

Trucking along: A couple's life migrates between city and country



WARRENTON VA -JANUARY 28: Exterior of the Red Truck Bakery in Warrenton VA , photo by John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

[LAUNCH PHOTO GALLERY](#)

Baker Brian Noyes and partner Dwight McNeill migrate between city house and country house, each with their own style.

Brian Noyes wakes up at 3 a.m. each weekday to the sound of the marimba ringtone on his iPhone. In the darkness of the Virginia countryside, he crunches across frosty gravel to his car for the 18-minute drive to work in Warrenton. It won't be long before the scent of double-chocolate moonshine cake wafts through the [Red Truck Bakery](#), the business he opened two years ago in a vintage gas station.

A few hours later at a 1938 rowhouse in Arlington, Noyes's partner, Dwight McNeill, will get ready for his own short commute. McNeill, a residential architect, walks to his office at [Morris-Day Designers and Builders](#), a firm known for gentle upgrading of decades-old bungalows and Cape Cods.

The two residences are part of a grand mid-career change. Noyes, 53, and McNeill, 58, have remixed their lives so they can focus on what they love doing. They traded in their large foursquare for two smaller houses and repurposed the rented gas station. As they downsized, they regrouped and redeployed their collections of folk art, pottery, flea market finds and mid-century classics.

The plan was two decades in the making. Noyes had spent his career as an art director for magazines, including this one, *House & Garden*, [Preservation](#) and [Smithsonian](#). But he was really a foodie, and for years, he and McNeill had joked that they wanted to open a coffee and pie place. They spent a lot of weekends scouting real estate, and Noyes designed bakery logos between his publishing gigs. Eventually, he took steps to seriously lay the groundwork for a new life.

In 2004, Noyes started taking courses at [L'Academie de Cuisine](#) and the [Culinary Institute of America](#). Drawn to Virginia's horse country, an hour's drive from Washington, he dreamed of

using local farms to supply the fruits, vegetables, dairy products, even moonshine, that he would need for his business. "He wanted a community gathering spot as much as a place to sell food," McNeill says.

Noyes came across a red 1954 Ford F-100 farm truck - once owned by Tommy Hilfiger - for sale online and made an impulse buy. "I knew someday it could be the icon for my business," he says.

A year later, Noyes and McNeill, then living in a 1919 home with a large yard in the Cherrydale neighborhood of Arlington, bought a weekend getaway. It was a tiny farmhouse in Orlean, a village between Warrenton and Washington, Va.

By 2006, Noyes had started selling baked goods out of his red truck. He'd drive out to the farmhouse on Fridays and bake artisan breads and peanut butter cookies into the night. Then he'd send out an e-mail blast to customers, who would be waiting for him the next morning as he pulled up to the Village Green, a shop in Orlean.

Noyes sold more than \$19,000 worth of goodies in 2007 at a 42 percent profit, he says. The next year, Red Truck's mail-order products won a mention from New York Times food writer Marian Burros, who lives locally. "One of my favorite discoveries is Brian Noyes ... who has a deft hand with pastries and an unerring sense of flavor balance," she wrote.



ARLINGTON VA -JANUARY 25: Dewight McNeill, left, and Brian Noyes , right, with their cat, Opie, in the kitchen at their town house in Arlington VA , photo by John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

Noyes and McNeill started looking for a storefront and in spring 2009 leased a former Esso station in Warrenton built in 1921. McNeill transformed it into a homespun shop and bakery. Noyes quit his job at Smithsonian magazine and began creating a menu.

When they received an unsolicited offer on their Cherrydale home, they said yes.

"It was getting to be crunch time, with Brian making the career change, the mortgage, lots of yardwork and cleaning," McNeill says. They bought the '38 rowhouse nearby, and McNeill staged a 12-day makeover.

McNeill, a native of Sanford, N.C., and Noyes, from Monterey, Calif., are collectors of Southern pottery and folk art. For years, the two had acquired treasures from trips to artists' studios in the South and the outdoor antiques show in Brimfield, Mass.

They had so much stuff that, when they moved, McNeill decided to unload some on eBay. Out went the hula dolls, Robert Venturi plates, punk-rock magazines and World's Fair memorabilia. "We were collectors, not hoarders," McNeill says. "But we wanted less stuff."

Now, their curated treasures migrate between city and country. "Our life," Noyes says, "is sort of an ever-changing exhibit."

The bakery in Warrenton

The namesake vintage Ford is parked as eye candy in front of Red Truck Bakery in historic Old Town Warrenton.

The old Esso station fit Noyes's criteria for a space in which to create an old-fashioned mercantile.

McNeill transformed the interior to reflect its industrial past while adding nostalgia. "Dwight created a warm, homey feeling in here," Noyes says.

There are three areas. The original Esso office remains the sales room, with an apothecary flavor inspired by a 1930s rural pharmacy. The two car repair bays have been turned into an open kitchen and a dining area with a large table.

McNeill did the floors in buff and white alternating 12-inch tiles. He installed bead board, molding and built-in shelves to hold Red Truck products.

Noyes found a close-out sale on [West Elm](#) stacking chairs in the cherry red shade of the truck. McNeill chose aluminum [Ikea](#) pendant lights to hang over the communal table. The frosted white glass schoolhouse lights above the bakery case come from [Rejuvenation](#) in Portland, Ore.

Opening day was July 31, 2009. The finished bakery "exudes quirky charm with its communal table and country-contemporary look," wrote Washingtonian magazine.

The first 18 months haven't been easy because of the recession, plus the three major snowstorms of last winter and the icy days around this year's "[thundersnow](#)." But Noyes and his staff of 14 keep churning out rum cupcakes, focaccia, ham scones and gourmet blueberry granola six days a week. The Red Truck line now even includes root beer, bottled water and peanuts.

On a typical day, county judges, fox hunters and maybe actor Robert Duvall will be sipping Red Truck coffee at the 12-foot table made of beams salvaged from a 19th-century Virginia barn. The coffee comes in three strengths: Premium, Hi-Octane and Unleaded.

The townhouse in Arlington

The \$497,000 rowhouse in GlebeWood Village has two stories, with two bedrooms and a bath upstairs, and a main floor with a small living room, eat-in kitchen and den with a skylight in the back. There is also a finished basement.

In the 12-day window they had before moving in, McNeill updated the first floor by staining the light floors a dark espresso and painting interior doors black to unify the space and give it a modern look.

"The kitchen had an odd group of cabinets and no place for a table," McNeill says. Previous owners had removed a wall that separated the kitchen and dining room. McNeill put a portion of the wall back to reestablish cooking and dining areas. For the kitchen, he ordered maple cabinets, painting the upper ones white (Duron Pure White) and lower ones steel blue (Duron Refuge). McNeill liked the way the blue looked with the stainless steel appliances. He designed a banquette and storage cabinets in the reestablished dining room, furnishing it with a shiny black Ikea table surrounded by laminated ash [Arne Jacobsen Series 7 chairs](#).

Because the couple was moving to smaller quarters, storage was crucial. In the living room, McNeill designed a wall of built-in shelves to accommodate books and large open baskets that hold CDs. Dozens of face jugs, plates and bowls, mainly from [Jugtown](#) and other [Seagrove, N.C., potters](#), were arranged on tall shelves and in closed-door storage cabinets. Under the banquette bench is a beverage storage area.

The small living room became a library-reading room with a single club chair and ottoman slipcovered in white cotton. The rear den is a mix of crackled leather chairs, comfortable upholstery and a West Elm jute rug. "I like mixing contemporary, simple pieces with antiques that have character," McNeill says. "We love the peeling paint and authentic weathered finishes, and we like the way they look with more modern things."

The farmhouse in Orlean

The couple bought the tiny house on 3.5 acres for \$320,000. "It was like a cozy little cottage dropped onto the Piedmont farmland," Noyes says, and it came with its own meat house and chicken coop. Lately, it has been the Monday-to-Friday residence for country baker Noyes.

The farmhouse, part of which dates to the 1860s, has an entry room, a living room and a kitchen with views of a hillside. Upstairs, there are two bedrooms. Noyes and McNeill liked the well-worn wood floors and funky fireplace. The exterior has a classic rural Virginia look: white stucco with green trim. Inside, they pretty much left everything as they found it after giving it a coat of beige paint (Olive Fog by Duron).

Outdoors, they added a flagstone patio and rebuilt the side porch, which looks out over a garden. They grow sour cherries, Indian Blood red peaches and persimmons that Noyes uses for pies, cookies and jams. They put in a small pond and a colony of gourd birdhouses for purple martins.

To furnish the house, they combed their closets and basement, and even the side of the road. (They picked up a weathered wood coffee table off the street and painted it barn red.) They hauled in twig tables from the Georgetown Flea Market and a chestnut farmhouse table from Sperryville. A trip to Ikea for a slipcovered sofa and chairs and to Crate and Barrel for sisal rugs completed the look. A minimalist [Ingo Maurer](#) crinkled paper lamp floats over the dining table.

"There is no pretension here," Noyes says. "This farm is all about keeping it fun and lighthearted."

All over, they arranged their colorful folk art, including a large bicycle painting by Woodie Long, an artist from Alabama. They brought face jugs and a primitive model of Graceland.

The house is relaxing in all seasons. "Winter is a cozy time," McNeill says. "It's nice to just be quiet. I like it because I check e-mail here less often."

Plus, there are bonfires to benefit the volunteer fire department and chili cookoffs. "When we bought the place in the country, it was a place to escape the city," McNeill says. "We didn't know we were joining another community out here."

Jura Koncius is a Washington Post staff writer. She can be reached at konciusj@washpost.com.