

Miniature Golf, Farming and a Cottage for Two



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS RAMIREZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Left, Maria Reidelbach at Homegrown Mini-Golf. Below left, the house she and Chris Butler bought in Accord, N.Y. Above, the house's kitchen, with vintage fixtures.

By LISA A. PHILLIPS

ACCORD, N.Y.

BEFORE Maria Reidelbach could find a second home for herself, she had to find a home for her dream project: a miniature golf course with a down-on-the-farm theme.

In 2004 Ms. Reidelbach, 53, a co-author of "Miniature Golf" (Abbeville Press, 1987), a history of the game (bound in artificial turf), traveled around the fertile Rondout Valley in Ulster County, N.Y., trying to interest farmers in letting her build a course on their land, planted with fruit trees, vegetables and herbs.

She said she was interested in a course that would show people how food grows. "I wanted to make my own roadside attraction, and mini-golf was what I knew best."

Ms. Reidelbach, the granddaughter of farmers in western Pennsylvania, found a kindred spirit in Chris Kelder, who runs Kelder's Farm, a popular pick-your-own spot in Kerhonkson, N.Y. Homegrown Mini-Golf opened at the farm in 2006.

While Ms. Reidelbach was building and planting the course, she shuttled between her loft in TriBeCa and a 50-year-old Airstream camper on the farm. During that time she began dating

Chris Butler, a musician and songwriter best known for founding the Waitresses, a 1980s New Wave band that had a cult hit with "I Know What Boys Like." The two bonded over the fact that they were both Guinness World Record holders: He composed the longest pop song ("The Devil Glitch," 69 minutes), and she built the world's largest garden gnome (the 13-foot-6-inch Chomsky, which stands near the entrance to Kelder's Farm).

"We both like to do obscure things to an extreme," Ms. Reidelbach said.

The couple started looking for a second home where she would have room for her sculpture and craft projects and he could make music. A few miles away from Kelder's Farm, they found a one-acre property in Accord with a 1930 Arts and Crafts house, a store with a steady tenant and, best of all, a 2,400-square-foot garage that had been a Model A dealership and a pottery factory.

"We liked the house, but we loved this space," Ms. Reidelbach said of the garage. It took six months to get the property's asking price of \$450,000 down to \$360,000. Before the sale in the spring of 2008, Ms. Reidelbach raised cash by dividing her 2,400-square-foot TriBeCa loft, where she has lived since 1982, and selling part of the space. She said the building, a self-sponsored co-op she had



helped organize in the early 1990s, was becoming less artist-friendly, with new tenants who "had day jobs and wanted to live regular, clean lifestyles."

"I realized it was not a compatible building for me to work in," she added. "I wasn't going to be able to make smells and noises. Up here, we have a lot more autonomy."

Ms. Reidelbach and Mr. Butler now spend about half the week at the downsized loft, near Ms. Reidelbach's job as art director for Manhattan Youth, which runs after-school activities and a community center in Lower Manhattan. They head to Accord for weekends that often include Fridays and Mondays.

"I moved to New York City to be in that pressure cooker," Mr. Butler said,

"but slowly it got to be too much. Up here, I still have enough energy to get things done."

Ms. Reidelbach said she "slips into another kind of brain wave" after a couple of days in Accord. "There's something about reducing the amount of stimulus that makes me hear my thoughts more clearly."

When in Accord, the garage is their creative center. At one end Ms. Reidelbach molds miniature versions of the garden gnome, part of her growing cottage industry of gnome-brand souvenirs. On the other end are Mr. Butler's instruments and mixing console, and his collection of antique recording devices, including a 1930s Webster Chicago wire recorder, which magnetizes stainless-steel wire to register sound, and an Edison Laboratories wax cylinder recorder.

Across the driveway, the 1,800-square-foot three-bedroom brick house is a showcase for the couple's eclectic-retro taste. The kitchen is renovated to highlight its vintage features, with new linoleum floors to complement the original red linoleum countertops and Westinghouse stove. A local auto-body specialist refurbished the metal cabinets with marigold-colored enamel.

The rest of the house needed little work. "This place was preserved in amber," Ms. Reidelbach said. "The woman who owned it kept it in perfect condition. We even have the original fire ex-

tinguisher that puffs baking soda."

The living room and dining room are trimmed with chestnut pillars, built-in shelving and other woodwork. Much of the couple's furniture is midcentury modern, including a red leather Eames chair with a matching geometric steel lampshade and a black vinyl rocking chair with outsize curved steel arms.

The art on the walls testifies to Ms. Reidelbach's interest in what she describes as low art. She has several needlepoint nudes, a folk-art collage of wooden skewers and bright cellophane, and the original drawing for a spread in a 1955 issue of Mad magazine. Ms. Reidelbach bought the drawing at auction after her best-selling book, "Completely Mad: A History of the Comic Book and Magazine," came out in 1991.

"I like things that are quirky and in bad taste," she said. "There may be beauty in perfection, but when things are imperfect and disharmonious, there's a real dynamic going on, and that's what interests me."

Ms. Reidelbach continues to spend a great deal of her time upstate, tending to Homegrown Mini-Golf. Educational annotations explain the plantings, which range from sweet corn to exotic crops like Chinese long beans and stevia. Sculptures she created, called the Grain Gang, give visitors a better look at quinoa, amaranth and other varieties on the course. All this whimsy has a clear purpose, Ms. Reidelbach said.

"I want people to connect with how things grow in an instinctive, visceral way, so they really care," she said. "Food makes your life more fun and exciting and sensual, and once you're tuned in to that, your body wants to eat seasonally, and you become more conscious of the environment."

ONLINE: GOLF, ART AND MUSIC

➤ A slideshow of Maria Reidelbach's home and miniature golf course:

nytimes.com/escapes