



MAKING HAY WHILE THE SUN SHINES

With the opening of Barn8 at historic Hermitage Farm, 21c Museum Hotels co-founders Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson seize an opportunity to celebrate and share all that they love about the Commonwealth.

Written by Bridget Williams / Photography by Andrew Kung

Prolific contemporary art collector Steve Wilson is quick to recall the first piece of art he purchased: a Picasso. While it was just an exhibition poster that adorned his college dorm at Murray State University, the acquisition made an impact, as did a drawing instructor who callously ripped up Wilson's assignment in front of the class. Growing up in rural Wickliffe, Kentucky, Wilson said there weren't any art classes in school; the harsh reality check he received in college summarily extinguished any ember of hope he had of becoming an artist.

Success, so they say, is the best revenge. Wilson said he went on to ace a design class, hinting at the favorable outcome he would eventually enjoy as co-founder of the 21c Museum Hotels brand and his most recent endeavor, Barn8 at Hermitage Farm. Akin to an artist staring at the promise presented by a blank canvas, Wilson said he loves walking into a dilapidated building, envisioning what it could be and seeing it become "something beautiful and real."

"This project wraps up all of our passions—horses, travel, art, and land conservation," said Wilson of the nearly eight-acre Barn8 enterprise, which is nestled amid the more than 600 acres that comprise Hermitage Farm. With subdivisions creeping up like kudzu all around the storied Thoroughbred farm, which has produced a Derby winner and garnered a visit from the Queen of England in 1986, Wilson and his wife Laura Lee Brown purchased the property in 2003 with the simple intention of keeping the bulldozers at bay.

Still very much a working farm, Hermitage is in the business of taking care of Thoroughbred moms and their offspring and preparing them for the yearling sale. Presently offering limited interaction with the horses from a safe distance, Wilson, who currently has two Thoroughbreds in training for racing, likened the valuables stabled in the barn to a bank vault.



Steve Wilson and Laura Lee Brown

With more ribbons than a craft store, a trophy room in a renovated stud barn near the nursery bears witness to Wilson's success as a competitive carriage driver. Remarking that he's "serious about anything I do," the four-time USEF Pair Champion retired from the sport earlier this year to focus on family and opening Barn8. "I miss competing, but I was an aggressive rider, and it's a dangerous sport," he added. The stud barn, which is open to tours, provides visitors with an overview of the sport of Combined Driving Eventing (CDE), along with examples of several antique and sport carriages (including one used in the film *Gone With the Wind*).

Wilson explained that initially, ideas such as a center for CDE competition with expanded equine services and even a distillery were considered as ways to make the farm viable without marring the land. However, they all proved to be too development-heavy. "It really came down to coming up with the best way to make parts of the property open to the public and sharing what makes Kentucky great," Wilson said of how the concept for Barn8 was developed. Much like he and Laura Lee drew inspiration for 21c from their globetrotting, the impetus for Barn8 was based on visits to celebrated places like Blue Hill at Stone Barns in New York and Blackberry Farm in Tennessee.

While Barn8 isn't visible from US 42, "Here & Where," an art installation created by French artist Jean Dupuy, stands out among the undulating farmland and indicates you've arrived. Representative of Wilson and Brown's penchant for collecting compelling contemporary art by living artists, the installation also hints at what's to come inside the gates and down a winding road that leads past a stately circa 1830 house. An article about

the home in *Sophisticated Living's* January/February 2017 issue previewed the Barn8 concept: "Plans for the three-part project read like a love letter to the Commonwealth, celebrating all that the couple finds endearing about the Bluegrass."

Slated to open at the precipice of the pandemic, full delivery of the aforementioned epistle was slightly delayed, but like all successful long-term relationships, patience and persistence pay off, and the top-notch team at Barn8 have used the phased opening to perfect their processes.

Barn8's restaurant, a small farm store, a bourbon library, and event loft are housed in a renovated dairy barn, with interiors designed by Douglas Riddle, President and COO of Bittners. Riddle also designed the farm's historic home and Brown and Wilson's residence at nearby Woodland Farm. Saying there wasn't any question that Riddle would be tapped for the project, Wilson expounded on Riddle's attributes as a designer and friend. "He's just a good person who has innate confidence about what's right and lets the owners' personalities shine through."

The interiors exude a sophisticated farm-chic style that looks casual but is actually extremely calculated. Patrons can opt to dine privately individual barn stalls (apropos for the current era), or at a long table that runs down the center of the space. Whimsical contemporary art is on display throughout, most notably in a swank lounge near the bar. Admitting that restrictions on travel and face-to-face contact have taken some of the fun out of art collecting for the moment, Wilson is encouraged by increasing opportunities to buy local, and singled out Susan Moreman's gallery on Main Street and John Brooks' Quappi Projects on Market Street.





Horticulturalist Stephanie Tittle



Adam Walpole, Alison Settle, and Erin Delaney



Douglas Riddle of Bittners conceived the interiors, which include Individual dining rooms created from the historic barn's original horse stalls.
Photo by Tony Bailey.



One of several antique and sport carriages on display at Hermitage Farm.
Photo by Tony Bailey.



There is ample space for alfresco dining.
Photo by Tony Bailey.

A towering bourbon barrel rick defines the staircase to the second floor. Illuminating the landing is a chimerical Murano chandelier whose off-kilter shades conjure *Alice In Wonderland* tea party vibes. In a large event space, hundreds of globe lights suspended from the vaulted ceiling at varying height are reminiscent of fireflies at play in the surrounding fields.

Calling himself a "big picture guy," Wilson is quick to rely on others' expertise to mind the minutiae. After a nationwide search for a chef, he found Alison Settle at Red Hog in the Crescent Hill neighborhood. Impressed with her demeanor and culinary prowess, he invited Settle to the farm and delivered what he called a "field of dreams" pitch. "What they are doing here is really special," said Settle, a Lexington native who reminisced that two days before Wilson approached her, she'd watched a program about 21c on *KET*.

There is a lot of girl power in the kitchen at Barn8 and Settle works in tandem with Stephanie Tittle, the property's horticulturist to do long-range menu planning. This partnership means that Barn8's use of farm-to-table terminology isn't just lip service. What doesn't come out of the adjacent greenhouse is sourced as locally as possible, including bison from Woodland Farm.

Barn8's delayed opening due to COVID allowed Settle to explore preserving, canning, dehydrating, pickling, and fermenting, thereby extending the enjoyment of the growing season throughout the year. "Being a creative fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants kitchen keeps us cooking with passion," she said. The menu changes

frequently (sometimes daily), with plenty of options for those with dietary restrictions and preferences.

Wilson likes to point out that most people don't consciously make the connection that bourbon is ultimately a farm product, and the beverage program at Barn8 also takes advantage of the cornucopia offered by the farm. For instance, a housemade shagbark hickory syrup is used for their new take on an Old Fashioned. "We like taking the familiar to the next level," said Food & Beverage Director Erin Delaney.

Bourbon Steward Adam Walpole is tasked with building Barn8's single barrel private select program, bourbon tasting flights, and a small vintage collection. Walpole, Settle, and Delaney are all part of the barrel select tasting team, which underscores the spirit of collaboration that pervades the entirety of the operation. To keep things exciting, Walpole said he'll place a rare bottle of bourbon for sale from time-to-time in the on-site shop to see happenstance play out.

During my last visit in early August, a crew was hard at work behind the barn building a boardwalk along the creek that will take guests on a unique nocturnal journey. Commissioned by artist Ricardo Rivera of KLIP Collective, this immersive 30-minute program will utilize sound and light to weave a narrative. Scheduled to be open to the public in early September, this engaging installation represents a continuation of Wilson and Brown's commitment, begun at 21c, to make art accessible to all. "Hermitage Farm and Barn8 are to the country what 21c is to the city," he articulated. **sl**