

DEPARTURES

M A G A Z I N E

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Serenity in Litchfield County, CT



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How can a place just two hours from Manhattan, packed with power brokers, stay so serene?

By Stellene Volandes

We are going there to hide.” The e-mail response—from a New York art world heavyweight about his decision to buy a home in Litchfield County, Connecticut—was decidedly curt. And yet a theme emerged. Samantha Gregory, vice president of global communications for Tory Burch and an infinitely more forthcoming Litchfield County habitué, describes a typical weekend at her home in the town of New Preston: “We [her husband is *Weeds* executive producer Roberto Benabib] leave Manhattan at about 5:30 p.m. on Friday. We stop at G. W. Tavern in Washington Depot, where the owners always save us a booth. Saturday we get breakfast at Marty’s coffee shop. Then we’ll walk around Lake Waramaug, stop by the Pantry for takeout, go back home and read by the fire. Every Saturday at 7:30 we go to Oliva restaurant and I order the Gorgonzola—and—caramelized onion pizza. Sunday morning we are back at Marty’s, then maybe the Hickory Stick Bookshop, or the Smithy market for organic vegetables and a pie, then home again. My favorite part? If we don’t want to talk to anyone at any of these places, we don’t have to. Don’t have to socialize at all, in fact, and it’s absolutely okay. Everyone here is on the same page.” Writer Celia McGee has been weekendening in Goshen for nearly 25 years and describes the Litchfield scene as one that would “probably horrify the professional social climbers, name-droppers, and partygoers in the Hamptons.”

“Discretion,” advises decorator and architect Robert Couturier from his home in Kent, “is very important here.” Interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud (who has a historic home in the town of Litchfield and a lake house in Kent) puts it this way: “Anything—or anyone—that is too loud won’t last long in Litchfield.”

The county of Litchfield includes 26 towns (places like Washington, Kent, New Preston, Warren, and West Cornwall) and occupies the northwest corner of Connecticut. The landscape is storybook New England, with rolling hills, endless woodlands, green fields, and streams. It’s just about two and a half hours by car from Manhattan, almost three from Boston. The most recent U.S. census marks the area as the least densely populated in Connecticut. But those are just numbers. The Litchfield list of names tells a different story. They’re not movie stars (for the most part) or party girls, but the county is undeniably packed with what used to be known as men and women of substance: Diane von Furstenberg is in New Milford, Philip Roth in Warren, Graydon Carter in Roxbury, Jasper Johns in Sharon, Henry Kissinger, Anne Bass, Agnes Gund, and Oscar de la Renta in Kent, Danny Meyer and Joan Rivers in Washington, Meryl Streep in Salisbury.

So just how did this 920-square-mile stretch of Connecticut with such a high-powered citizenship and close proximity to Manhattan become the red-hot center of the simple life?

This is a place where George Malkemus, the president of Manolo Blahnik, breeds prizewinning cattle at his Arethusa Farm in Litchfield. New York investor Terry Fitzgerald and his wife, Libby, raise all-natural Black Angus beef at their Greyledge Farm in Bridgewater. People get their coffee at Marty's in Washington Depot or Nine Main in New Preston. The 96-year-old Goshen Fair—garden tractor pull at 10 a.m.! Rabbit judging at 12! Woodcutting demonstration at 5!—is a mainstay of the summer calendar. And the hot list to be on is Marble Valley Farm's weekly e-mail update of what's in season ("the organic blueberries are here!"), recipes included.

The secret behind Litchfield County's bucolic preservation is equal parts natural selection and concerted effort. Locals point to George Black's book *The Trout Pool Paradox: The American Lives of Three Rivers* as a solid illustration of the phenomenon. Black tracks the fates of two tributaries of the Housatonic River. The Shepaug, which flows south through the Litchfield towns of Washington and Roxbury, remained pristine—"the Platonic ideal of a trout stream"—while the Naugatuck, which flows through the industrial town of Waterbury, became a "chemical sewer." Black credits Litchfield's salvation in part to the influence of men like 19th-century iron baron Alexander Lyman Holley, a Salisbury resident who worked to halt the spread of industry in his hometown and one of a long line of Housatonic Valley conservationists, and to the flood of 1955, caused by hurricanes Connie and Diane. Eliot Wadsworth, owner of White Flower Farm and cofounder of the Litchfield Hills Greenprint project, which has created an online map that highlights local areas ripe for conservation, explains, "The theory is that the flood wiped out whatever railroad lines we had in the county, which was bad for business but great for the natural scenery. We escaped industrialization. The landscape here got sort of frozen in amber after that." The absence of a railroad created a splendid isolation that continues. Getting to Litchfield County via public transportation is not easy: The closest train stations are about 30 minutes away in Waterbury, Connecticut, or Brewster, New York. As Kent weekender Anthony Champalimaud (son of Alexandra) explains, "It makes the area inaccessible to those who are easily inconvenienced."

It also seems to make for a kind of creative Eden. Pilobolus Dance Theater works out of a space in Washington Depot, and the Yale University School of Art holds its summer program on the same Norfolk estate where the university hosts its Chamber Music Festival. In the early eighties a New York furrier named Jacques Kaplan bought a house in Kent, decided it could be the art capital of Connecticut, and opened the Paris New York Kent Gallery. It closed in 2006 and Kaplan, a beloved figure, died last year, but the Kent Art Association is still going strong. The novelist Dani Shapiro moved to Litchfield County full-time six years ago, drawn partly because of its status as an artistic haven. "There's such a rich history," she says. "Alexander Calder lived here. Arthur Miller. William Styron. We have Frank McCourt, Larry Kramer, Francine du Plessix Gray, Milos Forman. It's a place where people who need to be connected to New York can be, while still feeling like they live in a small town. And there aren't a million options of what to do. It lets you be more meditative. And, of course, there is the fact that you actually have the room to think."

Sculptor Mark Mennin has a veritable stone quarry on the acres of land behind his Bethlehem home: Forty tons of Pakistani onyx, huge chunks of Turkish travertine, and pieces of white marble from Vermont sit between his prototypes of carvings for a wine pavilion for the Vineyard at Strawberry Ridge on Lake Waramaug, along with a forklift, drills, and jackhammers. The Iowa-born, Princeton-educated Mennin moved to Litchfield County from New York six years ago after realizing that he could no longer create large installations or make the noise required to blast through eight tons of stone while working in the greater metropolitan area. "Now I have a big house, a barn studio, and all the tree insulation I need," says Mennin, who still keeps a workspace in Chelsea Market and teaches once a week at the New York Academy of Art. "There's such a nice transition between life and work here. My pieces sit out back next to my daughter's dollhouse and my son's Ping-Pong table."

Mennin and Shapiro are part of Litchfield's growing "expat" community, a group of young bankers, writers, artists, and architects who left New York or who grew up weekendending in Litchfield County before deciding they wanted to be there full-time. "It's not just about antiquing on the weekend anymore; people live real lives here," says Shapiro. She and her husband, screenwriter Michael Maren, looked in Sag Harbor, Long Island, but couldn't see it as anything besides a summer town; Westchester seemed too suburban. "The only person I knew here was sculptor Michael Steiner," says Shapiro, "but once we decided on the house, it seemed like the whole community was calling to let me know where to buy the good bread. My realtor, Carolyn Klemm, gave me a party that first summer to introduce me to people. Where else would that happen?"

Former magazine photo editor Kathryn McCarver Root visited her in-laws in Litchfield County for years. She and her family now live in Roxbury, and she runs a photography gallery in Washington Depot called KMR Arts. And Belgian-born architect Harold Tittmann, who went to Kent School, moved into a self-designed house on 20 acres in Morris three years ago, after nearly ten years in NoLiTa. Real estate broker Peter Klemm (son of Carolyn) says that until recently, "you got no sense of young people here. Our buyer profile then was, to be honest, blue hairs or older weekenders. Now the average age is around fortysomething. They're ex-Hamptonites who now have two kids and want out of that scene. Others are lured by the size of the properties and the privacy that comes with it. I have listings right now for houses on forty and fifty acres. And the zoning is so strong that you often get lucky and buy a house on sixteen acres adjacent to a land trust that can't be developed," says Klemm. "Plus, between all these new people you could be at a dinner party every weekend." Still, Shapiro admits, "Friends who visit

us sometimes look around and ask, ‘What do you all do up here?’ ”

As much as locals insist there is no regular social circuit, there are certain events—the Housatonic Valley Association Auction, the Garden Conservancy’s Open Days private garden tours, the Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust dinner—that are very well attended, and regular haunts (the bar at Mayflower Inn & Spa, G. W. Tavern, West Street Grill) that are always packed. “I mean, it’s not Colonial Williamsburg,” sniped one longtime weekender when asked about her own calendar. “It’s social and sophisticated, just not urban or flashy.”

If there is a cause célèbre, it is the mission of the land trusts. And almost every town has its own. “Conserving open space is a cultural imperative,” says Bruce Schnitzer, himself the owner of a historic 18th-century home in Litchfield and deeply involved in Eliot Wadsworth’s Litchfield Hills Greenprint project. “A Connecticut Yankee takes care of his property.” As early as 1913, Alain White and his sister May gifted 4,000 acres of land and established the White Memorial Foundation. The property, directly adjacent to Winvian resort, which opened in November 2006, is all pristine green fields, water, and woodlands open to the public but off-limits to developers. In 2007 alone Weantinoge Heritage Land Trust, one of the most prominent in the state, saved 970 acres of farms, forestlands, and wetlands. “It seems there has always been a strong local instinct toward historic preservation,” says Schnitzer, “and it has extended into land conservation. Ultimately it’s all about preserving a way of life and a beautiful corner of the world.”

Which perhaps explains why although you can get the *Financial Times* at Nine Main in New Preston, take Pilates with Victoria Schumacher in Kent, get a full holistic consultation at Charym in Litchfield, and buy Le Creuset pots at the Pantry in Washington Depot, it’s still tough to get cell phone service in Litchfield County. “I found one spot in front of the deli by the main green where I can sometimes retrieve messages,” says Samantha Gregory. “I make my husband go out there to check them daily.”

Guide to Litchfield County

Litchfield County insiders may prize the region’s peace and privacy, but there are still plenty of reasons for visitors to come. And plenty do. They drive about two and a half hours from Manhattan (not including a burger—and—onion rings break at the Red Rooster Drive-In on Route 22 in Brewster, New York) or about three hours from Boston. Their long weekend should, invariably, include stops at the following (starting from the south).

Washington Depot

This town is home to **Mayflower Inn & Spa**, opened in 1992 (\$400–\$1,600; 118 Woodbury Rd.; mayflowerinn.com). It’s a “country house hotel” with four-poster beds and chintz-covered chairs, but the spa, redone in 2006, brings it into the 21st century. After a one-hour Sweet Surrender massage, drive to town and get a coffee at **Marty’s** (6 Green Hill Rd.; seeyouatmartys.com), browse the aisles at the **Hickory Stick Bookshop** (2 Green Hill Rd.; hickorystickbookshop.com), and view contemporary photography at **KMR Arts** (2 Titus Rd.; kmrarts.com). Down the road is **Finial Home & Garden** (13 River Rd.; 860-868-2577) and **Grape in the Shade** (13 River Rd.; 860-868-9119) for vintage Chanel cuffs, Oscar de la Renta shifts, and ostrich-feather pillbox hats. The **Pantry** is perfect for lunch (5 Titus Rd.; 860-868-0258), and for dinner it’s local watering holes like **G. W. Tavern** (20 Bee Brook Rd.; gwtavern.com) or the bar at Mayflower.

New Preston

Begin with coffee and croissants at **Nine Main Bakery & Deli** (9 Main St.; 860-868-1879). Then go to **Dawn Hill Antiques** for 18th- and 19th-century Swedish settees (from \$12,000; 11 Main St.; dawnhillantiques.com). At **J. Seitz & Co.** (9 E. Shore Rd.; jseitz.com) the focus is more contemporary, with organic Italian duvets (\$350) and leather clutches from Argentina (from \$600). **Pergola** (7 E. Shore Rd.; pergolahome.com) offers rare botanicals, driftwood mirror frames (from \$400), and Jack Staub’s illustrated book *75 Remarkable Fruits for Your Garden* (\$20). Most remarkable is the waterfall out back. For dinner **Oliva** is a favorite for grilled calamari stuffed with lemon and prunes, and Gorgonzola—and—caramelized onion pizza (18 E. Shore Rd.; 860-868-1787).

Morris

Winvian is a 113-acre resort with 18 themed cottages (the nautical Maritime, the wood-paneled Camping). There’s a 5,000-square-foot spa and the White Memorial Foundation for kayaking and canoeing. Even if the place is booked, come for the restaurant, recently opened to nonguests and headed by Ducasse and Boulud alum Chris Eddy (rooms, \$1,450–\$1,950; 155 Alain White Rd.; winvian.com). And though a fifties mail-order business made **White Flower Farm**’s bulbs and blooms available across the country, there’s nothing like walking through rows of paperwhites and perennials (167 Litchfield Rd.;

whiteflowerfarm.com).

Kent

Bartley Johnstone is a decorator by trade, but at her shop **B. Johnstone** (4 N. Main St.; 860-927-1272) she assembles objects from across categories and eras: forties red-and-white glass tumblers (\$65 for a set of eight), linen tunics (\$140), and gently worn Balenciaga bags and Manolo Blahnik mules from local closets. At **R. T. Facts** (22 S. Main St.; rtfacts.com) down the street, Greg and Natalie Randall have an eclectic mix—19th-century doors, footed bathtubs, Italian garden sculpture. A few doors away is **Belgique** for chocolates (1 Bridge St.; 860-927-3681). **Richard J. Lindsey Bookseller** (15 N. Main St.; 860-927-3025) specializes in out-of-print titles like Pierre-Joseph Redouté's Les Roses (\$4,000). And if a weekend cannot go by without a Pilates session, **Victoria Schumacher** offers private classes at her Bedford Studio off the main street (\$95 for one hour; 14 Old Barn Rd.; 860-927-5232).

Warren

Richard Lambertson, of the handbag design duo Lambertson Truex, opened **Privet House** last spring (4 Cornwall Rd.; 860-868-1800), and word spread fast. It's easy to see why. There are Santa Maria Novella creams and potions, scented candles from Versailles, Belgian handblown candlesticks. Next door is the gallerylike **Vol 1. Antiques**, curated by Lambertson's business partner, Suzanne Cassano (12 Cornwall Rd.; vol1antiques.com).

Litchfield

Locals bemoan the arrival of CVS and Talbots, but they still come for house-cured salmon and braised short ribs at **West Street Grill** (43 West St.; weststreetgrill.net), the early Americana at **Jeffrey Tillou Antiques** (39 West St.; tillouantiques.com), and **Lawrence Jeffrey Estate Jewelers'** vintage charm bracelets (33 West St.; lawrencejeffrey.com). To counter the consumption is the **Charym** wellness center, created by interior designer Alexandra Champalimaud. There are yoga classes, acupuncture, and a serious holistic medicine program headed by Dr. Malynn Utzinger, the Chopra Center for Wellbeing's former director of women's health, and David Williams, board-certified physician and expert in Ayurvedic medicine (by appointment only; 174 West St.; charym.com).

West Cornwall

Michael Trapp antiques (7 River Rd.; michaeltrapp.com) is a landmark for 19th-century Dutch Colonial teak benches (\$1,540) and 18th- and 19th-century terracotta tiles from Burgundy (\$35 a square foot). At **Ian Ingersoll's** workshop and gallery the furnituremaker handcrafts chairs and benches in the Shaker style (422 Sharon Goshen Tnpk.; ianingersoll.com).

If You Decide To Stay

Klemm Real Estate currently has listings for a new home in Washington on 5.5 acres with views of the Steep Rock preservation for \$3.2 million, an 1890 six-bedroom home in Sharon on six acres for \$2.5 million, and a four-bedroom Colonial in New Preston on 14 acres for \$1.2 million. 860-868-7313; klemmrealestate.com

Note

Litchfield County covers 920 square miles, which means that it can take about an hour to travel from Bridgewater to Salisbury. Getting from one town to another requires at least a 15-minute drive (if driving is not an option, **Carriage Limousine** car service knows the area well, 800-782-0570). For shoppers: There may be an upswing in full-timers, but the area's best-known antiques shops are usually open weekends only, or by appointment. And lastly, RuralIntelligence.com, a blog that covers all things Litchfield (as well as nearby Dutchess, Berkshire, and Columbia counties), is manned by former magazine editors Dan Shaw and Marilyn Bethany, who keep tabs on everything from small farms selling organic beef to the best place to catch Fourth of July fireworks.