

SPORTING CLASSICS

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Smith ©02

T ravel

By John Ross



It's known at Griffin & Howe, simply, as The Farm. On 3,000 acres, an hour's ride west of Manhattan on the west flank of one of New Jersey's Sparta Mountains, it hosts perhaps the most impressive array of shotgun sports in the East. Here, your scattergun passion, whatever it may be, is surfeit.

A small white sign, Hudson Farm, directs you from the county road onto the macadam drive that leads for a quarter-mile through a forest of mixed hardwoods, past the red barns down to the left where the dogs are kenneled, up the maple-lined drive to the white-pillared, mustard-stuccoed manor house where guests who were booked well in advance will spend the night in elegance bespeaking the Roaring Twenties.

The manor house is set so guests sitting in white wicker chairs on the veranda can catch the last rays of the falling sun. This century-old, twenty-room mansion looks out across a meticulously manicured lawn that spills down to a rock wall, beyond which lies a flat of turf suitable for playing croquet or landing helicopters ferrying those who wish to forego insufferable evening traffic on Interstate 80 out of the city. Gets my vote.

English is spoken here. On vintager days, gentlemen and ladies in earthen

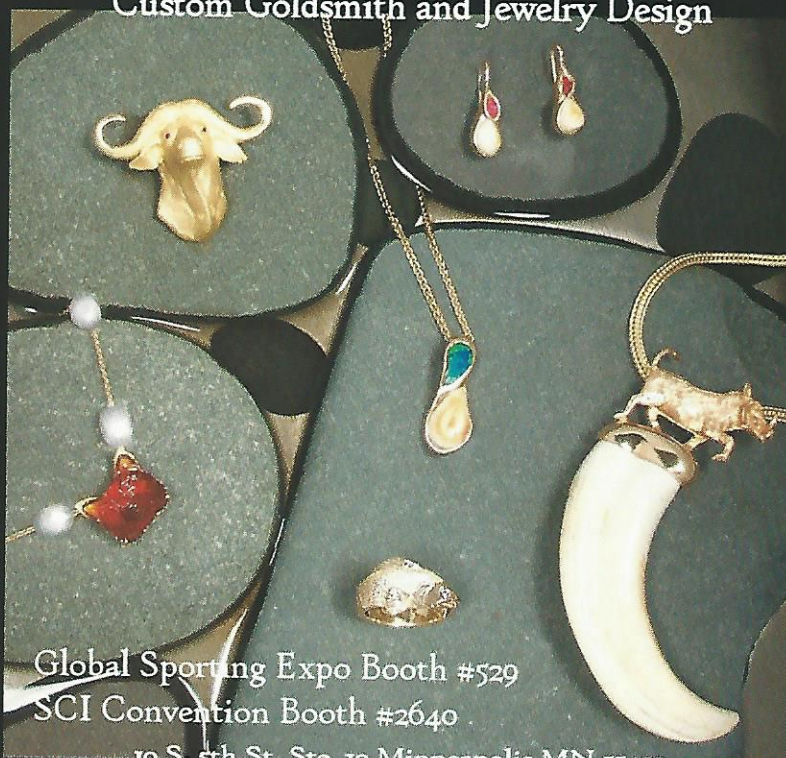
David Wecht, appropriately attired in tweeds, and "Carl" head out from the century-old manor to the shooting fields.

Down on The Farm, you can gun driven birds or polish your shooting skills under the watchful eyes of a whole team of well-tuned instructors.

tweeds, with best doubles broken over arm and fed as only a full country breakfast of bangers and mash can do, drift from the manor into the side lawn where they meet their shooting coaches. Boarding carts, they head for the sixteen-station sporting clays course, or five-stand, or eight-station flurries, or the simulated walk-up where motion sensors trigger traps that pitch clays just as a quail

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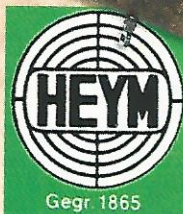
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would flush in the wild.

It may be that the day's agenda includes instruction from Lars Magnusson, a young, red-headed and personable Swede, Purdey-endorsed, whose gentle over-your-shoulder instruction – “a little more left, left a bit more” – pushes your muzzle through the target and times your tension on the trigger so it breaks just where it should. With wry humor, he'll adjust your mount, correct your cant so the rib stays flat and true, and position your feet so your body uncoils with the target.

Lars' gift lies not just in his ability to analyze and remedy those physical failings which keep us from busting birds, but also in his ability to establish rapport with his pupils and thus surmount our mental barriers as well. Lars is master of Griffin & Howe's Shooting School, headquartered at The Farm, and he oversees a quartet of well-tuned instructors.

Not all of the birds here are clay. The Farm is known for its release shoots that simulate driven pheasants and incoming ducks. Gunners, no more than ten at a time and two to a butt, await the ringnecks loosed from the woods on the ridge. They come in singles and pairs, high and incoming, so unlike low and away, as we usually flush 'em. If you're fortunate, one of your stands will face you into the sun. If you consistently kill birds here, you'll have no trouble wherever you shoot.

The game is similar for ducks. Mallards wing fast around the edge of the woods fringing the pond. Your job is to nail them before they set down. In my book, there's no better tune-up for teal. A corps of diligent Labs, each with a handler, collects your birds and lays them by your blind.

As you'd expect, The Farm plants scores of acres with sorghum, millet and other crops as cover for walk-up hunts. Each swath is ten to fifteen yards wide, with narrower strips running alongside. Its kennel provides Labs that swing to and fro through the thick grasses. Watch their tails. You'll see them get birdy. Though I know better, each cock's raucous flush startles me just enough so I'm always behind, no matter what I do.

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Because scent lingers in the cover, labs tend to be more effective here than pointers. However, you're quite welcome to hunt your own dog.

The Farm caters to shooting sports philanthropies such the Ruffed Grouse Society, which holds an annual sporting clays tournament and auction in September. As well, corporate groups book the farm for leadership, team-building and business development programs. Shooting grounds manager Steve Polanish tailors events at The Farm with the same professional attention-to-detail that Lars brings to instruction.

Events are normally booked well in advance, from Sunday through Thursdays. While clay pigeon games can be played from the first warmings of spring in March to the snows of December, live birds can be hunted from September through March in accordance with New Jersey's licensed shooting grounds regulations.

In a low stone building, The Farm maintains a small meeting house, which serves as the office and gun-fitting room for the shooting school, which operates year-round. Lars is particularly adept at fitting shotguns. Paul Chapman's fine smiths at Griffin & Howe's headquarters in Bernardsville, about an hour to the southeast, will take Lars' dimensions and develop a stock that comes to your shoulder and eye the same way each time you mount the gun. That's the key to consistent shotgunning.

To enjoy The Farm to the fullest, guests should plan an overnight stay. Rooms are positively posh with poster beds, Persian carpets and comfortable, overstuffed chairs. Those on the second floor of the Manor house boast private baths. On the third floor, five rooms share two baths. A guest cottage adds three more rooms with baths. Meals are elegant or easy. It's your choice.

Information about events, accommodations and instruction can be had by calling Griffin & Howe's Shooting School at 973-398-4330 or the main store at 908-766-2287. G&H's web site, www.griffinhowe.com, is also a reliable source of information. ✈

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