

RL *Fall 2009* MAGAZINE

Millbrook Minded

Rolling hills and high-wattage names
abound in horse country »



The rolling hills of Millbrook's horse country seem to exist in their own category of green.

*T*his unassuming hamlet hosts a coterie of boldface names who prefer to live humbly among their horses

Plenty of shades of green exist already in the visual lexicon—say, hunter green, cricket green, or polo green. There's also Windsor green, Farmington green, and Greenwich green. And then there's Millbrook green. Ninety miles north of New York City, this tiny village has the aura of another time. In spite of its size (just 1.9 square miles, and 2.8 miles across at its longest), the land feels endless, almost unbounded, thanks to its rolling hills, open pastures, and farming fields. Part plush kelly landscape, part old-money, faded-bill green, Millbrook has a positively viridian patina.

On my first trip to the village, I listened in disbelief as the car's GPS goaded us forward. There was no way my companion and I could possibly be headed in the right direction on these unmarked byways, mere suggestions of roads. Still, we sallied onward, pitching through mud piles and skittering over rocks. Then, miraculously, out of the brush appeared a towering white Greek Revival house in the throes of renovation. We'd arrived at the home of my host, Kevin "Pebbles" Smith.

Pebbles, in blue seersucker pants and straw hat, was preparing cocktails on the back porch. I asked if we could squeeze in a tour of the town, but then, why would we want to leave the comforts of the refurbished kitchen, extending from the original 1830s carriage house? After all, "main street," as it were, consists of a mere three blocks and features a single stoplight (the Millbrook Web site touts, "You'll never see a Starbucks or a Home Depot on the corner of Church and Franklin."). For Millbrook, "village" is almost a misnomer; it's more of a landscape than a specific place.

And one of the epicenters of this landscape is Fitch's Corner, the 140-acre farm of Fernanda Kellogg and Kirk Henckels. Kellogg is the president of the Tiffany & Co. Foundation and the daughter of the late ambassador Francis Kellogg. More relevant to me, however, is that she is the mother of my friend Fernanda Gilligan, who first introduced me to Millbrook. Both Fernandas—"Mrs." and "Miss," as they're lovingly referred to by friends—personify the spirit of Fitch's Corner and of Millbrook itself; they are ebullient, laid-back, warm, and gracious.

Kellogg grew up in Manhattan and Bedford, New York, but it was her love for horses ("I could hug a pony morning, noon, and night," she says) that steered the avid equestrienne to weekend in Dutchess County. When Fitch's Corner, whose original house dates to 1793 (and has passed through the hands of the original Fitches and Mr. and Mrs. John Hanes, of Hanes partyhose fortune), went on the market in 1991, Kellogg acquired it.

Today the sprawling property probably looks no different than when the Fitches themselves lived there. The house and barn, nestled among tamarack pines, alfalfa hay fields, and teeming wildflowers, are painted the same faded green of the aspen trees that loom in the background. Black angus cattle dot the pastures and the contours of the hillsides are striped with rows of corn. "The truly rural aspect," Kellogg affirms, "is Millbrook's charm. Until you get into the countryside, you don't know what it's all about."

Kellogg's farm is the site of one of the premier social events of the summer, the Horse Trials at Fitch's Corner, which are sanctioned by the United States Eventing Association and the United States Equestrian Federation. The trials, held in July, feature dressage, cross country, and show jumping competitions, and Kellogg opens her farm to everyone from local equine enthusiasts to celebrity weekenders. This year, Pebbles threw a Friday night kickoff party at his home, and Kellogg and Henckels hosted the annual Blue Jean Ball on Saturday.

Everyone I talked with singled out the Fitch's trials as the epitome of what Millbrook stands for—"good people," generosity of spirit, and a devotion to horses. Shirin von Wulffen, the former head of communications for Tom Ford and wife of hairstyle ace Frédéric Fekkai, put it this way: "The key for the Fitch's trials is to keep everything natural—totally 'un-done.' Fernanda and Kirk have an amazing ability to make everyone feel welcome." Kellogg, admired as a sort of doyenne of the Millbrook horse set, shrugs humbly at any praise. "It just pleases me enormously to be a good steward of the land."

Millbrook's land is a year-round playground for weekenders and full-time residents alike. There's gardening and shooting, fly-fishing and falconry. An informal soccer league, complete with hotdog and hamburger tents, was organized when some of Millbrook's foreign representatives—Cuban, Italian, French, and Brazilian—started playing on open fields. Perhaps more than shooting, pitting an Italian player against a French one can be a dangerous sport; Fekkai broke his foot during a match in the course of my reporting.

Over breakfast one morning, von Wulffen, casually chic in jeans and a navy tee, described why she and Fekkai settled on Millbrook for their weekend house. "It's not pretentious. No one is trying to show off or show up anyone else. No one puts up hedges and hides behind trees. Our house is right there, on the edge of the street."

For von Wulffen, who was raised on a thoroughbred farm in Orange County, Virginia, the rusticity reminds her of home. She and Fekkai were even married here, in a 2006 civil ceremony. In easy Millbrook fashion, they made their vows before their two dogs at the picnic table outside their "little farmhouse," a relaxed European-style country home set on more than 350 acres of land known as Beaver Brook Farm that encompass a 30-acre lake.

Above all, Millbrookians pride themselves on their low-key lifestyle. Theirs is an almost Jeffersonian cult of the land—the ideal of the yeoman farmer as the embodiment of civic virtue. When New York glossy magazines began touting Millbrook as the next "it" weekend retreat, arrivistes started tricking in. What they didn't realize is that, while Millbrook has its share of tony residents (reportedly among them Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner, Mary Tyler Moore, Sigourney Weaver, and Rufus Wainwright), Millbrookians are respectfully toned-down. "A lot of that Hamptons crowd realized this wasn't for them and quickly left. There's no Citarella in Millbrook," one resident explained to me.

Instead, Millbrook represents an unstuffy society that lives, breathes, and breeds horses, not for show, but out of genuine love. It's an attitude and an aesthetic that runs deep, from the generations of quiet, established families through the new who embrace it. "It's just authentic American country," one resident told me. "Millbrook is regular people living regular lives."

Well, almost regular. Christopher Spitzmiller, a darling of the Manhattan interior-design crowd for his ceramic lamps, attended the Fitch's trials this summer. "Bette Midler was sitting at the table right next to me, and you wouldn't even notice her," he told me. "I can't imagine what crowd it is that Bette Midler would fit into, but she fits in here."