

Artful Pleasures

Bucks County has great museums, shopping, and dining—and, at day's end, some of the country's most romantic inns

BY ANN COCHRAN

THERE IS A certain energy in places that attract artists and authors. Bucks County, Pennsylvania, is such a place. Over the years, it has been home to James Michener, George S. Kaufman, Dorothy Parker, Oscar Hammerstein II, Moss Hart, and others.

Artistic creativity has long defined Bucks County, a collection of well-preserved towns and working farms along the Delaware River. You can see it everywhere, from its interesting museums and architecture to its terrific shops and restaurants.

The area is also known for beautiful inns. In a little more than three hours from Washington we arrived at the Inn at Bowman's Hill, which has been called one of the ten most romantic inns in America. It lived up to its billing.

I loved the featherbeds and the quiet guaranteed by insulated walls. After a sound sleep, my husband and I enjoyed a traditional English breakfast by the hearth. The orchid-filled conservatory

beckoned, but not for long—the inn is just 2½ miles from New Hope, the epicenter of Bucks County.

New Hope packs a lot of shopping into a square mile. At Loves Saves the Day (1 S. Main St.), vintage Barbies, lunch boxes, and costume jewelry sit near racks of 1960s dresses. Down the street, two stores named Topeo—Topeo Gallery at 35 North Main and Topeo South at 15—represent some 600 American artists.

Artisinal (1 N. Main St.) is like a museum of decorative art. Cast-bronze outdoor furniture—five-piece sets were \$30,000—look like they were designed by Tiffany.

It turned out they were created by owner Christine Figueora, who had just restored a historic B&B. I had to see this inn. So the next day, my husband and I enjoyed a gourmet brunch at Barley Sheaf Farm, where the antiques, fabrics, and art deco rooms were as stylish as Figueora's shop.

The Inn at Bowman's Hill, with featherbeds and an orchid conservatory, is one the nation's most romantic inns.



Museum Central

After brunch we continued on to Doylestown, another great walking town that is about ten miles from New Hope and home to several museums. A good place to start is Fonthill, the estate of Henry Chapman Mercer (1856–1930), an eccentric genius with a passion for tile.

Fonthill is more a curiosity than a thing of beauty. Throughout the 44 rooms of the concrete home, every surface has inlaid ceramic tile, both his factory's handcrafted tiles and the Persian, Chinese, Spanish, and Dutch tiles he collected.

Mercer tiles were considered among the world's best in their day and are still in demand. After the house tour, you can walk downhill to see Mercer's Spanish-mission-style Moravian Pottery and Tile Works. Unless you have a keen interest in tile, skip the movie and tour. Do check out the shop, where you can purchase unusual decor like a Rip Van



Winkle fireplace surround.

Another strange but worthwhile stop is the Mercer Museum, which houses 40,000 early American tools. A Conestoga wagon, whaling boat, carriages, and an antique fire engine are suspended overhead.

Across the street is the James A. Michener Art Museum, named for Doylestown's Pulitzer-winning author and major donor. Pennsylvania Impressionist paintings make up the heart of the collection. If weather permits, relax outdoors among the modern sculptures.

A short drive north is the Pearl Buck House. Buck's first bestseller was *The Good Earth*, her 1931 novel about peasant life in China, where she spent most of her first four decades. Buck moved to this farmhouse in 1934, and it is decorated with a handsome mix of Asian objects and Pennsylvania country furniture.

Creole to Cabaret

We had several memorable dinners in New Hope, including one at Marsha Brown (15 S. Main St.; 215-862-7044; marshabrownrestaurant.com), a Creole restaurant created by New Orleans native Brown. The setting is inspired: a 125-year-old Methodist church with stained-glass windows and a 40-foot-high oil painting of lions and warriors. The oyster bar is surrounded by the young and exuberant.

The food we most savored was at

Tastebuds (49 W. Ferry St.; 215-862-9722; tastebuds-newhope.com), where we enjoyed a filet of beef with rhu-barb-and-red-onion chutney, and a fennel-fontina risotto. The food was fresh, light, and reasonably priced; desserts are made on site.

If it's entertainment you're after, another good bet is the Bucks County Playhouse (215-862-2041; buckscountyplyhouse.com). Spring and summer productions include *West Side Story*, *Crazy for You*, and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

Gardens and Vineyards

All good times must come to an end. On Sunday morning, my husband locked the key inside our new car as he was loading luggage. While he called a locksmith, Mike Amery—our host at the Inn at Bowman's Hill—approached.

"Take my car," Mike insisted, "leave me your numbers, and I'll take care of everything."

A loaner car? That set a new standard of service. We accepted and headed for Hortulus (60 Thompson Mill Rd., Wrightstown; 215-598-0550; hortulusfarm.com), a nursery whose greenhouses and gardens have been filmed for HGTV shows.

We squeezed in one more stop, at one of eight local wineries (buckscountywi-

netrail.com). Crossing Vineyards (1853 Wrightstown Rd., Washington Crossing; 215-493-6500; *crossingvineyards.com*) uses sustainable agricultural methods and seemed fun—its crushing machine is nicknamed Ethel, while a press is called Lucy. Because we had to drive home, we did not indulge.

We promised we'd be back.

Where to Stay

The Inn at Bowman's Hill, New Hope; 215-862-8090; *theinnatbowmanshill.com*. Room rates: \$295 to \$535. Five manicured acres surround the stone-and-stucco house. In its four spacious guest rooms and two suites, every detail has been considered, from accent lighting to special snacks. The marble-and-travertine bathrooms are large; the Manor Suite shower has 11 jets.

Barley Sheaf Farm Estate & Spa, Holicong; 215-794-5104; *barleysheaf.com*. Rooms: \$275 to \$525. Sixteen suites have amenities that include whirlpool tubs, fireplaces, private sunrooms, and balconies. On the 100 acres are gardens, ponds, a pool, walking paths, and even sheep, goats, and miniature horses.

Centre Bridge Inn, New Hope; 215-862-9139; *centrebridgeinn.com*. Rooms: \$135 to \$225. Not many inns offer mule-drawn barge rides. At this canal-side inn with Colonial roots and a well-regarded restaurant, dine on the romantic patio when weather permits.

1870 Wedgwood Inn, New Hope; 215-862-2570; *wedgwoodinn.com*. Rates: \$95 to \$295. Featured in many magazines, this inn has a perfect location—downtown but a bit away from the main drag.

Lambertville House, Lambertville, N.J.; 888-867-8859; *lambertvillehouse.com*. Rates \$200 to \$395. A short walk across the bridge are more streets lined with antiques and boutiques; the 1812 inn with 26 luxe-country rooms has historic status and a bar with an of-the-moment martini menu.

Lexington House, New Hope; 215-794-0811; *lexingtonhouse.com*. Rates: \$130 to \$195. Innkeepers Ed White and Michael McHale give this 1749 B&B heart and style. It's mostly the real deal in antiques with a little kitsch for fun and has a two-level swimming pool with a waterfall.

The Mansion Inn, New Hope; 215-862-1231; *themansioninn.com*. Rates: \$155 to \$275. Behind a wrought-iron grape-cluster fence forged in 1867, this baroque Victorian has fine dining and a prime in-town location.

If You Go

Bucks County Conference & Visitors Bureau; 215-639-0300; *experiencebuckscounty.com*.

Fonthill Museum, Rt. 313 and E. Court St., Doylestown; 215-348-9461; *fonthillmuseum.org*.

Mercer Museum, 84 S. Pine St., Doylestown; 215-345-0210; *mercermuseum.org*.

Moravian Pottery and Tile Works, 130 Swamp Rd., Doylestown; 215-345-6722; *bucksnet.com/moravian*.

James A. Michener Art Museum, 138 S. Pine St., Doylestown; 215-340-9800; *michenermuseum.org*. Additional exhibits are at the Michener in New Hope, 500 Union Square Dr.; 215-862-7633.

Pearl S. Buck House, 520 Dublin Rd., Perkasi; 215-249-0100; *psbi.org*. 