

Bess Hochstein
words
29 Van Deusenville Road
Great Barrington, MA 01230
413.274.3487

Approx. 900

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New Spa at the Old Inn

Allison Gemmel was expecting two for her private morning yoga class, but Kipp was a no-show. Over dinner the night before at the Old Inn on the Green, proprietor Brad Wagstaff had invited my husband to experience the beauty of hydrolics by trying out some of his big toys – an 11,000-pound crawler/excavator and a 100-horsepower crawler/loader. Kipp immediately expressed his deep appreciation of hydrolics and jumped at the chance to dig up boulders with Brad. The fact that it took him less than a second to choose boulder-relocation over yoga class gave Wagstaff a new idea for companions of sybarites happy to spend a day at his Mepal Spa.

So while Kipp moved boulders around the grounds, Allison was helping me move my energy and get grounded in the brand new spa's sun-filled yoga room. This was an ideal start to a day at the Mepal Manor and Spa.

The addition of Mepal Spa to Brad Wagstaff and Leslie Miller's New Marlborough hospitality empire is a clear example of the tail wagging the dog. The couple had considered creating a spa for the Old Inn on the Green and Gedney Farm when the opportunity to buy the Hildreth Bloodgood's stately stone manor – built in 1906

– suddenly arose in the summer of 2000. Since opening the Old Inn as a B&B in 1979, Wagstaff and Miller have capitalized on serendipity, and their purchase of the manor from the Kolburne School – saving 210 acres of open land from development – was no exception.

The manor, which had been the Marlboro Academy in a previous incarnation, boasted grand architecture as well as a set of the original design plans, which Wagstaff and Miller assiduously followed in their extensive three-year renovations. But marring what became Mepal Manor was an eyesore; a low-slung, 1970s steel structure with a corrugated metal roof that had served as classrooms and a gymnasium for the school.

Wagstaff and Miller wondered if this was their spa; after all, with 30 weddings held each year at their properties they already had a built-in customer base. But it was difficult to imagine how the unsightly structure would house a haven of health and beauty.

“It was such an ugly building,” explained Wagstaff. “Of course, I wanted to start anew. But it had all the mechanicals, and my Yankee frugality wouldn’t let me tear it down.”

Their trusted architect Bob Swain, who had transformed the twin barns of Gedney Farm into luxurious accommodations and a function hall, made the case for adaptive reuse. “Bob told me ‘I can’t make it anything other than an unattractive rectangular building. But we can landscape it to improve the view from the Manor, and we can transform it from the inside.’”

And so it is that stepping into the Mepal Spa is a transporting experience. Visitors depart staid New England for a dose of high-impact contemporary design, warmed and softened by bucolic views from the spa's many windows. Bold use of color, texture, light and natural elements demarcates transitions between each room in the 6,000-square-foot haven.

The most striking vantage point is from the hot tub on a deck in the "Quiet Room." Due to its clever configuration, soakers can relish the rolling landscape without fear of being observed by passersby. Or they can relax on wavy maple chaises before being whisked into one of four peaceful, cork-floored treatment rooms.

Here visitors can experience a selection of massages, facials, and body treatments, or continue into a funky, bright white zone to choose from a full range of salon services. Mepal is the only spa in the region using Comfort Zone products, an Italian skin-, body- and hair-care line that melds botanical ingredients with high science to create effective, sensually pleasing potions.

Most visitors won't see that Mepal remains a work in progress. Behind closed doors is 6,000 more square feet still awaiting transformation. Wagstaff and Miller intend to double the space of the spa, adding fitness facilities, exercise equipment, a basketball court and flexible areas for one-on-one sessions of Pilates, Physioball, or other mind/body disciplines. Further down the road are plans for a pool. All will be executed with the same high-style flair and quality.

But even without these additional amenities, Mepal Spa has attracted fans among both visitors and locals. Since quietly opening in August, "The spa has been astonishingly

busy,” notes Wagstaff. “We’re blown away by the reception the spa has had.” Adds Miller, “We’ve gotten great local business, and we haven’t even had our official opening yet. People have heard about us and they come by to see what we’re doing.”

Miller and Wagstaff hope to serve the local community. Non-guests can use the facilities for a fee and take yoga classes by reservation. When it’s completed, community members will be able to purchase spa memberships.

By the time I met Kipp for lunch on the sun-dappled terrace of Mepal Manor, I was glowing from my 15-step Hydramemory Facial at the soothing hands of Missy Ketchum, and anticipating the manicure, pedicure, and Skin Repair Body Treatment yet to come.

Kipp had reluctantly relinquished boulder patrol for a massage at the spa, and he was glowing, too, but mostly from enjoyment of his earth-moving experience. It’s clear that the restless mind of Brad Wagstaff is once again onto something big; heavy-machinery sessions for the spa-shy are now under serious consideration for Mepal programming.

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