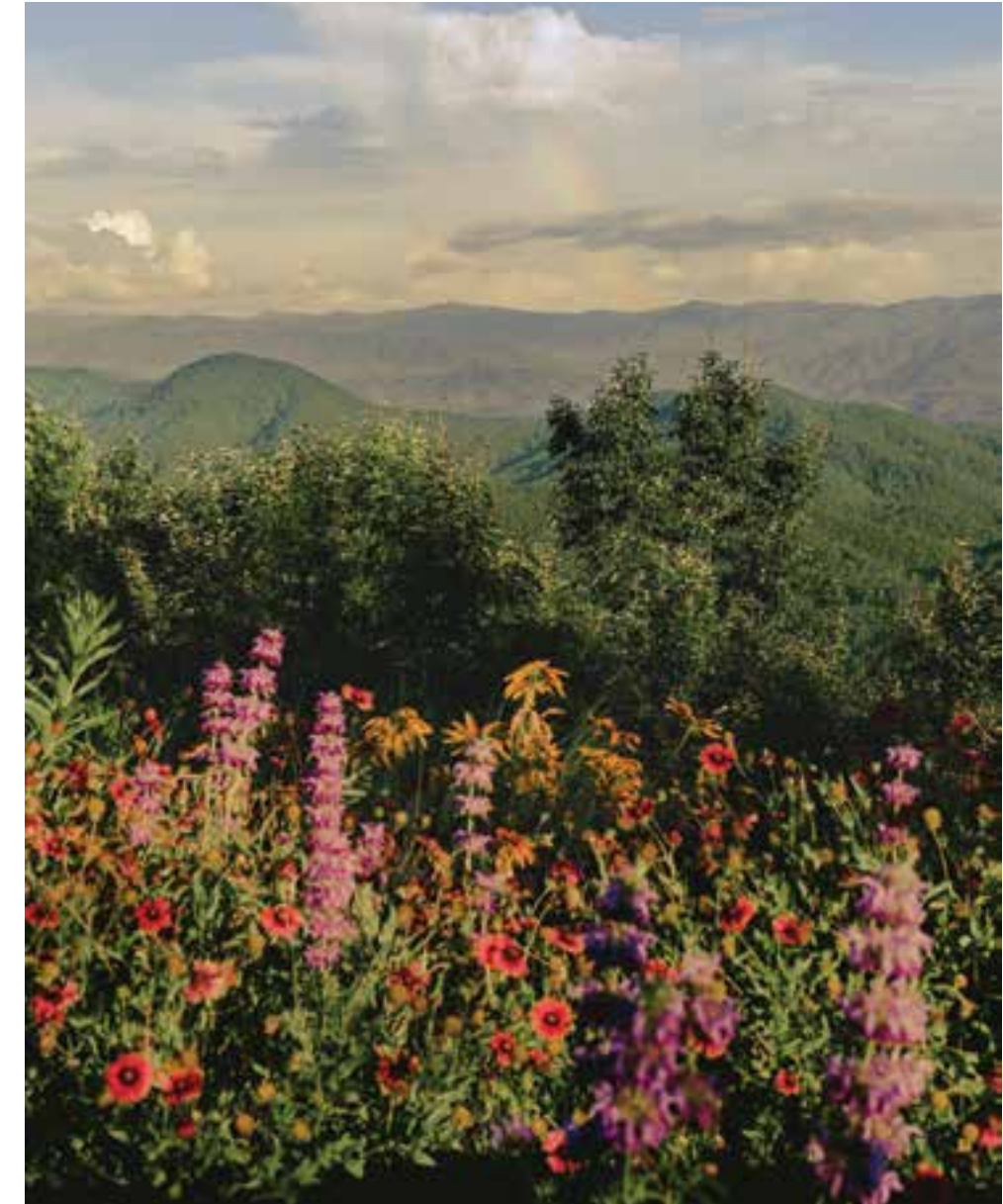


NATURAL HABITAT
A 1-acre body of fresh water with a beach, boardwalks and a 30-foot speed slide at The Valley, a new leisure park at Blackberry Mountain. Opposite: A view from Goat Hill.

The Great Escape



After a tragic loss and amid a global pandemic, Mary Celeste Beall, the proprietor of two resorts in the Tennessee foothills, is extending her family's shared vision with The Valley, a new 15-acre outpost.

BY GABE ULLA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JUSTIN KANEPS

FRESH PERSPECTIVE
“I never thought I would become proprietor,” says Mary Celeste Beall, photographed at Blackberry Mountain, which she has helmed since her husband’s death in 2016. “But even in the crazy fog following the accident, it felt natural.”



I JUST LOVE THIS RIDE,” says Mary Celeste Beall from the driver’s seat of a golf cart bound for The Valley, a new 15-acre leisure park at Blackberry Mountain, one of her two resorts outside of Knoxville, Tennessee. The turn off the property’s main road immediately gives way to a winding descent, past timber footbridges, waterfalls and sandstone boulders, before merging onto a woodland path that runs beneath a dense canopy of oak and pine. It takes about 10 minutes for the sky to open up and the destination to come into view. On this hazy June afternoon, in the midst of a pandemic that has fundamentally altered American life, it feels almost like a mirage.

“More than ever, people want space,” Beall, 43, says, “and we’ve got lots of it.”

Blackberry Mountain is the sister property of Blackberry Farm. Both resorts sit just north of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and fall within Blount County, whose landscape is marked by rolling hills and rhododendron. Cormac McCarthy wrote his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, while living in the region; and Dollywood, in neighboring Sevier County, is less than an hour’s drive. Blackberry Farm, whose history dates back nearly five decades, is known as a place to eat well and unwind; Mountain, meanwhile, is a sylvan retreat of 27 cottages, six cabins and multiple private residences that dot Chilhowee Mountain. Since the resort’s debut last year, an activities center called The Hub has offered

dozens of options, including indoor rock climbing, sound-bathing meditations and guided hikes along 26 miles of private trails that extend up to the 2,800-foot summit.

Now, with The Valley, Beall has launched an expansion aimed at families. “While planning this, I was thinking about what people with kids would want, which was easy,” she says, “because it’s really what I want.” A mother of five (Cameron, 22; Sam, 17; Rose, 15; Josephine, 11; and Lila, 7), she has lived on Blackberry Farm for the better part of 23 years and has led the company since 2016, when her predecessor and husband, Sam Beall, died in a skiing accident in Colorado, at the age of 39.

“I never thought I would become proprietor,” says Beall, who holds a master’s degree in accounting from the University of Tennessee but had always planned to contribute to the business in an unofficial capacity while raising their family. “But even in the crazy fog following the accident, it felt natural.”

The Valley site sits on the development’s lowest elevation; The Hub, the main lodge and the majority of accommodations are on “mid-mountain,” as staff refer to it. Perched higher yet, right at the peak, are Firetower, one of Mountain’s two restaurants, and a series of cabins built for hikers. Beall envisions guests driving or hiking down to The Valley, where there are two pairs of tennis and pickleball courts; a green lawn for those who want to toss a football or lie in the sun; as well as a pool, the second on the property.

The area opened to guests on the initial target date of July 4 despite an unforeseen delay: Covid-19. When the state government banned restaurant dining, the leadership team—which includes Mary Celeste, the proprietor; her father-in-law, Sandy Beall, the co-founder; and Matt Alexander, the president—decided to suspend all operations. The temporary closure lasted from late March to mid-May, during which time Blackberry was able to compensate nearly 900 staff members at their average hours or full salary.

“Closing for a month and a half had a big impact on business,” says Alexander. “Our inventory doesn’t just sit on a shelf.” He nonetheless believes that Blackberry can adapt to the times, mainly because both resorts consist of individual cottages and homes that are scattered across 10,000 acres. “But,” he adds, “We are not blind to the fact that things could still change.”

Since they reopened, both Farm and Mountain have intentionally been functioning at reduced occupancy levels. But demand is high, and they are fully booked. In addition to commonly held protocols like mandatory morning temperature checks for staff and more rigorous sanitizing practices, check-in times and dining reservations are now staggered. Another newly implemented rule ensures that rooms remain vacant for a longer period of time between guests, following a deep clean. Staff wear face coverings at all times; Beall is no exception. She keeps hers firmly fixed, even though it can make it difficult to sustain conversation



INSIDE EDITION
One of Blackberry Mountain’s private residences, the interiors of which are tailored to each owner’s tastes.



RUSTIC RETREAT
 Left: Three Sisters, Blackberry Mountain's most ambitious restaurant, led by chefs Bonnie Moore and Joey Edwards. Above: A floating dock at The Valley.

on a muggy day.

"We are doing the best we can," Beall says, walking deeper into the landscape, toward The Valley's pond—a 1-acre body of fresh water fed by nearby streams, with dock hammocks and a 30-foot speed slide that's been built into the surrounding slope. Beall gestures toward a chimney in a shady alcove close by. It's the only trace of a cottage that burned down many years ago. "That's the spot where Sam, the kids and I liked to camp out," she says, alluding to the days when the family was first acquainting itself with this terrain, well before there were plans for Blackberry Mountain, much less The Valley.

"None of us really know how our lives are going to unfold," Beall says. "Sam and I had reached this point where we thought we had figured it all out. But then the rug got pulled out from under us."

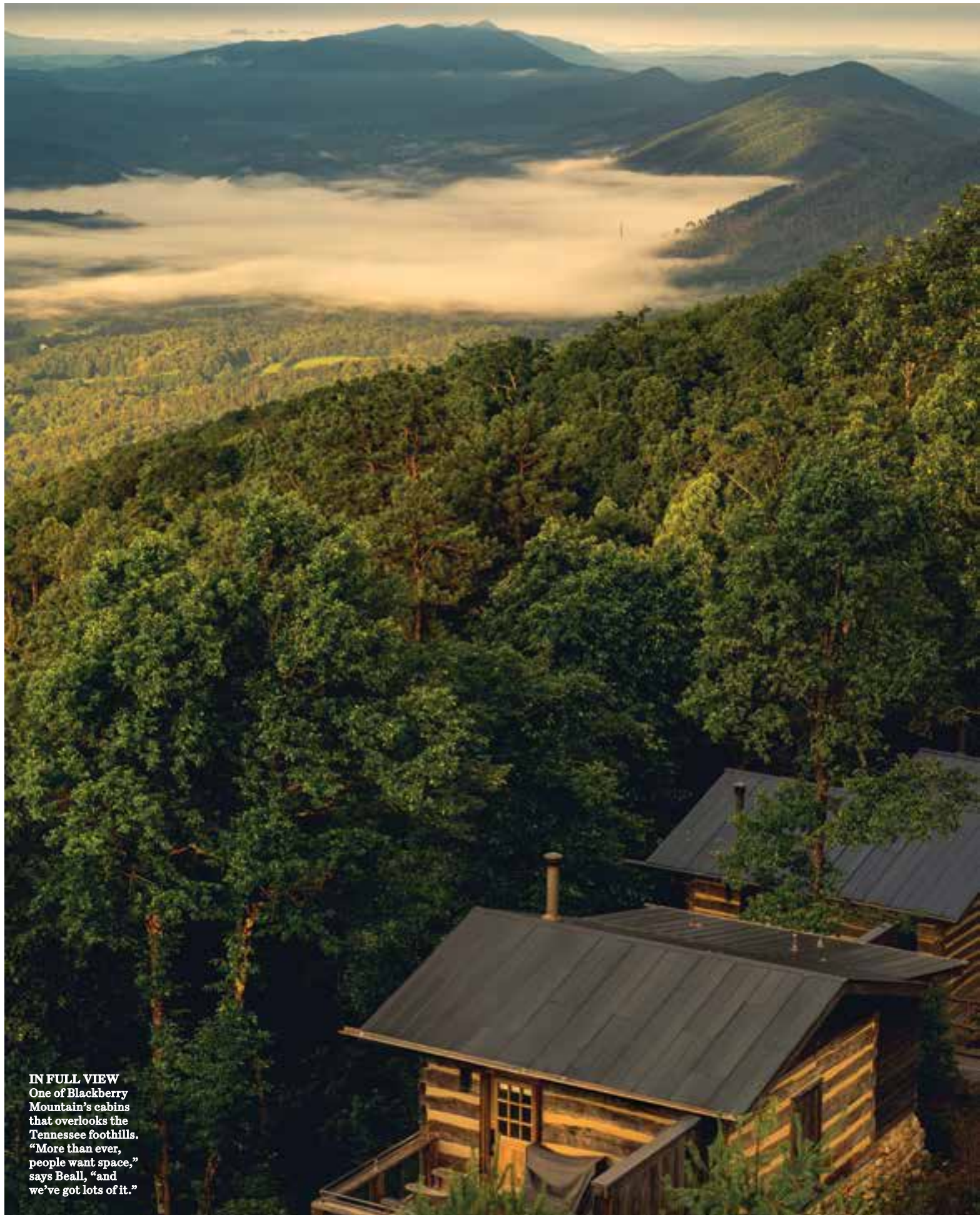
The two fell in love as high school students in Mary Celeste's hometown of Mobile, Alabama. Sam was born in East Tennessee, but his father, Sandy, the founder of Ruby Tuesday Inc., had moved the family to Mobile after the restaurant chain was acquired by a local company. As Mary Celeste and Sam's relationship developed, they took regular trips to Blackberry Farm, his family's Tennessee home, which Sandy and his wife, Kreis Beall, bought

in 1976 and started operating as a nine-room inn shortly thereafter. (They have since divorced.) Mary Celeste and Sam went off to college in Virginia—she to Washington and Lee University, he to Hampden-Sydney College—and got married in 1997. The couple lived in California for several years while Sam trained to become a chef and Mary Celeste worked at PricewaterhouseCoopers, but they always considered Blackberry home.

By the time Sam assumed the role of proprietor in 2002, Kreis and Sandy had earned Blackberry Farm a place in Relais & Châteaux's global association of independently owned hospitality businesses. Their



SCENIC ROUTE
 From top: Tennis courts at The Valley; a blue corn crêpe with crème fraîche from Three Sisters restaurant; Beall with four of her five children at Blackberry Mountain. Left: The Valley's 60-by-24-foot pool.



IN FULL VIEW
One of Blackberry Mountain's cabins that overlooks the Tennessee foothills. "More than ever, people want space," says Beall, "and we've got lots of it."

“WHILE PLANNING THIS, I WAS THINKING ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE WITH KIDS WOULD WANT, WHICH WAS EASY, BECAUSE IT’S REALLY WHAT I WANT.”

—MARY CELESTE BEALL

son expanded Blackberry’s reputation. He used the lessons he had picked up at the California Culinary Academy and the French Laundry to turn Blackberry Farm into a fulcrum of Southern food and ideas. He championed a cuisine attuned to the local land, and he invited noted chefs, including Sean Brock and Rodney Scott, for collaborative dinners. His cookbook, *The Foothills Cuisine of Blackberry Farm*, doubles as an agricultural history of the region and features recipes ranging from a springtime dish of foraged morel mushrooms filled with soft-scrambled eggs to an autumnal salad of young greens, hickory nuts and an aged ewe’s-milk cheese produced at the resort’s own dairy.

“When we started getting all this attention for sourcing food from only yards away,” says Beall, “Sam would always respond, ‘This is how people have been eating here for ages. We aren’t doing anything special.’”

Today, a small army of beekeepers, preservationists, butchers and cooks maintains Blackberry’s culinary ecosystem. (Nightly rates at Farm and Mountain start around \$1,000 and include most meals; its restaurants are currently only open to guests and homeowners.) Farm’s flagship restaurant, The Barn, opened in 2007 and has won two James Beard Awards; most recently, its current chef, Cassidee Dabney, earned a Beard nomination for Best Chef: Southeast for 2020, her third to date. A larder sells a line of house-made items, including Appalachian coppa and aged pimento cheese, and the Blackberry Farm Brewery produces more than 10 different styles of craft beer. Master gardener John Coykendall, who has worked at Blackberry for over 20 years, oversees a four-acre plot. Some of the heirloom seeds in his collection date back centuries.

With funds raised from culinary events and concerts (around \$170,000 in 2019), the company’s nonprofit, the Blackberry Foundation, awards annual grants to several local schools, as well as to charities devoted to culinary education and child food insecurity. Another effort, the Sam Beall Fellows Program, provides scholarships to aspiring hospitality workers so that they can experience multiple areas of the profession before selecting a career path.

“What they do there is much more than serve really nice food to rich people,” says chef and restaurateur Gabriela Cámara, who hosted a four-day culinary event at Farm in 2019. “The collective knowledge of John and everyone who works that land, the devotion to good farming practices, and the way they negotiate old and new is just so important.”

In the aftermath of Sam’s death, Sandy didn’t wait very long to suggest to his daughter-in-law that she take charge. “We’re talking days, not weeks,” Mary Celeste says. There was a lot of work to do. The Bealls had just settled on plans to build a hotel on the

5,200 acres of mountain terrain they had acquired in 2007. They say that the primary goal of the purchase—which they made together with several other families—was to prevent any unseemly development of the environment. With the help of the North American Land Trust, they dedicated 2,800 acres for conservation, and from there they developed a vision for a new resort, inspired in great part by Mary Celeste and Sam’s experiences on the land.

“We just started rocking and rolling,” says Beall of the transition. “When I married Sam, I committed to supporting him, but I had an accounting degree, because I thought I needed to be able to support myself no matter what happened.” She has always had a hand in the marketing and retail departments. Now she oversees them. Sandy, meanwhile, has taken over culinary operations, along with sommelier Andy Chabot, who joined the company nearly 20 years ago and presides over a wine list that some consider reason alone to book a trip to Farm.

“I really had to learn to let go and not micromanage,” Beall says. “We have six restaurants, three retail shops, a magazine, a catalog and so much more, so it wouldn’t be a good idea.” If Blackberry is to live on for decades, which Beall says has always been the family’s plan, she argues that the key is empowering others. “Besides,” she says, “I’ve realized how much all of us here naturally lean on each other, which has helped us with the loss of Sam.” In conversation, it’s common to hear employees refer to their colleagues as family. “It’s not a word we throw around lightly, and it can be difficult for outsiders to understand the extent of it,” says Alexander, who started working at Blackberry 21 years ago. Several longtime staff members met their spouses at work, like Chabot, whose wife, Sarah Elder Chabot, is the director of marketing.

“You know, it’s been four years since Sam died,” Beall says, “and there has still been no bitterness or anger. Do I wish he was back here with us? Of course. Are there terrible days? Of course. Can I fill that void? No. But every day I have the chance to pursue the dream he and I created together.”

“Her positive temperament isn’t some kind of Southern put-on,” says singer-songwriter Holly Williams (granddaughter of Hank Williams Sr.) of Beall, whom she first met in 2013. “She has to constantly make a choice to look at things a certain way, and that takes work.”

As the face of Blackberry, Beall has seen her responsibilities as host increase. In recent years, both Gwyneth Paltrow and Brené Brown have held summits at Mountain, while at Farm, there have been concerts by Emmylou Harris and culinary events led by chef José Andrés. Beall has also emerged as a guiding voice on architecture and design. “With Mary Celeste, you have to understand that luxe for the sake of luxe is never going to fly,”

says Matt Smith, Blackberry’s development director, who joined the organization 12 years ago. “There is a strong avoidance of snootiness.” The sensibility is evident in the vernacular architecture of The Valley, as well as during a quick-fire meeting to review items for the company’s yearly catalog, when Beall gets stuck on a \$28 napkin. “Come on, who’s really going to buy this?” she asks. “Maybe it’s because I’m the youngest of four, I don’t know.”

Every week is different for Beall. “I am not great at managing my time,” she says. Colleagues and friends, like the fashion designer Billy Reid, would suggest otherwise: “Never would you know that those two worlds are coinciding, but they are always coinciding,” he says of the way Beall balances the personal and professional. With the exception of her eldest daughter, Cameron, who is attending the University of Georgia, all of her children are still at home. “The great, lucky thing for me is that we live on Blackberry Farm,” Beall says, noting that the added space was particularly useful during quarantine, as her youngest two, Lila and Josephine, finished the academic year remotely. The kids frequently tag along to different events with her, and some guests and homeowners take the younger Bealls on bike rides and other adventures.

“I also love being able to sneak in a walk around the property to inspect things whenever I want,” she says. At one point in the day, Beall stops by Three Sisters, Mountain’s most ambitious restaurant, where two longstanding Blackberry employees, Bonnie Moore and Joey Edwards, are now the executive chefs, and her daughter Rose is learning the rhythms of a professional kitchen. “We’ve always made sure that they are very exposed to the family business,” Beall says while adjusting her daughter’s mask.

With The Valley complete, Beall says, “We’re good on big hotel projects for now.” Instead of opening more outposts, she’s interested in making incremental improvements to the existing properties. Maybe one day there will be treehouses erected near Mountain’s main lodge. Maybe in five or 10 years they’ll construct some homes by The Valley, which currently does not include accommodations. Beall would also love to build an amphitheater on lower mountain and to expand the art offerings at The Hub in honor of her mother, Eugenia Foster, a painter, who is still based in Mobile. “I have always loved being in her studio,” says Beall, whose parents divorced when she was 10. “That’s when Mom took her painting to another level, because she needed to have an income of her own.”

For the moment, though, Beall is mostly focused on a different development.

“At first, I would always ask myself, What would Sam do?” she says. “But now I feel confident that we can evolve. We’re living on.” ●