

TRAVEL + LEISURE

+ Food

**Eat,
Drink,
Travel,
Repeat.**

TENNESSEE
CALIFORNIA
SPAIN
ISRAEL
JAPAN
ITALY
+ MORE

**Special
Section**
**World's
Best
Restaurants**

30 Delicious
Places to Add
to Your Global
Dining List

SEPTEMBER 2019
DISPLAY UNTIL SEPTEMBER 20, 2019

\$5.99





Guests enjoy a picnic at the Lower Pasture at Blackberry Farm.

An American Story

FOR DECADES, BLACKBERRY FARM HAS NOURISHED AND WELCOMED AND SERVED ITS GUESTS WITH A HIGHLY REFINED TASTE OF THE SOUTH. WITH A SECOND, WELLNESS-FOCUSED HOTEL NOW OPEN, BRAND BLACKBERRY IS BRANCHING OUT, WHILE STAYING TRUE TO ITS CORE.

BY JACQUELINE GIFFORD PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCUS NILSSON



▲
*From top:
Creamed corn and
chanterelles with
bee balm, pickled
cucumber, and
oregano, served
at the Barn at
Blackberry Farm;
Mary Celeste Beall,
proprietor of
Blackberry Farm
and Blackberry
Mountain.*

►
*A view of the Great
Smoky Mountains
from the deck at
Blackberry
Mountain.*



EVER UNDERESTIMATE THE
power of Instagram.

Soon after I post a picture of the apple-red Barn, the fine-dining restaurant at Blackberry Farm, the DMs and comments come flooding in.

“Dying to go there!”

“Been on my wish list!”

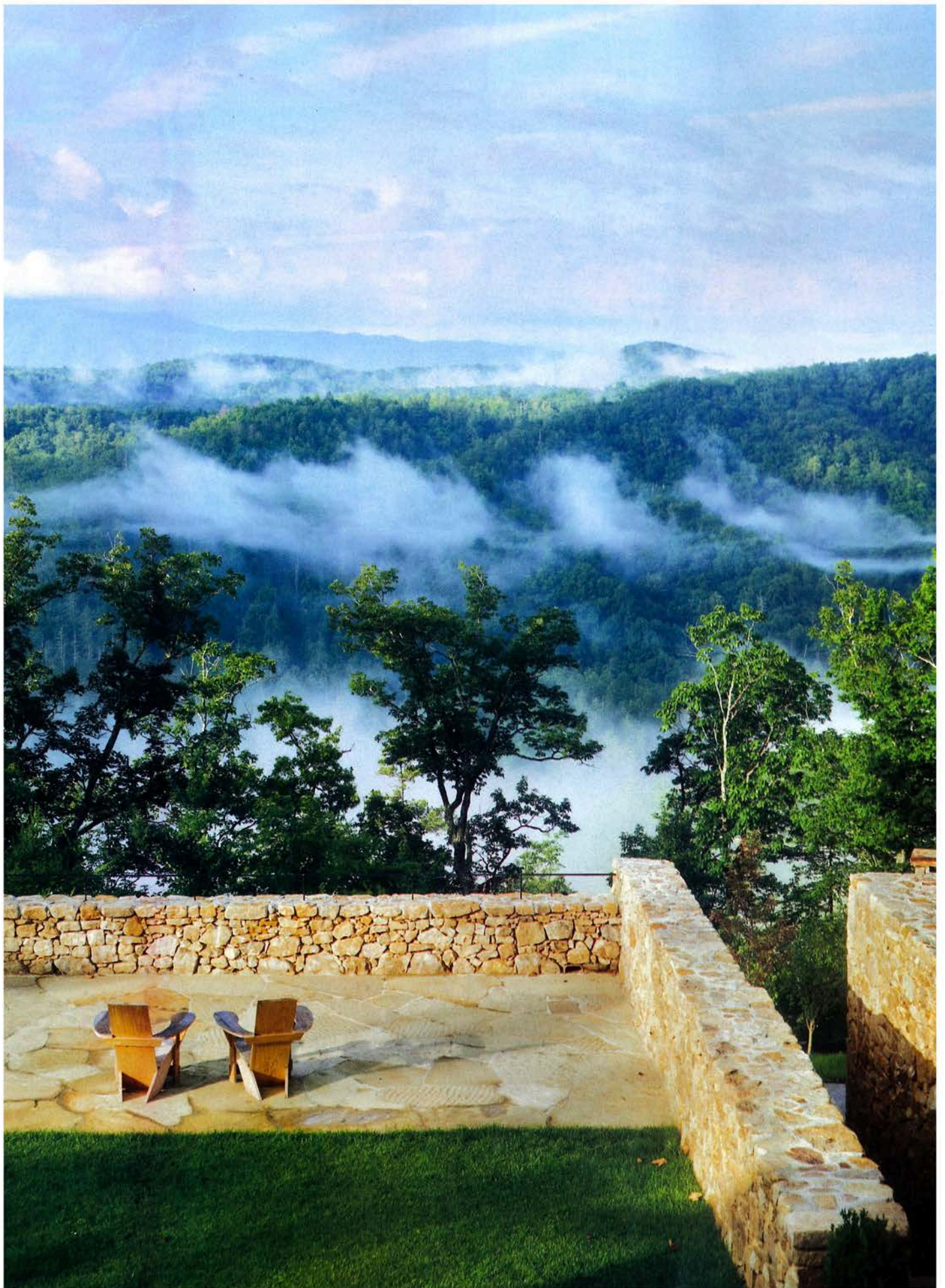
“Sigh.”

I ogle hotels on Insta all the time, and over the years I’ve noticed that certain places acquire a mythic quality—call it an oversize personality—on the platform. Properties like Amangiri, a luxury retreat dropped down like some alien spaceship among the red rocks of Utah. Or Le Sirenuse, an Amalfi Coast fantasy of bronze tans and ice-cold negronis. Everyone wants to go to these hotels, because everyone else seems to be having a better time there.

Blackberry Farm, a glamorous and welcoming celebration of Southern cuisine and culture in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, is such a place. At this 4,200-acre resort, you embrace the life of shooting clays and fly-fishing and hiking in your Barbour. You sit on huge white rocking chairs and stare at the green expanse of the Smokies. You see Insta-friendly animals—well-fed sheep, a cow or two, the hotel’s resident Lagotto Romagnolo water dogs—and feel compelled to show the world that you saw them.

The real draw, however, is the food: hearty and unpretentious, with dishes as simple as pimento cheese and fried chicken and as delicately complex as a single garden strawberry topped with sorrel granita and vanilla olive oil. The resort celebrates what it calls “foothills cuisine,” which means rugged, refined cooking done with seasonal mountain ingredients, and employs a long roster of artisans (gardeners, cheese makers, craft brewers) to bring the style to life.

You can thank one family, the Bealls, for this immaculate, highly curated experience. In 1976, Sandy Beall, the founder of the Ruby Tuesday restaurant chain, bought Blackberry Farm, then a rustic country estate. Soon Sandy and his wife, Kreis, who decorated each of the main house’s rooms, opened the property to guests, welcoming them as if into their own home (which, actually, it was—the couple lived





► From top: Guests participate in a sound-bathing session at Blackberry Mountain; fresh vegetables and flowers from the garden at Blackberry Farm; one of the bright, contemporary guest cottages at Blackberry Mountain.

there with their two boys). Over the years, they expanded, adding a few cottages here, a spa there.

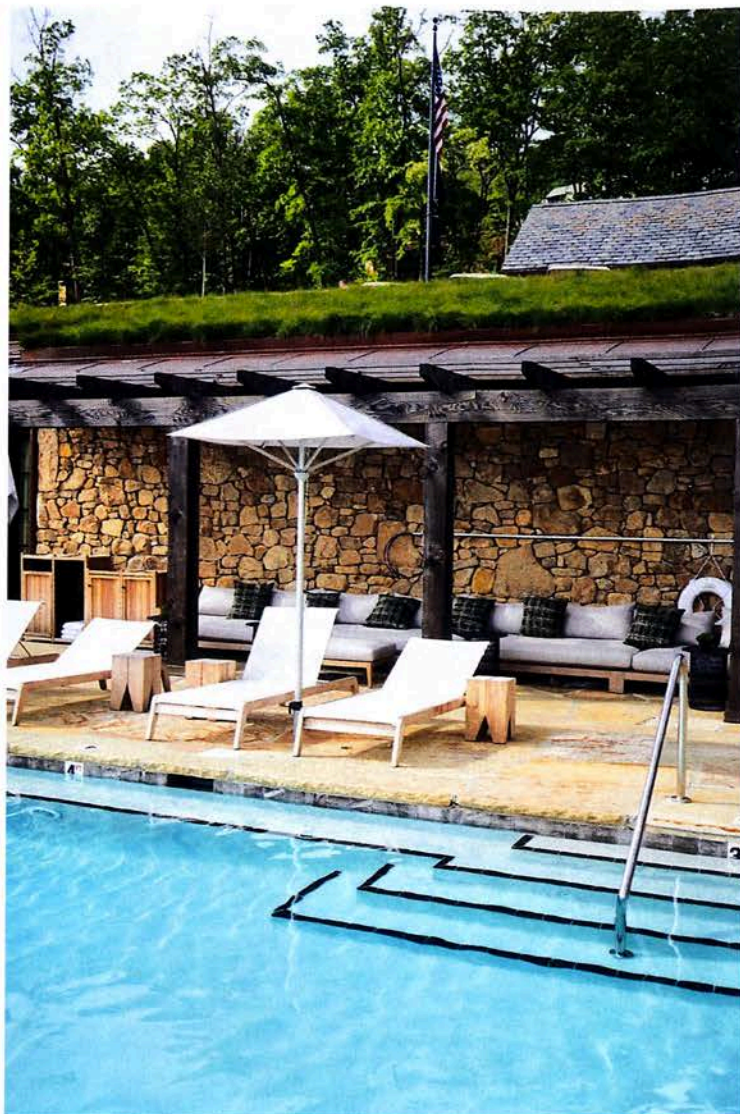
But it was their son Sam who anticipated that American palates were growing more adventurous and more refined—that sophisticated diners would soon begin seeking out farm-to-table cuisine. After stints at a number of high-end northern California wineries and restaurants, including the French Laundry, he returned home to open the Barn at Blackberry Farm, a fine-dining restaurant in a 200-year-old timber-frame structure brought piece by piece from Pennsylvania Dutch country, and the more casual Dogwood, in the main house. Both catapulted Blackberry Farm to the top of the American hotel food chain, earning it a Relais & Châteaux Gourmand designation. Sam also tapped into a growing desire for the kind of genuine, unstuffy service that is the normal way of doing things in this rural pocket of eastern Tennessee. Many of the 600-plus people working at Blackberry Farm grew up nearby.

I first visited in October 2011, when the summer's heat had passed and the chestnut oaks and maples were awash in orange and red. The first morning, my husband and I shed our Manhattan personas and followed a fox hunt on foot. We met Sam, who looked like he'd stepped out of a Ralph Lauren ad as he played with a litter of puppies. I remember him thanking us for taking the time to visit, as if we'd actually been put out to come.

The Blackberry Farm of 2019 feels different from the one I visited in 2011. The wellness-focused Blackberry Mountain, a companion hotel that is drawing a different type of visitor, opened in February, just 15 minutes away from the original property. The project was one of Sam's top priorities at the time of his sudden death, in 2016, in a skiing accident. His absence is keenly felt, but Blackberry Farm has continued to push the boundaries of hospitality.

◄ Master gardener and Tennessee native John Coykendall at the Blackberry Farm garden.





▲
The guest pool just off the main lodge at Blackberry Mountain.

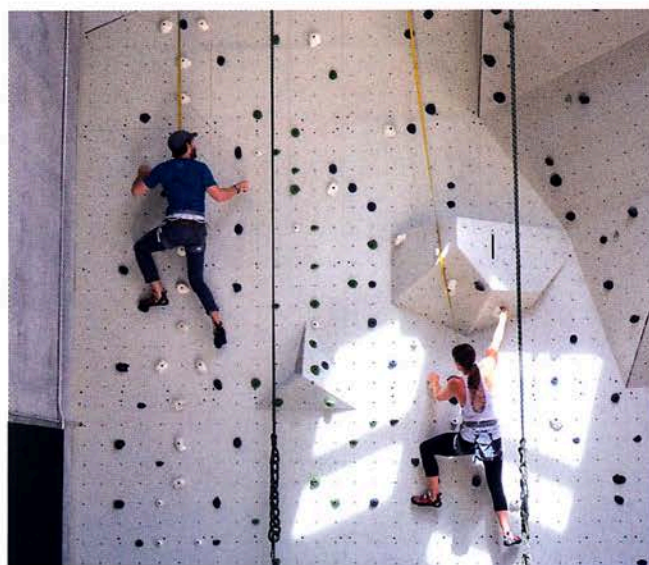
CASSIDEE DABNEY, the executive chef of the Barn, leads me through the tidy rows of the three-acre organic garden, where the dozens of herbs, flowers, vegetables, and grains that supply her kitchen are grown. Even though dinner at the Barn starts in less than two hours, Cassidee is not in a rush. We stop to taste golden oregano. Then asparagus, so crisp and earthy that I wonder why anyone in their right mind would boil this vegetable.

A decade ago, farm-to-table was enough for guests, says the chef, who has piercing cobalt eyes and a direct, no-nonsense way of speaking. Now it's still farm-to-table, but individually tailored for each diner. As a result, dinner service requires a new choreography. "Back in 2010, two tables a night had dietary restrictions," explains Cassidee, who started

as a cook at the main house in 2005, and was named to her current job in 2015. "Now 85 percent of my guests have a restriction." The team accommodates dairy, vinegar, gluten, tree-nut, soy, nightshade, and garlic allergies, as well as paleo, Atkins, keto, raw vegan, vegetarian, and kosher diets, as well as many other requests. "The restrictions have added about two hours of work every night," says Cassidee, who developed a gluten intolerance herself this past year.

There is no question that Americans are rethinking their relationship with food, from how it makes them feel to the impact of industrialized farming and overfishing on the environment. We're also getting more comfortable expressing what we want—thank (or blame) social media for that. To its credit, Blackberry, because it is a hotel and because it charges what it does (\$895 per night, including meals, for one of the airy guest rooms), bends over backward to be inclusive. And even though it's more work, Cassidee enjoys playing mad scientist. After a local farmer dropped off 40 pounds of mushrooms recently, she fermented and then boiled the stems to make a sauce that turned out to taste like Parmesan. It soon showed up on a vegan menu.

During two solo meals at the Barn, I found that its mood has changed, too. The chefs working in the open kitchen look the same and the air still smells lightly of wood smoke, but the background music is a touch louder; the crowd, a hair younger. A party of eight gets rowdy in a corner. The couple next to me is clearly on their honeymoon. They look at each other nervously—*OMG, we're at Blackberry Farm!*—until they hear the laughter from the other table and relax.



All around me, the servers and chefs do their dance, trying their best to make others happy.

Blackberry still has its formal touches, to be sure: the china is from Bernardaud and the monogrammed linen napkins are from Casarovea. But no matter what question you ask—like, *Just what exactly is a North Carolina guinea hen?*—your server won't bat an eye. You're a guest of the Bealls, and guests of the Bealls can ask anything they like.

One evening I decide to go (mostly) vegetarian. First comes a delicately grilled buttermilk cheese, with green garlic, ramps, and garden broccoli, in an umami bomb of a broth that pairs beautifully with a Terres de Velle 2016 Chardonnay from Burgundy. Sean Beeler, a junior sommelier, gives me the tasting notes, but I'm more interested in his personal story. His mom ran a local wine store, and that's how he made his way to Blackberry, where he's soaking it all in—when he's not at Walt Disney World, which is his other obsession (one I share).

The courses keep coming. Those special mushrooms Dabney told me about earlier appear in a thick, incredible soup, topped with crispy shallots and thyme oil. I taste a wood-grilled rib-eye cap, which I'd ordered mainly because it came with horseradish béarnaise. My three-hour dinner

flies by. All around me, the servers and chefs do their dance, trying their best to make others happy.

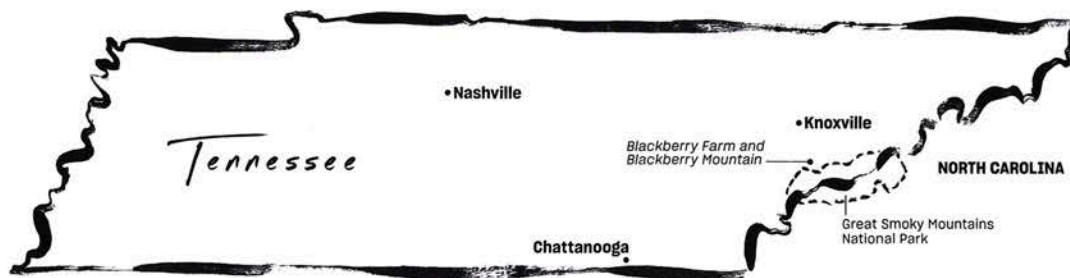
YOU CAN'T ESCAPE the word *wellness* these days. Or its spirit animal, Gwyneth Paltrow. I check in to Blackberry Mountain, Blackberry Farm's new companion property, shortly after the actress-slash-media mogul and her Goopers wrap up a retreat there. "Having the most magical time at one of the nicest properties I have ever been to in my life," Paltrow raves later on Instagram.

Opened in February, Blackberry Mountain is just seven miles from the Farm, but it's at an elevation of 2,800 feet, on 5,200 acres in the Chilhowee Mountain ridge. The land, which was the site of a lumber mill a century ago but had sat empty for years, came up for sale in 2007. Fearing it could be turned into a housing development, Sam and his wife, Mary Celeste Beall, along with other investors, scooped it up. They dedicated half to conservation and waited out the



From far left: The climbing wall at Blackberry Mountain; royal red shrimp with green pea curry at Blackberry Mountain's Three Sisters restaurant; Cassidee Dabney, executive chef at the Barn at Blackberry Farm.

One of the six
secluded Watchman
Cabins, part of
Blackberry
Mountain.



Food and Wellness in Eastern Tennessee

Getting There

Several airlines offer direct flights from more than a dozen U.S. cities into McGhee-Tyson Airport in Knoxville, Tennessee. From there, it's about a 30-minute drive to the properties. You won't need a car at Blackberry; staffers chauffeur visitors around in Lexus SUVs, and personal golf carts are also provided. However, if you want to go off-site to explore Great Smoky Mountains National Park, a rental will come in handy.

Where to Stay Blackberry Farm

(blackberryfarm.com; doubles from \$895, including meals) has 68 lovely guest rooms located by the main house, but I personally love the generous Singing Brook Cottage Suites closer to the Barn for the space and the proximity to the family pool. (Blackberry, though it has its formalities, is very family-friendly.) At **Blackberry Mountain**

(blackberrymountain.com; doubles from \$945, including breakfast and dinner), I stayed in one of the cottages close to the main lodge; those on the lower ridge have a bit more privacy. I suggest packing clothes for all types of weather, since it can get cool at night and downpours aren't uncommon, especially in the spring.

What to Do

At Blackberry Farm, there's plenty to do between meals, like clay shooting at the nearby range and fly-fishing on Hesse Creek; there's even an on-site archery range. I also recommend the expansive Wellhouse spa, which offers fantastic facials. Blackberry Mountain guests can take advantage of the numerous fitness classes, in addition to the hiking and biking trails. Some classes and private sessions, such as a hike with Boyd Hopkins, one of the top guides, cost extra.

economic downturn to build on the other half. During that time, travelers became increasingly interested in wellness, prompting the Bealls, who loved boating and hiking and the great outdoors, to come up with a concept for an entirely different hotel.

Blackberry Mountain is not a place for sitting. I would fly there tomorrow for the breakfast muffins, but I think of the meals as punctuation marks between the activities. The Mountain is a place to play and reconnect with nature: the Smokies surround you, informing your entire experience. There are 25 miles of mountain biking and hiking trails, and a place called the Hub, made up of sleek spaces for hot yoga, rock climbing, pottery, TRX, and more. The crowd during my stay was even younger than at the Farm: mainly couples in their 30s and 40s.

One morning I set out with Boyd Hopkins, the lead guide, to tackle Cat's Paw Ridge, a 1.3-mile series of switchbacks and hills, and try to absorb some of his encyclopedic knowledge of the landscape. One point three miles sounds easy, but then you try this hike and get schooled.

Boyd wears his hair long and loose, with tiny braids woven in. He speaks low and softly, and I focus on his voice as the trek grows more challenging. He shows me sourwood and mayapple, pink lady's-slippers and umbrella magnolias. We turn a corner halfway through the trek to find a glade of cinnamon ferns that have just unfurled in the spring sunshine. Boyd hears the call of a scarlet tanager and tells me the bird flies up from Brazil every year. There are plenty of black bears in these woods, too. Boyd says he stumbled upon a pair of cubs the other day while their mother was out foraging.

We reach a clearing where you can see all the way to Georgia. A gigantic wooden

(Continued on page 130)





(An American Story, continued from page 108)

troll carved by the Danish artist Thomas Dambo sits in the center, like some bizarre Tennessee version of Mount Rushmore. I pose for a photo, not quite processing that the troll is there.

Back at the Hub, I obsess over which of the 24 classes I should take to better myself. I decide on TRX, cardio drumming, and hot yoga to get me energized. Later, I try sound bathing with Chris Savell, an out-of-body experience that leaves me refreshed but also disoriented: halfway through, as Chris plays an “ocean drum,” I feel a tightness in my chest, akin to a panic attack. Then it goes away, and I nearly fall asleep. My bad energy, Chris explains, has been dislodged.

When I’m not trying a class, I sit and read on the deck of my cabin, appreciating the silence. Blackberry Mountain has 30 spacious cottages with cozy touches like fireplaces and heated stone floors. They’re clustered around the main lodge, which is built from timber and stone and has an intimate spa where you can indulge in herbal-poultice massages and acupuncture. At night, the whole place takes on a convivial, summer-camp-for-grown-ups atmosphere, as cocktails are poured and guests chat about their day.

For true quiet, there are the six Watchman Cabins, partly repurposed from a 19th-century log home at the very top of the mountain, where Wi-Fi and TVs would feel horribly out of place—you’ll just have to do without. The main form of entertainment is the

Firetower, a bar and restaurant built around the base of a circa-1940 lookout that offers panoramic views of the Smokies.

Those mountains do grab your attention, but it is the wisps of mist that hover over them that keep you transfixed. You will come to Blackberry Mountain to be restored by the yoga and the sound bathing, or at the very least get a massage. But the view is what will really heal you.

MORE THAN ONE Blackberry staffer describes Mary Celeste Beall as a force of nature, an inspiration. (You can follow her on Instagram, as I do: @marycelestbf.) I would normally be skeptical. But I have met this woman. I have done hot yoga and gone on hikes with this woman. And I am a believer.

Mary Celeste met Sam in high school, in Alabama. Before he died, she was involved in many aspects of Blackberry Farm, like the design and the event planning, but not the day-to-day operations, because she was also involved in the minutiae of raising five children. “Things are a little different now as a single mother,” she says.

With Sam gone, Mary Celeste was left to keep the Farm running at the highest level, lead a staff in mourning, and complete the Mountain project. “When Sam passed away, we didn’t have the details figured out,” she explains as we set out on a morning hike. “As we kept evolving the resort, we came up with the Firetower restaurant. Then we focused on the wellness piece. I labored over every trail name.”

Mary Celeste goes back and forth between the two properties. She meets with her team at the beginning of each week, then hosts retreats and events and travels the country to spread the word of Blackberry. She also gets the kids off to school. “It was probably life-saving,” she tells me of taking over the hotels. “If I hadn’t jumped in, I probably would have been lying in bed, doing nothing, or micromanaging my children.”

On our hike, we talk about everything and nothing: poison ivy, raising kids, how the Farm crowd is getting younger, Sam’s belief that everything should be in moderation. Her mind runs a mile a minute. She tells me which Mountain trails my young son could walk. She gets the working-mom dilemma: sometimes you want to bring the whole crew along for the ride; sometimes you need time for yourself.

I ask her about grief. “Everyone’s situation is different,” she says, her voice cracking slightly. “Yesterday was a terrible day for me, and I thought about how I want people to know it’s a ride, it’s all normal. Our life is great, we have so many inspiring moments, but there are hard days. I want my kids to know it’s normal to have a bad day. It’s not all sunshine. Our kids are seeing that this celebrity won this award, is on the red carpet, and the reality is they have issues, too.”

I realize that what she’s saying applies to Blackberry Farm and Blackberry Mountain, too. You want to go because you see this foodie fairy tale on Instagram, but then you do go and you realize that what really makes it amazing is that it’s a real place, with real people. It’s easy to root for Mary Celeste, because she’s genuine. She doesn’t have the time to make up a narrative of her life to sell to others. She gave me three hours, when she had five minutes.

My last morning at the Mountain, I take a pottery class with Polly Ann Martin, who is patience incarnate. Polly Ann taught at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan for many years, and has seen many a frazzled New Yorker. I come to her somewhat relaxed, because I’ve already spent two days eating and sound bathing, but I also come to her with a little anxiety and brain noise. And I haven’t attempted to make a clay pot since ninth grade. After Polly Ann looks me directly in the eyes and tells me everything is going to be okay, I sit in front of the wheel and happily get to work. ♣