



Merrie Mill tasting room with Chantal the sea lion.



Elizabeth and Guy Pelly



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Smitten with Keswick

A London couple conjures a “maximalist wonderland” in Merrie Mill Farm and Vineyards

By CONSTANCE COSTAS | Photography by SERA PETRAS

PORTRAIT BY KATE THOMPSON / COURTESY OF MERRIE MILL

ENTER THE TASTING ROOM AT Merrie Mill in Keswick and you’ll meet Chantal, a 150-year-old taxidermy sea lion, swaddled in pink fabric and floating near the bar from circus balloons. She’s just one hint that the wine-tasting experience at Merrie Mill is like no other.

“The sea lion was her idea,” says proprietor Guy Pelly, of his wife, Elizabeth, pointing upward with a sense of pride. “But, the pink fabric and the balloons were mine.”

Clearly these two were destined for each other. Guy Pelly grew up in England’s County Kent before running some of London’s most innova-

tive nightclubs. Elizabeth, née, Wilson, hails from Memphis, Tennessee. They met while she was in London pursuing a graduate degree and married in 2014.

“His country childhood instilled the land in his blood,” Elizabeth says of Guy. “And his 10 years as a London nightclub owner tapped his love for creating gathering places. In Merrie Mill, he’s found both.”

With their tasting room, they’re breaking—no *smashing*—the mold. “You see a lot of converted

barns when you go to wineries. And those are nice, but we wanted this one to feel like an extension of our home,” says Elizabeth who, as Merrie Mill’s creative director, happily describes her design sensibility as “pushing tasteful boundaries just to the edge of tacky—without crossing that line.”

“You can get it so wrong,” adds Guy, with the assurance of a man for whom vintage metal lawn chairs and fringed striped cabanas feel so right.

“It’s a maximalist wonderland inspired by the cabinet of curiosities tradition, known as *wunderkammer*,” Elizabeth explains. “Someone commented that it looked like Alice in Wonderland. We take that as a compliment.” Artist Stephanie Fishwick—a Keswick neighbor who counts Gwyneth Paltrow, Tiffany and Co., and Jo Malone among her clients—dreamed up the fanciful Merrie Mill logo which captures the sophisticated kitschy-fabulousness of the place.

Why Keswick? “I *should* say we looked at hundreds of properties all over the world,” Guy offers. “But it wasn’t like that.” In fact, he was smitten when they attended a friend’s wedding at Castle Hill. “I saw what people in Keswick were doing with vineyards and farms; there was a vibe about the place.” Once home, unable to shake Keswick’s hold, he booked a return flight to look at properties. Would Elizabeth care to join, he asked?

“I said ‘you’re crazy,’” she recalls. “I’m not going.”

One year later, the Pellys were packing up their London home and orchestrating a trans-Atlantic move to Merrie Mill, a Keswick estate built in 1879 and situated on 413 acres. “People always ask, ‘how did you drag your English

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husband to Virginia?” says Elizabeth, a UVA graduate who earned a Masters in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown. “But it was the other way around. He dragged me.”

Merrie Mill’s twelve acres of vineyards includes seven varieties of grapes, including cabernet sauvignon—notoriously difficult to coax from Virginia’s soil. In a stroke of geological luck, a swath of the vineyard yielded rare Manteo soil, the holy grail of grape growers. Their consulting winemaker, Emily Hodson, “got so excited, she put some in a jar to keep on her desk,” Guy says, adding, “I know only one other local vineyard that has this soil.”

Still, their luck turned to heartbreak when their much-anticipated first harvest was devastated by 2020’s late frost. For now, the tasting room is serving the award-winning True Heritage wines from a neighboring vineyard,

whose owner was happy to showcase his offerings at Merrie Mill. Wines range from the 2020 Estate Rosé (\$24) to the 2017 Petit Verdot (\$35); the menu’s sharing platters include cheese and charcuterie, chicken salad, hummus, or pimiento cheese (\$15 to \$40).

On a recent Friday afternoon, visitors Abigail and Matt Hein, both teachers, took a rare day off to drive the two hours from Loudoun County after spotting Merrie Mill on Instagram. “It was the whole décor,” says Abigail, nodding across the lawn at a sculpture of a trio of giant jackrocks and a ball, “we just had to see it for ourselves.”

Another guest, Geo Payne, sipped rosé while enjoying the chicken salad plate. “I live five miles down the road,” she says. “I come whenever I can, just to take it in.” In anticipation of Merrie Mill’s first vintage, Payne joined their wine club, as well.

The family-friendly tasting room and grounds may someday offer a grownups-only zone. “But we are covered in dogs and children,” Guy says, “so we’d be pretty hypocritical not to welcome them.” (In addition to daughters Willow, 4, and Clementine, 2, the Pellys are expecting their third child, come fall.) “The parents can sit down and relax, have wine, eat; and the children can be running around outside.”

In the end, their setbacks have revealed a silver lining. “We’ve found the winemaking community here really wonderful,” Elizabeth says. “There’s so much demand that everyone benefits when more good wineries open up near Charlottes-

ville.” They’re also seeing the bright side of losing their first harvest. “After opening the tasting room, we’ll have a little breathing room before we harvest our own grapes and start making our



Guy Pelly checks the vines.



Charcuterie platter. Clockwise from top left: Giant corkscrew; outdoor spaces; botanical gallery; décor details; pouring flights.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KATE THOMPSON / COURTESY OF MERRIE MILL

wine,” she notes, adding, “if you think our décor is surprising, just wait ‘til you try our wine. It’s something to look forward to.” MerrieMillFarm.com

Constance Costas, editor of Virginia Living, has written for national magazines including SELF, Harper’s Bazaar, Parents, and Southern Home.