

Far From the Hamptons

by Ralph Gardner Jr.

There's neither enough time nor space, nor may the English language be sufficient to allow a full elaboration on why one would choose to head upstate for the weekend rather than out to the Hamptons.

But let me try. Start with the traffic. It's hard to beat the beach, but it's difficult to enjoy its beauty, and cool off in the surf, if you're stuck on the LIE. Even worse is the Montauk Highway, taking an hour of prime tanning time to travel the several bumper-to-bumper miles from Southampton to East Hampton. I don't really believe in a wrathful God, but I'm persuaded somebody is trying to tell you something about your weekend place if you have to return to the city Sunday morning to be reasonably confident you'll make it to work on Monday.

And then there's the social life. Is it really worth all the effort and inflated home prices just to be able to tell your friends you spotted Kelly Bensimon and her pet golden doodle, floating down Main Street in East Hampton, or that you made small talk with Christie Brinkley at a Peggy Siegal screening? Methinks not.

Please don't try to illuminate me about what's so great about the Hamptons. I admit, if you own a beachfront estate, or know somebody who does, it feels good to be alive. But occasionally even you will have to leave your fortress (if only to visit your neighbor's).

Those of us who head in other directions will be forgiven for thinking we're better people (even if our net worth runs in the hundreds rather than the hundreds of millions of dollars), if for no other reason than we don't lose sleep over the fact Nacho Figueras didn't recognize us at the last polo benefit. (If you have no idea who Nacho Figueras is, that just goes to

prove what a worthy person you are.)

If anything, we suffer from the opposite problem—reverse snobbery. If the great fear in the Hamptons is not being invited to the right party, the main

dread where I spend the weekend is being invited to any party, being forced to break up your routine by showering and putting on clothes without stains, and socializing with pretty much anybody except the dog.



Photo credit: Bobby Sudekum

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Indeed, my idea of the perfect summer evening is heading out to the porch with the newspaper and an arsenal of liquid refreshments and salty snacks and reading about the world (even the goings-on in the Hamptons), occasionally making the effort to look up and admire the sunset.

So it was with some reservations that Saturday night I attended a dinner at Katchkie Farm, down the road from us. It benefited the Columbia Land Conservancy and the Sylvia Center, the nonprofit arm of GREAT PERFORMANCES, one of the city's biggest caterers, which educates children about the delights of fresh foods—from growing it on their farm to preparing it in their kitchens on Hudson Street.

I was drawn to the event and made the sacrifice to shave because of its convenient location, good causes and also because the dinner was to be held in the middle of a field. There's something to be said for dining al fresco, especially if isn't raining.

An argument against attending was the inexplicably early 5 p.m. starting time, even though I didn't show up until just before the 6:30 dinner. Also (and as the "Urban Gardner" I probably shouldn't admit this), enough already with the sustainable agriculture, the fresh, organic foods, the grass-fed beef and braised kale. Can't we go back to cheeseburgers and Cokes?

"How do you bring a community together around food?" Liz Neumark,

GREAT PERFORMANCES' founder and CEO, asked rhetorically as the swells, or what passes for swells in our neck of the woods, seated at two really, really long tables settled into their Summer Squash Salad with Arugula and Joe's Dairy Ricotta Stuffed Zucchini Blossom with Fresh Herb Vinaigrette. "We're caterers *and* farmers. This is the blending of both worlds."

I admit, I was already prejudiced in Ms. Neumark's favor. Cocktail hour, even if it started prematurely, offered not only wine and mineral water but also Core, a local organic vodka. (Apparently, none of the food came from farther than 100 miles away.) And not to keep hammering the Hamptons, but would what follows qualify as hot gossip in Sagaponack? David Barrett, a Millbrook resident whose wife, Didi, ran for the New York

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state Senate last year, said that afternoon he'd encountered a young woman at the Love Apple Farm stand on County Route 9H buying gooseberries by the gross. When he asked their purpose, she confided "Jean-Georges," referring to the famous three-star chef. We all oohed and aahed. We were on the map!

Jennifer Russell, the Metropolitan Museum's associate director for exhibitions, was grateful the evening started early and ended in similar fashion. "It's perfect," she said. "We'll all be in bed by 9:30."

Spoken like a true non-Hamptonite.

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