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# Seasons' Greetings



Welcome back to *Seasons* – and welcome to Spring! After a long, cold winter, no doubt all of us are happy to see the return of warmer temperatures and longer days. For many of us, that means a chance to spend more time outdoors. Already, we are seeing bright sunny days in the 60s, inviting us to take advantage of Connecticut's beautiful outdoor amenities, from beaches and mountaintops to golf courses and playing fields. There is truly something for everyone.

In this issue, we tell you about the many beautiful historic gardens across the state – planted generations ago by Connecticut residents with an eye for beauty.

We also give you the scoop on travel sports, which not only allows children and teens to play basketball, baseball or soccer on fields and in facilities far from home, but has become big business across the nation.

For many, spring means a renewed opportunity to get fit. Read our "Self" feature to learn how to improve your health and well-being in a variety of ways – nutritionally, financially, mentally, and in your careers and relationships.

For the folks at CRIS Radio, a nonprofit providing audio services to visually impaired listeners across the state, spring means the arrival of their major fundraiser, a fun and enlightening April gala called *Dancing in the Dark*. Find out how the proceeds help to make a huge daily difference for both children and adults who depend on CRIS broadcasts – for entertainment, education, and crucial information about their communities and the world.

And don't miss "part two" of our "Coming to America" series, to learn how several immigrant families and couples are building successful lives for themselves here, and enriching the fabric of our state in the process.

Thanks for reading these and other stories in this issue. Be sure to connect with us on social media. We'll see you there!

*Carol*

Carol Latter, Editorial Director



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SEASONS of the Farmington Valley™

# Spring 2019

page 7.  
*Business*  
For Love of the Game

page 14.  
*Health & Wellness*  
Dr. Stephanie  
Montgomery of Saint  
Francis Hospital and  
Medical Center

page 18.  
*Feature*  
Coming to America

page 32.  
*Delicious*  
The Joy of Eating

page 38.  
*In the Spirit*  
Vision for the Future

page 46.  
*Feature*  
Bloomin' Wonderful

page 56.  
*Self*  
Five Ways to be 'Fit'

page 63.  
*Final Thoughts*  
The Worst of Times

“Don't wait for someone to bring you flowers. Plant your own garden and decorate your own soul.”  
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# For Love of The Game

Youth travel sports represent fun,  
opportunity ... and big business

by JOHN TORSIELLO

**T**he term “youth sports” used to connote a handful of kids getting together for a pickup game in someone’s backyard or on an open field somewhere in the neighborhood. Then, Little League and other sports organizations formalized local play, introducing standardized rules, coaches, and regularly scheduled games.

Today, organized sports – especially travel sports – has become a business ... big business.

Across the United States, travel sports has morphed into a \$15.5 billion industry, with parents often treating an out-of-state tournament as a family vacation involving flights, hotels, restaurant meals and sightseeing, on top of the sports travel league fees.





A rendering of Fastpitch Nation Park, which opens April 27 in Windsor.

In Connecticut, the travel sports category represents a growing economic sector, with developers – like elsewhere in the country – recognizing its enormous financial potential.

Last year, plans were announced for a \$150-\$200 million sports complex near Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks. The proposed project, set for a 2020 opening, was to include an outdoor stadium, an indoor arena, two hotels and a convention center, built on some 76 acres of former tobacco land. The vision included 16 indoor basketball and volleyball courts, along with eight multipurpose synthetic turf fields for field hockey, softball, soccer, flag football and lacrosse.

The Long Island developer said he hoped “All Sports Village,” as it was dubbed, could be a premier facility for top youth athletes from around the country, and especially for Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) basketball. It was also projected to create an estimated 400 full-time and 100 part-time jobs.

According to town officials, the project is “in progress” but is still at a very early stage.

Meanwhile, in Windsor, the developer of the brand-new Fastpitch Nation Park is preparing to unveil a \$3 million complex comprising 11 regulation fastpitch fields on a 20-acre parcel on Day Hill Road. The facility, the largest of its kind in New England, was the brainchild of long-time fastpitch softball coach and league official David Rocha. Opening day is April 27.

“Travel sports, whether it is softball, baseball, soccer

and other sports, have mushroomed,” says Rocha, owner of Fastpitch Nation, which he created in 2008. His Bloomfield location is the largest (24,000 square feet) indoor fastpitch softball training facility in Connecticut, annually hosting more than 450 games, along with lessons and clinics.

Rocha says the new project includes a 3,200-square-foot building featuring retail space, a food court, bathrooms, and live streaming of all games on the fields. Tournaments will be played from April through October, mostly on weekends.

“There is nothing like this park anywhere in New England,” he says. “The lack of these sorts of parks, which are numerous in other areas of the country, will make our new location the most sought out park for teams to play in the region. Our goal is to create a family-oriented park with zero negative impact on the surrounding area and a huge positive economic impact for Windsor and surrounding businesses.”

Rocha, who does not field teams, says interest and excitement in Fastpitch Nation Park is already at a fever pitch.

“My facility is almost 100% per cent booked for the whole season, and we’re not even open yet.”

## BASEBALL

Of course, youth travel sports is not just about business and profit margins. It’s also about fun ... and opportunity.

Tom Nicholson, a youth baseball pitching coach with Fastpitch Nation – just one of several Connecticut organizations offering facilities and services to help children



and young people achieve their athletic ambitions – perhaps put it best when asked what the allure of being part of a travel sports team is for a youngster.

“The beauty of a travel team is the open road and sky,” he says. “The Little League-aged teams I met on planes were flying over neighboring states to play. The fields and umpires available to the kids offer new limits as to where they can go to throw the horsehide around the diamond.”

But there’s more to it than just the diversity of experience. “I wouldn’t have gotten seen by as many college coaches as I did if I didn’t travel and play in national tournaments,” says Dillon Lifrieri of Wilton, now a freshman on the University of Arkansas baseball team, which advanced to the College Baseball World Series championship last year.

“Travel baseball also exposed me to players in other areas of the country and gave me an idea, especially at the start, how much I had to improve,” adds the 19-year-old Wilton High School graduate. In high school, Lifrieri was the sixth-ranked player in Connecticut by Prep Baseball Report and was ranked #293 in the nation by Perfect Game. He was the only player on his team to earn all-state honors in 2017.

“We give kids a place where they can improve,” says Dan Kennedy, director of baseball operations and player

development at the Connecticut Baseball Academy in East Hartford. “If a kid wants to play college baseball or even professionally, he pretty much has to play travel baseball and get that experience and playing time.”

The baseball academy, one of the biggest training facilities in New England, fields 16 travel teams for ages 13 through 18. “Team Connecticut Baseball” squads have won numerous national titles, including last year’s 14-year-old champs.

Its travel teams compete around the country in tournaments and offer players top level competition, as well as the chance to be seen by college coaches and even Major League Baseball scouts. The academy boasts that more than 70 of its players have been selected in the Major League Baseball draft, and many others have played, or are playing, college ball.

Evan Curtiss of Simsbury is in the 13-and-under group there. “I want to get experience for high school. This is my second year and I was able to travel to New Jersey last year.” And for a starry-eyed youngster in love with baseball, New Jersey might just as well be California.

Meriden’s CT Edge Baseball Academy, a training facility with 15 travel teams for ages 8-and-under (8U) to 18-and-under (18U), competes in regional and national level tournaments. The goal is to place players in front of college



Chase Leonard of Newington gets ready to make a catch at the Connecticut Baseball Academy.





Kids get plenty of opportunity to practice and compete at the Farmington soccer fields.

and pro scouts. Says owner Dennis Boucher, “The travel program growth over the past 10 years has exploded. The exposure at a young age, along with teaching from talented and experienced coaches, places young players in a position of growth and improvement.”

## SOCCER

Garret Ratcliffe, director of travel soccer for Farmington Soccer, says his organization has had a “long tradition” of developing successful players at every level and “our teams continue to be among the best in Connecticut.” He added, “Winning state championships is always our long-term goal for the kids, so developing high level players who have passion and excitement is a key component.”

Most youngsters who participate in travel soccer improve significantly over those who play strictly recreational soccer. It’s simple math, really: The youngsters on travel teams get more practices per week and typically have more experienced coaches to teach them enhanced skills and tactics. Also, they are playing against stronger competition.

J.P. DiTommaso, director of events and sponsorship as well as club coach at the Farmington Sports Arena, says the draw to youth travel teams gives players and families the opportunity to travel outside their communities and experience playing soccer in new settings.

“Travel soccer becomes the true collection of players coming from different geographical areas and styles of play to create a new team. Traveling and competing locally, regionally and nationally allows players to experience the game how it is played outside of their immediate community.”







The Farmington Soccer Arena (FSA) features 130,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor fields, practice areas and a track.



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**"THE BEAUTY OF A TRAVEL TEAM IS THE OPEN ROAD AND SKY. THE LITTLE LEAGUE-AGED TEAMS I MET ON PLANES WERE FLYING OVER NEIGHBORING STATES TO PLAY. THE FIELDS AND UMPIRES AVAILABLE TO THE KIDS OFFER NEW LIMITS AS TO WHERE THEY CAN GO TO THROW THE HORSEHIDE AROUND THE DIAMOND."** - TOM NICHOLSON, FASTPITCH NATION

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The arena is a Mecca for sports, with 130,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor fields, practice areas, a track, locker rooms, a café, and a retail store. "Our goal is to provide an environment that entices players to work hard and compete to the best of their ability," DiTommaso says. "The travel team concept attracts established and educated coaches crucial to the development of young players. Success is achieved through the dedication of the player to grow as both an individual and a team member."

Todd Hill, a former player with New Haven Youth Soccer who has served as a coach since 2002, says the organization's programs have grown in recent years as families look for a balance between competitive and recreational sports. Today, the group offers a recreational league, a middle school league, and a travel league. "We have many programs that address the ever-changing landscape of youth soccer in our community. We see soccer as a means to a healthier person. The sport part is important, but we look to also build the overall health of the child."

Tatiana O'Connor, an official with New Haven Youth Soccer, has seen growth in younger age groups, U-10 and U-12, particularly with the boys. "Parents of kids at this age level are ready to make the commitment of bringing their players to away games to play against other towns. With travel, you get to see other talented players with different levels of skill."

## **BASKETBALL**

Jennifer Labrie, president of Norwich-based Connecticut Storm Girls Basketball, says players in that nonprofit club's basketball program – especially those in older age groups – are looking to play in college.

"They are playing with the best in their area and against the best from all over the country. College scouts attend their games and recruit players that would be a good match for their college programs," Labrie explains. "Our graduating teams from the last two years have 11 players currently playing in college and even one playing professionally. For tournaments on the weekends, older players travel all over the place." Younger grades compete mostly locally.

Connecticut's annual AAU boys' and girls' basketball tournaments currently draw more than 140 teams from around the state, with teams playing at various high schools

in the spring of each year.

This year, male and female players will try to out-dribble, out-pass and out-dunk opponents at tournaments in New Haven, Woodbridge, Trumbull, Waterford, Canton, Bristol and Harwinton. But they will also travel beyond state borders to attend competitions in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

## **THE PRICE OF PARTICIPATION**

The word "travel," when applied to youth sports teams, can run the gamut, from teams sponsored by individual towns and organizations to those fielded by private or semi-private facilities. The cost to play can range from hundreds to thousands of dollars a year.

The Farmington Soccer Club prides itself on being one of the lowest-cost travel programs in the state. It raises money from hosting a tournament over Labor Day weekend, which helps defray some of the cost of playing. Also, coaches and managers are volunteers, and that helps keep expenses low. "Playing soccer in Farmington is extremely affordable for any family and if they qualify, we also provide financial assistance," says Ratcliffe.

NHYS charges \$325 per player for travel teams in the fall and spring and offers financial aid. Says Hill, "The cost is fair and includes the player's uniforms, one home and one away jersey. New Haven Youth Soccer is an absolute steal with its travel costs. The club uses a sliding scale, so the U10s will pay less than the U12 to U19s. Based on age and ability, the costs are reasonable."

Labrie explains that playing for the Storm "is fairly expensive" due to the cost of tournaments, gym space rental fees, as well as travel to tournaments. "However, we do understand that cost may be an issue for some families, so the Storm never turns a player away due to financials. We always work with our families to make sure the athlete can play."

Fees for intensive travel programs at the Connecticut Baseball Academy range from \$500 to \$2,000 per player for fall teams, while for the spring/summer season the rates are \$1,950 to \$3,500 per player. The spring and summer travel fees entitle players to participate in 35 to 65 games, depending upon the age bracket, and around a half dozen tournaments.



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For the money, especially at the high end of the spectrum, parents and youngsters expect results.


“Our goal with The Storm is to promote the full individual,” says Labrie. “On the basketball end, we are looking at a full scope and sequence of the game, and each coach is trained on what skill set their players need before they move on to the next grade level. As coaches are passing off players, the next grade level coach knows exactly what the players have learned, and can build on those skills. The goal is that by the time they reach high school, they have a full skill set to play at a high competitive level. We also promote the individual off the court. We talk to our players about grades and making sure they are focused in school.”

Nicholson, a baseball coach who has taught and played at all levels of the game, including as a former 4-year Division I pitcher at Siena College, addresses both the mental and physical aspects of pitching with his students. Speaking both as a parent and as a professional pitching coach, he says youth travel teams – and all they encompass – should be for children and teens who are mentally, emotionally and physically ready to handle “everything that goes into traveling and playing on the road.” He adds, “Just because the parent has a good checkbook doesn’t

necessarily mean it’s good for the young kid.”

Kennedy says in order to avoid burnout in one particular sport, the Connecticut Baseball Academy “encourages kids to play all sports, not just concentrate on baseball, although some do.”

DiTommaso agrees that “too much of anything can have negative effects on the mental, physical and emotional well-being of individuals. That’s why we have focused on developing programs to continue to challenge our players while avoiding the burnout phenomenon that often occurs in youth sports. We strive to find the balance between motivating and pushing players to be the best they can be, without turning them off to the sport they love.”

Today, youth travel teams are exposing boys and girls to better competition, college coaches and pro scouts, and places in the country only dreamed about when “travel” meant simply walking down to a neighborhood field or playground for a game of pickup ball. 

*John Torsiello is an independent writer and editor. A resident of Torrington, he writes extensively about sports, business, and general interest topics.*



# Dr. Stephanie Montgomery

**T**hough Dr. Stephanie Montgomery has saved countless lives with her eleventh-hour interventions in the operating room, the trauma and critical care specialist at Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center claims that her life as a surgeon is far less important than her life as a teacher.

"I think I derive as much pleasure from teaching people to be surgeons as from doing it," she says, "because you have a much greater impact on the world if you teach someone to take care of people."

She says her own teachers, who believed in her despite the fact that she came from a poor, uneducated family, had a huge impact on her life. Born in Bristol, Tennessee, a small town located on that state's border with Virginia, Dr. Montgomery was the first person in her family to go to college. Yet she knew by the age of four that she wanted to be a physician. "They [my family] didn't know what to think of me," she says.

She describes how as a child, she was constantly putting Band-Aids on family members and giving people shots with her plastic Fisher-Price syringe. "My whole life was getting ready to be a doctor," she says.

## THE GOLDEN TICKET

Dr. Montgomery encountered many obstacles along the way to obtaining her medical degree; in fact, she had to drop out of Virginia Tech when her divorced mother, who was helping her pay for college, lost her job. "There were times we didn't even have food in the house – or electricity or running water," she recalls. "But I always knew if I worked as hard as I knew I could, that I could raise myself out of it."

Determined to complete her education, she took out loans, commuted to Old Dominion University on the east coast of Virginia to finish her undergraduate degree, and then applied to medical school. "It's not really a sad story," Dr. Montgomery says, "because my life has made me able to relate to everyone – from the person who cleans the floor all

the way up to the CEO. I just worked to get where I am."

The day she got into Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk, Dr. Montgomery says, she "dropped to the ground and cried." In fact, it meant so much to her that she still has the acceptance letter. "This piece of paper," she says, pulling the ink-stained document, dated October 17, 1994, from a worn blue folder stashed in her desk's file drawer, "was like the Willy Wonka Golden Ticket." Med school, she says, changed her life. And once she began her surgery rotation, during her third year of medical school, she knew she had found her calling.

"I think one of the reasons I was drawn to surgery is that I used to help my dad, and later, my mom, fix things. I knew how to use tools even when I was little," she says. "I used to also always sew quilts with my mom and grandmother (it's a southern thing), and that's actually a lot like sewing intestines."

Dr. Montgomery adds that she was never squeamish about seeing blood, as many of her family members were hunters and fishermen, and she would help to field dress the deer or gut the fish to get the day's bounty ready for dinner.

She completed her residency at the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center at the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore. "I was lucky because as a resident at this world-known trauma center, I got to see amazing doctors literally drag people back from the jaws of death," she recalls.

Dr. Montgomery remained at Shock Trauma for her fellowship training in surgical critical care, but before settling on that specialty, spent a year doing a research fellowship at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, since she also had an interest in surgical oncology.

"I immediately missed patients," she said of her brief stint in research. "People are better than mice."

Dr. Montgomery, who took care of many head injuries while at Shock Trauma, obtained additional board certification in neurocritical care while an attending at the Medical University of South Carolina, where she worked





**MAKING IT BETTER:** Dr. Stephanie Montgomery's journey has been all about saving and improving lives - including her own.

until joining the staff of Saint Francis in 2015. She learned about Saint Francis while she was in Connecticut, interviewing at Yale. “My friend who lived in the area and worked at Saint Francis said, ‘You should see my hospital.’” And she liked what she saw. “I was coming from a Level I trauma center,” she adds, “and I knew that coming here, I could have a say in growing the trauma program.”

In November, in fact, Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center was recognized by the American College of Surgeons as a Level I Trauma Center – one of just a few in the state. “We are very proud of the program that we are building,” says Dr. Montgomery.

## SAVING LIVES

About 2,500 trauma cases pass through the Saint Francis emergency room each year, and Dr. Montgomery and her partners – Dr. Gary Kaml, Dr. David Shapiro, Dr. Manuel Moutinho, Dr. Vijay Jayaraman, and Dr. Ronald Gross – handle all of them. They also take care of patients in the intensive and critical care units and perform general emergency surgery as well. “I have the greatest job ever,” says Dr. Montgomery. “Every day is different.”

She says that taking care of trauma patients is especially rewarding, as “some of the patients are within minutes of dying if you are not standing there.” She explains how trauma surgeons must take care of families as well as patients, and that they see people at their best time and at their worst possible time, depending on the patient outcome.

It’s extremely gratifying, she says, when patients bounce back. “You see a young person come into the trauma bay unresponsive, close to dying,” she describes. “And then to have the sheer exhilaration to see them walking into your office and thanking you – it makes you cry every time – it fills your soul.”

One of Dr. Montgomery’s trauma patients in South Carolina – a young mother who almost died giving birth – even named her second baby (carried by a surrogate) after the doctor who saved her life. “Sometimes I think that the world puts you on a path for a special reason,” says Dr. Montgomery. “The day that I saved Meghan, I felt so strongly

**IN NOVEMBER, SAINT FRANCIS HOSPITAL AND MEDICAL CENTER WAS RECOGNIZED BY THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS AS A LEVEL I TRAUMA CENTER – ONE OF JUST A FEW IN THE STATE.**

that this was the reason that I became a doctor.”

## FINDING FULFILLMENT THROUGH TEACHING

Dr. Montgomery, an associate professor of surgery, also derives fulfillment through teaching; the surgeon is always trailed by a team of medical students and residents. As director for the hospital’s surgery clerkship, Dr. Montgomery is in charge of the UConn and Quinnipiac medical students’ experience at Saint Francis. She also trains UConn surgical residents, as well as physician assistant and nursing students.

“I let them all come in with me and participate in whatever I’m doing,” she says. This means paying attention to them, remembering their names, giving them a role, and showing them that they are important too, she explains. “It matters – if people have positive role models and mentors, they are more likely to [continue in] the field they are in.”

When she’s not in the operating room or teaching, Dr. Montgomery loves to travel. A giant map of the world covers one wall of her office; pushpins mark each country that she has visited. Because she grew up in such a small place and never visited anywhere else as a child, “the minute I got my passport, I took off.”

Her other source of joy: with spending time with her family. “I have two little girls, 10 and 12, and all the stuff that makes me crazy about them,” she concedes, “is straight from me.”

One daughter wants to be a doctor. “She always wants to see photos of wounds, and she wants to hear about how many operations I did today,” Dr. Montgomery says. The other daughter wants to sing and be famous. The surgeon says she, too, wanted to be famous.

“I’m just waiting for that to happen,” she adds with a laugh. 📷

*Lori Miller Kase is a freelance writer living in Simsbury.*

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**A DARK HORSE:** Disenchanted with his native England, John Harris moved to America, where he met his wife and, with her help, opened a successful pub in the northwest corner of Connecticut.



# Coming to America

## The adventure continues

by **DONNA CARUSO BOWDEN** and **KATHERINE HAUSWIRTH** / *photography by* **TODD FAIRCHILD**

**I**n last year's Spring edition of *Seasons*, the first Coming to America article started a story that continues to resonate in Connecticut, as well as in the nation at large.

Immigrants, whether arriving decades ago or recently, are woven into the fabric of our state and our country, and the reasons they come – and want to stay – are as varied as their stories. Whether prompted by hardship in their home countries, the call of romance, or the ubiquitous American Dream, the people featured here help make America what it is today.

### **JOHN HARRIS OF WASHINGTON**

When John Harris was 16 years old, he made a decision that changed the course of his life. The self-proclaimed rebel drove a motorbike across the cricket pitch at his prestigious London school right before a match. He was asked to leave the school.

No matter. Surrounded by the bands of the British Invasion – The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Cream, The Who – Harris wanted to be in a rock band anyway. Playing lead guitar and singing, he gave it a go. It didn't work out. He tried classical acting, largely Shakespeare. Not his destiny either.

It was only then, now more than 40 years ago, that Harris took the first steps on a path that turned out to be filled with adventure and a ticket to America, where he embraced a culture that contrasted with the Victorian sensibility he had rebelled against in England.

"There is this wonderful amalgamation of everybody," says Harris. "The first time I went to a dinner party in America, I was sitting next to a banker, I was sitting next to an industrialist and I was sitting next to a plumber. That's what I liked. That sort of thing doesn't happen in England – not in the England I was raised in."

Sitting in The White Horse Country Pub & Restaurant, his award-winning classic New England pub in New Preston, Connecticut, Harris

talks about the practical decision he made after his attempts at rock music and acting. He earned a degree in hotel management. That led to managing hotels in Bermuda, Bahrain and East Africa. While in Africa, he was planning to go to Bali when he was offered an opportunity to work for an American developer. Bali gave way to New Jersey.

"This wonderful gentleman took me into his house as an accommodation until I found my own apartment to rent. He had a big farmhouse. An American and I worked for his company, which was a [commercial] development company at the time, and I learned the building trade from him," says Harris.

After transferring to the company's California branch, he met his future wife Lisa, a successful writer who had a talent for development. They moved to the East Coast to take on their own building projects.

Enter 2008. With a crimp in building, Harris was intrigued when a realtor called about an old pub on the banks of the shallow Aspetuck River in northwest Connecticut. Lisa suggested they make it a gastropub and name it after the mythological white horse.

"So I get in touch with the oldest sign painter in England. Don't forget, it's 2008 and everything is collapsing. I said, 'Okay, I need you to paint a white horse on top of a hill, a little lake in the background under a dark sky and we're going to create a pub called the White Horse Pub ... and it's going to bring hope to everybody,'" recalls Harris.

The remodeled restaurant, officially called The White Horse Country Pub & Restaurant and located in New Preston, opened in 2009, decorated with artifacts that seem to reflect on Harris' life – the Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I; a check written by Charles Dickens for 160 bottles of 1834 port; a 1920 Indian motorcycle; a 1599 William Shakespeare land document; and a signed Rolling Stones guitar.

Ten years later, Harris runs a bustling



**SAFE HAVEN:** Pramod Pradhan emigrated from Nepal to Connecticut with his wife and son in 2004, after the Maoist insurgency led to violence in his homeland.

establishment brimming with accolades. The staff of 50 opens the doors to some 150,000 customers a year from near and far, and from all walks of life. It is the kind of “polyglot” that Harris so connected to when he came to America.

“What a privilege to have all these people come,” he says.

### **PRAMOD PRADHAN OF WEST HARTFORD**

Pramod Pradhan, a trim, neatly dressed man with an engaging manner, emigrated from Nepal to Connecticut in 2004, along with his wife Narshila and 10-year-old son Abhishek. The Maoist insurgency had escalated in their country, leading to violent incidents nearby. The country was in tremendous turmoil, and the Pradhans were eager to start a new life.

Pramod and Nashila had good jobs in Nepal. He was a pharmaceutical representative for a multinational company; she was a schoolteacher. But they were increasingly concerned about Abhishek’s future, considering the chaos surrounding them. The family was happy when they learned they had won the “green card lottery,” part of the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program. Americans they’d met via student exchange programs in Nepal vouched for them, which helped their eligibility. They chose Connecticut because of its job opportunities.

Initially, the Pradhans arrived in Colchester, and Pramod and Narshila started jobs at the Hartford Public Library. By 2005, they had moved to West Hartford, glad for the shorter commute. When they purchased their house, they were the first Nepalese family on the block. Now, there are about 15.

Pradhan was struck by the orderliness of American life. He recalls Nepalese society being much more chaotic. With far fewer traffic lights and cows in the street, people are often not on time – they might show up an hour late for an appointment. While he clearly appreciates the U.S., he becomes wistful when talking about Nepalese food. He remembers with fondness an extremely spicy water buffalo meat-based dish and yogurt made from water buffalo milk; neither are easy to come by here. Although Nepalese families run some local restaurants, they usually tone down the spiciness for the generally tamer local palettes.

In 2009, the Pradhans were pleased to become full-fledged citizens of the United States. Eventually, Pramod interviewed for a new position at the West Hartford Public Library (Faxon branch): community engagement librarian. The role was created in recognition of the continually shifting demographics in the area. He shares a telling fact: students in West Hartford schools speak more than 70 languages!

The community engagement roles help to ensure that people of all ages, and from all backgrounds, can benefit fully from library services. The position seemed a perfect fit for Pradhan, who has been involved with the Nepalese Association of Connecticut and, while he was still at



Hartford Library, worked to help a large influx of refugees from Bhutan. He is passionate about helping newcomers adjust to their surroundings and become active in their new communities.

He relishes many aspects of his job, which focuses on fostering partnership within and between communities and organizations. He and coworker Jane Breen reach out to schools, senior centers, town commissions, and the like. Pradhan likes to increase immigrant awareness about how to get involved in the town and civic affairs, noting, "Libraries are so much more than books!" His branch is working to establish a citizenship training program that offers one-on-one tutoring. They refer patrons to other services, too, such as those that help with resumes or social challenges.

When asked what people born and raised here might not fully appreciate about their country, he recounts the reminder he shares with his son: "Half of the people of the world cannot imagine what we have at our disposal here." He says that some new to this country come to the library and ask how much they must pay for library privileges.

It seems the message of gratitude and abundance resonated with Abhishek, who graduated from UConn and is now in the Air Force.

## DAGMAR RATENSPEGER OF GUILFORD

Dagmar Ratenspeger built her American Dream on tartlets, tortes, stollen and strudel. With a modest demeanor and an easy smile, the determined entrepreneur tells the story of an intentionally slow road to find her way in her adopted country. When she finally did, it came full circle to her German roots.

"When I first came over here, you think, 'Okay, you don't fit in right away, but with this business being a German bakery, it is kind of like, yes, you should be German.' It's not a bad thing to know you have the accent and all that," she says, sitting in Dagmar's Desserts, her Old Saybrook bakery.

In 1994, Ratenspeger was working as a secretary in the city of Nuremberg in the German state of Bavaria. That was when she met her German-born husband, who was living in America and running his own commercial photography business. A year later, when she was 25 years old, they married in Guilford while she held a three-month fiancé visa. She came to a different culture, knowing few people and surrounded by a language she had spoken only in the classroom.

"I think it's just like getting to know the country and making friends, Of course, it's always a little bit lonely, but on the other hand, it's like, 'Oh, you are in the U.S., so it's very exciting,' " she says.

She eventually decided she would attend Southern Connecticut State University, which required getting her



Dagmar Ratenspeger moved to Connecticut after meeting a German-born photographer who was living and working in the United States. Today, she owns a German bakery, offering other German immigrants and their descendants a taste of home.

GED (German schools did not equate). She graduated summa cum laude with a degree in economics. While looking for a job in her field, she taught German and worked part-time at an Italian gourmet store. That's when it dawned on her that she could sell German desserts.

"Everybody who comes to a different country, they always miss some food there, and I always thought there is a niche for Austrian and German baking. Then I started baking cakes, some of the recipes I knew from my mom," she says.

She started her business in 2006 at a Deep River industrial park. She laughs as she mimics opening the large rollover door in the morning to customers as if it were a garage start-up. She remembers protectively bringing back ingredients from Germany in her suitcase - vanilla, sugar, baking soda, custard powder, almond paste. Two years of success spurred

her to find a shoreline storefront. Although she has a pastry chef now, Ratenspeger is often found up to her elbows in cake batter. She is particularly proud that she has been able to bring a bit of Germany to other immigrants.

"You don't really know how many Germans live around here because you don't see them that much, but with the bakery, [I've discovered] there are really a lot of Germans here, a lot of people who have German ancestors. And they come in and they look for things that grandma made," she says.

When Ratenspeger talks about America, the conversation always comes back to how much she enjoys meeting people. She says those outside America often view the country in terms of extremes – the biggest or the fastest – because they don't get to meet everyday people. When her parents come to visit, their biggest hurdle is in understanding the work hours: "They are so used to four- to six-week vacations. Germans are the biggest travelers in the world."

**"Glastonbury was the best thing that ever happened to us," he says. He describes being embraced by the community, remembering Dot and Charlie Pittman from the church with special fondness. The couple would readily jump into action whenever the family needed help.**

Had she never left Germany, she believes she would have worked in an office and had those lengthy vacations herself. But Ratenspeger has absolutely no regrets: "I like having a bakery because it's a happy place," she says with a smile.

### **RAUL PINO OF HARTFORD**

Raul Pino, MD, MPH, has been Commissioner of the Department of Public Health since late 2015, and he has traveled a long road to get there. In 1995, Pino, his (now former) wife Sandra, and their 4-year-old son Raul Luis emigrated from Cuba. Pino was a plastic surgeon and burn specialist and Sandra was also a physician.

Pino and his family were political refugees from the harrowing Communist regime. Around that

time, many Cuban refugees were arriving in the Hartford area, with tens of thousands settling across the United States.

Arranging for emigration was a grueling process, involving many failed attempts to obtain safe passage. Finally, Reverend Mark Pendleton, who at the time led St. Luke's Episcopal

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**NEW COUNTRY, NEW CAREER:** Raul Pino, MD, MPH is Commissioner of Connecticut's Department of Public Health. A refugee from Cuba, he left behind a troubled country and a career as a physician, but found a satisfying new life in Greater Hartford.

Church in South Glastonbury, agreed to sponsor the family. Pendleton and Pino were friends who had met during Pendleton's trips to Cuba.

Pino remembers arriving in Glastonbury late on a chilly June night, and being greeted with the distinctive smell of American coffee the next morning. That aroma continues to take him back to his first day in his new home.

"Glastonbury was the best thing that ever happened to us," he says. He describes being embraced by the community, remembering Dot and Charlie Pittman from the church with


special fondness. The couple would readily jump into action whenever the family needed help.

Pendleton and his congregation helped the Pinos, who had moved in behind the Old Cider Mill, to learn English. While the younger Raul picked the language up easily – his father notes that Raul, now an adult, speaks Spanish with a "Nutmegger accent" – the adults struggled to master it. Pino recalls a family game of running up the stairs as their English teachers approached the house. The last one to make it upstairs was the one who had to start conversing in English.



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## Pino marveled at the peaceful feeling he experienced when the landscape was blanketed in white.

Everything was different in America. Pino was struck by the deep greens of the summer vegetation – the greens had been lighter at home. And when the family first encountered snow, they stuck out their tongues to catch the flakes. He marveled at the peaceful feeling he experienced when the landscape was blanketed in white.

One of the biggest frustrations was the Pinos' unfulfilled desire to again work as physicians but "life took off in a different direction," he says. The arrival of a second child, Carla, kept the family busy.

In the early years, he worked at many different jobs, including tutor, food packer, and nurse's aide. Tough economic circumstances meant that they couldn't afford the exams required to practice medicine here. Pino observes that it can still be quite a cumbersome and discouraging process for professionals who emigrate here, and wonders if more can be done to help professionals transition, so that they can contribute meaningfully and help fill the need for highly qualified workers.

Eventually, Pino acquired a Master's Degree in Public Health at UConn, and at this point has nearly two decades of experience in state, municipal, and community public health agencies.

But when asked what makes him most proud, Pino doesn't mention his important public health role. He is proud that his family did not disappoint those who helped them from the beginning. Dot and Charlie and several others have passed on, and he wishes they could see how far the Pinos have come. Carla is now 18, and Raul Luis has just graduated from Cornell University. He will soon start his career as a physician assistant. ■

*Donna Caruso Bowden writes from Deep River, Connecticut. Her articles have appeared in the Boston Sunday Globe, Marinalife Magazine, Seasons Magazines, Yachting, Soundings and River and Shore; she is a contributing editor for Embassy Cruising Guides.*

*Katherine Hauswirth (fpnaturalist.com) is the author of a Connecticut nature essay collection entitled, "The Book of Noticing: Collections and Connections on the Trail."*

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# All For One

UConn Health Center's spine team  
collaborates to provide optimal care

by JAMES BATTAGLIO / photography by SESHU PHOTOGRAPHY

More than two decades ago, UConn Health neurosurgeon Hilary Onyiuke, M.D. had a vision whereby patients with back and spinal problems, ranging from simple back pain to complicated spinal surgery, could come to a single location to be treated by a cadre of skilled medical professionals aided by 21st Century technology. His vision included thwarting the competition that prevailed among neurosurgeons and orthopedic surgeons from neighboring hospitals.

Dr. Onyiuke began promoting that vision by knocking on his colleagues' doors, convincing them that UConn Health had the potential to stand tall within the medical profession when it came to curing spinal problems.

His lobbying efforts have resulted in one of the most sophisticated spine treatment programs in the Northeast, if not the entire country. The UConn Health's Comprehensive Spine Center at UConn Health – in which a tremendous number of patients are treated annually by orthopedic surgeons, neurosurgeons, physical therapists, advanced practice practitioners and physiatrists – is hailed as one of the most unique, patient-friendly centers of its kind anywhere.

Dr. Isaac Moss, an orthopedic spine surgeon, explains that spinal surgery is a “shared discipline involving different parts of the body. There are two main areas that make up the column: the bone, or central spinal column, and the nerves that run through the spine.” Decades ago, he says, “orthopedic surgeons operated on the bone while neurosurgeons operated on the nerves. As spinal surgery became more complex, it developed into its own specialty.”

Dr. Onyiuke says in 1995, “we had a lot of competition among surgeons from hospitals who wanted to impact the spine surgery arena. There was a feeling that there was an uneven advantage as it applied to neurosurgeons



## UConn HEALTH

**COLLABORATIVE CARE:** UConn Health's Comprehensive Spine Center team includes (from left) Dr. David Choi, Dr. Ketan Bulsara, Dr. Scott Mallozzi, Dr. Hilary Onyiuke, and Dr. Isaac Moss.





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**“Every patient who walks through  
our door should have treatment that’s  
tailored specifically to them.”**

—DR. HILARY ONYIUKE, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE  
COMPREHENSIVE SPINE CENTER AT UCONN HEALTH

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because we deal with the spine and the brain. What I did was to try to gather orthopedic surgeons and spine surgeons into one center under one roof – that was the genesis of the term ‘comprehensive’ – and create a one-stop shop in which every necessary specialty existed. At UConn Health, we don’t differentiate between orthopedic spine surgeons and neurosurgeons.”

While it wasn’t easy bringing specialties together, due to human nature and the uncommon coalition being proposed, things ultimately fell into place and everything jelled.

Today, patients who enter UConn Health’s Comprehensive Spine Center are treated in a convenient, well-run medical system that includes a multitude of disciplines, skilled in treating all aspects of back and spine problems. While approximately 85% of Americans suffer from back pain, the vast majority do not need surgery, the group explains. “Whenever we can avoid surgery, we avoid surgery,” says Dr. Onyiuke.

Yet cutting-edge technology does play a major role in the care provided, including surgical robots that enable doctors to perform sophisticated procedures unheard of a decade ago.

At UConn Health – the first medical facility in New England to use robotics in spinal surgery – members of the team can now perform far more complex spinal reconstruction, aided by navigation technology: the precise implanting of hardware in the spine.

Dr. Moss agrees, noting, “You don’t need a robot for everything, but for patients with spinal deformities and more complex maladies, this technology – which is akin to an automobile GPS device – enables precision.”

Patients can rest assured that robots have not replaced patient/doctor relations. As Dr. Ketan Bulsara, chief of neurosurgery, explains, “We use all the latest technology to optimize patient outcomes and deliver compassionate and world-class care.”

The amazing advances seen in modern spinal care in recent years are continuing to evolve. Both Dr. Moss, who has a master’s degree in bioengineering, and Dr. Scott Mallozzi, a new member of the team as well as an assistant professor of orthopedic surgery and a spine surgeon himself, are involved in research involving the regeneration of spinal discs – a possibility reminiscent of Star Trek.

Jokingly, Dr. Moss says, “I’m trying to put myself out of business! Currently, there is no good treatment or cure for the wear and tear of spinal discs, which serve as the spine’s shock absorbers. Current treatment frequently requires the removal of discs followed by replacement or spinal fusion.” While disc regeneration is possibly “many years away,” he believes it’s not out of the question. (Tooth regeneration has also been the subject of research at UConn Health’s School of Dental Medicine.)

If Dr. Mallozzi has any advice for patients, it would be to suggest they be seen by specialty-trained surgeons in a multidisciplinary collaborative group.

Dr. Bulsara, whose practice focuses primarily on vascular/tumor issues, cites UConn Health’s Comprehensive Spine Center as a beacon of light in the spine surgery field.

“There is no other center in the Northeast – that I know of – that has been able to pull this off. Here, we have many different specialties that have all come together. When a spine patient comes to me, I make the determination as to what might best serve that patient and I then make a referral among the five surgeons within the center.”

Another of the center’s newest members is Dr. David Choi, a neurosurgeon, who has nothing but positive things to say about the program.

“Ideally, what you want is to make sure that everyone gets to grow independently,” says Dr. Choi. “There’s a lot of strength in all of us being together, but you’re only as strong as the parts that make that whole. We’re allowing every single specialty within the center to have extreme strength. If the practice of neurosurgery or orthopedic spine is weak, they’re going to make the whole program weak. But by each component being strong and coming together in harmony, there’s nothing that can stop that strength and ultimately result in optimized patient care.”

The spine team is in agreement that blending the skills of multiple spine care experts into one highly functional group benefits both patients and physicians at the center. “We are one team and we all work together,” says Dr. Choi. “No doctor feels as though they’re alone. Instead, there is a culture of effortless collaboration where physicians can call on each other to assist them and the patient with a complicated case. It’s not uncommon for two surgeons from two specialties to work on the same case simultaneously.”

According to Dr. Onyiuke, the treatment process may start with a patient’s primary care physician (PCP) referring the case to the spine center. “That PCP is given constant feedback by our team members once a patient is integrated into the system.”

Before returning to his or her PCP for follow-up care, a patient may see several different spine center providers representing various specialties, such as advanced practice providers, a physical therapist, or a physiatrist, who treats a wide variety of medical conditions affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons.

Specialists interact on a daily basis to go over the patient’s case, and at a twice-monthly conference in which some 30 specialists meet to discuss cases.

Twenty-four years have passed since Dr. Onyiuke went knocking on doors, proposing a comprehensive concept unheard of within the profession. Today, thousands of patients and dozens of colleagues agree that his Herculean effort was well worth it.

“It’s been said that nobody can do it better,” says Dr. Bulsara of his team. “With the focus on personalized care to optimize each patient’s outcome and shape the future of spine care, it’s no surprise that The Comprehensive Spine Center at UConn Health has become busier and busier.”

*James Battaglio is a freelance writer and experienced crisis communication specialist who lives in Glastonbury, CT. A longtime communications executive for a major healthcare system, he frequently writes about healthcare-related issues and a wide array of other topics. ■*



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# The Joy of Eating

## Don't Be Afraid To Unleash Your Inner Cook

*written and photographed by* **SARAH ALDRICH**

**I**t was the food critic and writer Michael Pollan who wrote, “Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.” This was his ultimate approach to eating healthfully and well.

Each element of the sentence describes a crucial piece of the joy of eating: the act of eating itself, the art of moderation, and the benefits of following a mostly plant-based diet.

From a purely biological standpoint, eating is pure nourishment. Eating is giving the body what it needs to survive and thrive. But is it just that? Anyone who’s had the pleasure of enjoying a slice of Frank Pepe’s pizza in New Haven knows that there is more to eating than just fueling. Indeed, the gustatory experience of a good meal can transcend both time and memory.

I remember this one particular meal I ate with my best friend and her parents – it was a salad, dressed with a simple oil and vinegar dressing, served with the most delicious crusty bread and a glass of red wine. That meal has stood out to me over the years not because it was complicated or fussy, but rather because the simplicity and quality of the ingredients made it so memorable.

But to a degree, I think many Americans have lost the simple joy of eating. It has become increasingly easier to order takeout or delivery than it is to cook a homemade meal. I know that I am certainly guilty of this. People who know me as a food photographer and blogger would be shocked to hear how often I’ve let restaurants cook for me. In my case, I think that I had come

# “Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.”

—Michael Pollan

to conflate “food” with “work,” and slowly lost my love of preparing my own meals. For a time, cooking had become more of a chore than a path to happiness. But it doesn’t have to be this way, for me or for any home cook.

I believe that everyone can cook. Why? Because every single person is the arbiter of their own taste, the ultimate judge of what they love to eat. Anybody can learn to make a variety of meals that they will enjoy and savor. And don’t get me wrong, there is a time and place for eating out at restaurants. But there is something undeniably satisfying about enjoying the fruits of your own labor – the simple joy of eating a home-cooked meal.

Invariably, the question I get asked after making such a statement is, “How can I do this? How can I recreate my favorite restaurant flavors at home?” I used to be stymied by this very question myself. With so many different cuisines, ingredients, and techniques, the process of cooking can get very overwhelming. But there are simple tips and tricks that any home cook – or eater – can employ to make their food taste delicious.

My top suggestion is to be generous with salt. Ever wonder why restaurant food tastes so flavorful? The chefs aren’t afraid to use salt, and you shouldn’t be either! Salt itself is flavorless but acts as a magnifying glass that amplifies existing flavors in the food. Of course, over-applying the salt can render a dish inedible, but it’s been my experience that most home cooks under-salt their food. In general, a liberal pinch of salt can add an amazing dimension of flavor to your roasted vegetables, soups, and pastas.

My second tip is to familiarize yourself with sources of flavor, such as herbs, spices, and condiments. A homemade stir-fry can taste better than takeout with a simple splash of tamari (a variety of soy sauce). Even something as simple as a bowl of rice can be transformed with a handful of chopped parsley and a squeeze of lemon juice. Finding little ways to add flavor to your existing meals can transform them into something that’s truly delicious. Some of my favorite condiments and flavors include grainy, tangy Dijon mustard, spicy hot sauce, fresh citrus juice, apple cider vinegar, and nutty tahini.

My third tip, and the very foundation of my own culinary experience, is to read and cook from cookbooks. My copies of two of my favorite cookbooks, “My New Roots” by Sarah Britton and “The First Mess Cookbook” by Laura Wright, are studded with Post-it Notes and handwritten ideas in the columns. Learn how your favorite cookbook authors approach food and try applying their techniques to your own cooking.

At the very least, reading a variety of cookbooks will open your eyes to flavors and food combinations that you never would have considered before. In fact, one of the best pasta dishes I’ve ever had was from a cookbook; the sauce was a combination of tomatoes, mustard, smoked paprika, and sriracha. It was a combination that I read very warily, but the sauce turned out to be smoky, tangy, and bursting with flavor. It was one of the best things I had ever eaten! Keeping an open mind with your cookbook recipe selection can turn out to be the best thing you’ll do for your palate.

Armed with these tools and tips, the journey towards becoming a proficient home cook can be a delicious and joyous one. Food has the incredible power to nourish, to enliven, and to heal. So many of our societal joys are centered around food – the meal shared together on a first date, the gathering of family for Thanksgiving dinner, the barbecues that declare the start of summer – that it’s no wonder that it has undeniable powers to bring people together. People of all different cultures, backgrounds, and life stages can come together over a delicious meal.

Finding your inner cook and connecting to the joy of eating is a lifelong process that is rewarding in so many ways. Even something as simple as a soup recipe can be passed down from generation to generation, bridging families across time and space. The love of food, and the love of eating, is something that’s so universal and undeniably human. For all of you reading this, I wish you joy and happiness on your cooking and eating journeys!

*Sarah Aldrich is a food photographer and blogger. Find her blog devoted to plant-based eating, Well and Full, at [wellandfull.com](http://wellandfull.com).*



A top-down photograph of a Spring Panzanella Salad. On the left, a wooden cutting board holds several fresh radishes with their green leafy tops. To the right, a white bowl is filled with the assembled salad, which includes mixed greens, sliced radishes, red onion, sunflower seeds, and golden-brown croutons. The background is a light-colored surface.

## SPRING PANZANELLA SALAD

### SALAD INGREDIENTS:

- 4-5 handfuls of mixed greens**
- 4 thinly sliced radishes**
- ¼ red onion, thinly sliced**
- ¼ cup sunflower seeds**

### DRESSING:

- Juice from ½ lemon**
- ½ cup extra virgin olive oil**
- 2 tsp Dijon mustard**
- ¼ tsp salt**
- Black pepper, to taste**
- 1 Tbsp maple syrup**

### CROUTONS:

- 2-3 slices whole grain bread**
- Drizzle of extra virgin olive oil**
- Salt and pepper, to taste**

### METHOD:

Start by making your dressing. Combine all dressing ingredients into small bowl and whisk vigorously to combine. Taste, and adjust seasonings to your preference. (Please note that you may need to whisk the dressing again right before serving.)

Then, make your croutons. Cut each slice of bread into 16ths and add to a bowl. Drizzle the croutons with a little extra virgin olive oil, and sprinkle on a pinch each of salt and pepper, to taste.

Bring a large pan to medium heat on the stove. Add in the seasoned croutons, and sauté (flipping often) for about 5-7 minutes, or until bread is toasty brown.

Then, assemble the salad. In a large bowl, mix the greens, radishes, red onion slices, sunflower seeds, and croutons. Drizzle with as much dressing as you like (you may have some left over).

Serve, and enjoy!



# PERFECT PAIRINGS

by SCOTT CLARK

## Why not all wines are vegan

**A**s we all know, wine is made from grapes. Essentially, wine is fermented grape juice. Yeasts convert the grape juice sugars into alcohol.

The reason that all wines are not vegan has to do with how the wine is clarified and a process called ‘fining.’ All young wines are hazy and contain tiny molecules such as proteins, tartrates or tannins. These are all natural, and in no way harmful.

However, wine-drinkers like our wines to be clear and bright. Producers use a variety of aids called ‘fining agents’ to help the process along. The fining agent acts like a magnet – attracting the molecules around it. They coagulate around the fining agent, creating fewer but larger particles, which can then be more easily removed.

Traditionally, the most commonly used fining agents were casein (a milk protein), albumin (egg whites), gelatin (animal protein) and isinglass (fish bladder protein). These fining agents are known as processing aids. They are not additives to the wine, but the use of these fining agents is not compatible with the vegan diet.

Today, many winemakers use clay-based fining agents, which are particularly efficient at fining out unwanted proteins. Activated charcoal is another vegan and vegetarian-friendly agent that is also used. In addition, the move to more natural winemaking methods, allowing nature to take its course, means more vegan wines. An increasing number of wine producers around the globe are electing not to fine or filter their wines, leaving them to self-clarify and self-stabilize. Such wines usually mention on the label “not fined” and/or “not filtered.”

Once you’ve identified a wine that is vegan friendly (readily available choices are listed below), it’s time to

pair your vegan dish with the right vegan wine. It can be difficult to pinpoint specific vegetables that match specific wines; therefore, pairing vegan meals with wine according to the herbs, spices, oils/fats, and sauces used in a dish is the best way of achieving a delicious combination. In general, soft buttery white wines (and some light-bodied reds) go well with simple citrus, peanut sauce, yellow coconut curry, and various other ethnic foods. Medium to bold red wines pair well with tomato-based sauces. Reds can also pair well with chili sauces, salsas and various curries.

Examples of popular and well-priced vegan wines (verified through [Barnivore.com](http://Barnivore.com)) include:

### **WHITE:**

Kris Pinot Grigio  
Duckhorn Decoy Sauvignon Blanc  
Bogle Chardonnay & Sauvignon Blanc

### **RED:**

Willamette Valley Vineyards “Estate” Pinot Noir  
Michael David 7 Deadly Zins or Freakshow Cabernet  
Layer Cake Cabernet, Shiraz or Primitivo

### **ROSÉ:**

Rosé all day  
Meiomi Rosé

### **SPARKLING:**

Zardetto Prosecco  
Nicolas Feuillatte Champagne

*Scott Clark is the general manager of Liquor Depot Inc.*



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**A BRIGHT LIGHT:** Ronni Zoback of Tolland explains how CRIS Radio helped her father when he experienced a progressive loss of vision. Photo courtesy of NPR

# A Vision for the Future

**CRIS Radio continues to evolve after 40 years of helping people read, learn and connect to the world**

*by* **CAROL LATTER** *and photography by* **STEVE LASCHEVER**

**A**round 1986, Ronni Zoback's father received a diagnosis of macular degeneration, a condition that leads to a progressive loss of vision. Over the next months and years, he suffered a loss not only of his vision but his self-esteem. "He became more and more sad, and felt cut off from the world," she recalls, "so he went from this very independent, very vital, vibrant person to somebody who basically 'sat.'"

Then, "by luck and by chance," she and her father discovered CRIS – the Connecticut Radio Information System, Inc. Within days of contacting the nonprofit, her father received one of the early CRIS radio receivers. "It was crackly, and so reception wasn't the best until we played around with it. But then it became wonderful because we found someone reading *The New York Times*," says Zoback, of Tolland.

CRIS – the state's only radio reading service – has been providing audio broadcasts to people who are blind or print-challenged for four decades. Throughout the day, volunteers read the latest national, state and local news on air – along with some 50 magazines, sports and weather reports, grocery ads, obituaries, arts and entertainment announcements, and more.

From its early days of broadcasting for two hours daily from a single basement recording booth in Rocky Hill, CRIS now has six studios around the state and broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week. CRIS Executive Director Diane Weaver Dunne says most volunteers come in between 7





**THE ART OF ACCESS:** Celebrating the launch of CRISAccess' "talking art" service of selected masterpieces displayed at the New Britain Museum of American Art are, from left, Luc Ouellette, docent, NBMAA; Michelle Hargraves, deputy director, NBMAA; Jeffrey Mainville, senior director, visitor services, NBMAA; Gail Lebert, secretary, CRIS Radio Board of Directors; and Paul Young, chairman, CRIS Radio Board of Directors.



**TEAM EFFORT:** At left, Diane Weaver Dunne, CRIS Radio executive director, in the broadcast center's production studio. Above, CRIS volunteer and listener, Diane Duhaime, (center) produces a live afternoon news program with volunteer readers Sue Carey, left, and Ruth Foxman. Pictured with Duhaime is her guide dog, Iroc.







**ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE:** CRIS Radio volunteers were honored at a reception held at the New Britain Museum of American Art.

a.m. and 7 p.m. and pre-record their material. The station broadcasts live for three to four hours during the day, and offers taped material for the remainder of the day and night. “We generate about 14 hours of new content every day,” she says.

Today, CRIS offers its listeners audio via the latest listening technologies, and the “crackly” reception is gone. But even in the early years, CRIS was a beacon of hope, and a way of reconnecting to the world, for those who were not able to read on their own.

“I can picture him on the couch with the radio right next to him, with one of the first smiles I had seen on his face in probably years, in regard to himself,” says Ronni Zoback of her father. After losing his vision, “he wasn’t happy about himself until he was able to listen to this stuff and then converse [about it with his friends]. Suddenly, he was back in the mix of things.”

## THERE FROM THE BEGINNING

Tom Grossi, 75, has been involved with CRIS since it began in 1978.

Retired from the state and blind since birth, he served for many years on the organization’s board of directors and chaired the board while it was building its new headquarters in Windsor. He now works as a volunteer, calling new clients to ask if they’ve received their radios, and to walk them through the program guide so they’ll know when particular programs are aired.

“A lot of people don’t know that every day, from Monday to Friday, there’s a regional roundup where volunteers read the local news in all of our satellite locations,” he says. “They let you know what’s going on in your town.” In addition to Windsor, CRIS has five regional studios, in Danbury, Norwalk, Norwich, Trumbull and West Haven.

As well as helping new listeners, Grossi also listens to CRIS Radio every day himself, to catch up on the news and, in particular, listen to the latest sports reports. He loves the fact that on-air volunteers read complete sports articles from the newspaper, whereas TV and “regular” radio may only give final scores and few details.

While he used to be able to read with the aid of special glasses and magnifiers, and also watch TV, that’s no longer the case. CRIS Radio serves as a lifeline, allowing him to keep tabs on his favorite teams, stay abreast of the news, find out when tickets are available for performances at local theaters, and even be aware when a friend or acquaintance has had a death in the family.

“If I wasn’t able to get the latest news and sports, I’d feel isolated and left out,” Grossi says. “When I’m with other people after listening to CRIS, I can talk to them about what’s going on.”



But he's quick to emphasize that CRIS is not only for the blind or visually challenged. He says people who have difficulty holding a book or magazine – or turning the pages – due to conditions like multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, Lou Gehrig's disease or even arthritis, are also eligible for the free service.

CRIS also provides services for people with learning, emotional or intellectual disabilities. In addition to English-language broadcasts, Spanish versions are also available.

## HOSPITALS, MUSEUMS, SCHOOLS AND MORE

Dunne notes that 40 years in, CRIS continues to expand – not only geographically but with the number of programs it offers in the community.

“Two years ago, we began to stream to each patient bed at Saint Francis Hospital and Medical Center, and that really was an important initiative for us because people who are patients at hospitals spend a lot of their time waiting for procedures,” she explains. “TV can become monotonous, or

a patient's medical condition may prevent them from being able to read and pass the time.”

CRIS also records and streams children's magazines for hospital patients at Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford. One of the channels is for very young

children, and the other is for older kids.

Another exciting initiative is CRISAccess. After downloading a QR code reader to their smartphones, people can now visit a museum, scan the QR code at a particular exhibit, and listen to information about that



**HORSE SENSE:** Bill Gaughan, a member of the Plainville Lions Club, uses his smartphone to scan a CRISAccess QR Code to learn more about a New England Carousel Museum exhibit.



**PART OF THE TEAM:** Ernest Johnson, a CRIS Radio volunteer, records an article published in *Sports Illustrated*.



**CALLING ALL KIDS:** CRIS Radio streams articles published in children's magazines to each patient room at Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford. Pictured is Noel Muteba.

exhibit. "This is really important for people who are blind or have low vision or dyslexia," says Dunne. "We're now in eight museums, and we've had thousands of hits."

Dunne says CRIS based this project on recommendations from a focus group conducted by the Smithsonian, in which blind and disabled members said they would like to have an audio version of signage, along with a description of the exhibit and any tactile opportunities.

"There have been several national studies showing that only 11 percent of adults with a disability visit a museum because they don't consider it accessible," says Dunne. "We wanted to provide a low-cost method that would allow these people to visit and enjoy a museum – and make it rich, informative and fun."

As with hospitals, CRIS charges museums a modest fee for service – one that's far less expensive than for an equivalent commercial service. These fees help CRIS to defray the cost to create signage and QR codes, and provide high quality human narration of exhibits in both English and Spanish.

"We're also in the process of developing a standalone mobile app specifically for museums, with an embedded QR code reader and GPS

longitude and latitude functionality. This way, when people are visiting an outdoor living history exhibit, for example, they could walk around and the longitude and latitude readings would launch an automatic narrative for them. We hope to have it go into operation in next several months."

CRIS also has services for children who have difficulty reading, whether it's due to vision impairment or something else. CRISKids and CRISKids for Schools provide children and teens with instant access to audio versions of written materials, from award-winning magazines to classroom print materials, all narrated by the nonprofit's talented and dedicated volunteers.

"There are about 1,300 classroom titles in our CRISKids audio library, available on demand or through a subscription-based service," Dunne explains. "We also do custom recordings for teachers, to meet the needs of students who are unable to read the print version. So far, about 100 schools have signed up."

CRIS now receives a high volume of requests to have books narrated. "We've been inundated with requests. There's a huge demand for it and a huge need for it," she says.

Dunne says the organization continues to work hard to embrace

the latest technology. Whereas CRIS initially only distributed transistor radios, "now you can listen on a smartphone, through a hands-free speaker like Echo, through Internet radios or on your computer. We also have cable TV connectivity through several cable operators. Because we're able to use so many methods, we've been able to expand the services we provide." Nine years ago, CRIS audiocasts reached 4,000 people. Today, its audience numbers 85,000 people, and continues to grow.

## MAKING ENDS MEET

Paul Young, board chairman and a volunteer for the past 30 years, says CRIS does a lot with a little. "We operate with a small staff and a large number of dedicated volunteers who provide voice talent," he says. "We have more than 200 volunteers statewide who come in and read; some have been doing it for 20 to 30 years, and we recently gave out a 35-year award. We couldn't do what we do without them."

The station works hard to raise the necessary funds to cover its "tightly controlled" costs of half a million dollars each year. But the funds it has received from the state have dwindled dramatically – an experience shared by most, if not all, Connecticut nonprofits



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over the past decade.

Young says at its peak, CRIS received \$110,000 to \$120,000 per year from the state. “Last year, we received \$20,000 and this year, the new governor has committed to \$20,000” – a figure that falls far short of what’s needed.

Adds Dunne, “The state cut our funding by 76 percent over last four years alone, so fundraising is more critical than ever. It’s really important for us to raise the money we need to keep our lights on.”

Young says the station writes a lot of grant applications and does receive grants based on specific programs, like its museum initiative or the CRISKids program. Lions Clubs “are also very good to us and donate a lot over the course of the year.” But because CRIS is not an FCC licensed radio station, he says, “trying to get people to underwrite any one of our broadcasts is a problem.”

Occasionally, the station puts out a

request for donations from listeners and supporters. “Donations are not large but they’re heartfelt. We sometimes get three quarters and a dime taped on a piece of paper and sent in to us. Many of our listeners are not wealthy people and their means are not such that they can donate large sums of money.”

Overall, Young says, funding remains a challenge and the station is currently in the red. “But one way or another, we’re determined to close that deficit. By the end of the year, we hope to be much closer to that black number than we are right now.”

CRIS is actively seeking out sponsors for its annual “Dining and Dancing in the Dark” fundraiser – a takeoff on “Dancing with the Stars.” Set this year for April 27 at the Bond Ballroom in Hartford, the evening gala features local celebrities and businesspeople competing for top ballroom dancing honors before a panel of judges. A live band provides

tunes to dance by. Dunne says the event attracts about 200 people, “and we usually sell out. It’s a lovely and fun evening, and it helps us so much.”

Meanwhile, people like Ronni Zoback continue to be grateful for all that CRIS provides.

In the beginning, she says, “I don’t think I even understood how wonderful CRIS was, but they were angels to me.” And the experience inspired thoughts of how she could give back. “I have a New York accent and I fall back into it a lot, but maybe someone wouldn’t mind listening to me reading *The New York Times* to them.” 📻

*For more information, visit [crisradio.org](http://crisradio.org) or call (860) 527-8000.*

*Carol Latter is the editor of Seasons and a longtime journalist and writer who lives in Simsbury.*



The poster features a dark, starry night sky with the Milky Way galaxy visible. In the lower right, a silhouette of a person stands on a dark, rounded horizon, looking up at the stars. The text is overlaid on this background.

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**A COLORFUL HISTORY:** Connecticut's restored historical gardens offer visitors the chance to soak up the color and fragrance of dozens of types of flowers and plants - from peonies and phlox to heirloom roses, cosmos, lilacs, and more. This is a view of the Bellamy-Ferriday House & Garden in Bethlehem.



# Bloomin' Wonderful

## Visiting Connecticut gardens that evoke the state's historic past

by **LORI MILLER KASE** / *Photography courtesy of Connecticut's Historic Gardens and Connecticut Landmarks*

**W**hether you are a garden lover or a history buff, Connecticut's many historic gardens offer both inspiration and a unique glimpse into the lives and sensibilities of generations past. With their parterres and pergolas, stately trees and topiaries, perennial borders and old-fashioned kitchen potagers, the meticulously restored gardens in our region span three centuries and represent an array of styles and horticultural trends.

From the early colonial gardens at Stanley-Whitman House to the painterly palette of perennials inspired by the French Impressionists at the Hill-Stead Museum's Sunken Garden, both in Farmington, much of the flowers and foliage on display at these sites today represent plantings that date back to the gardens' heydays.

"We try to keep the plants as close as we can to what was there at each garden's historical peak," says Laurie Masciandaro, a spokesperson for Connecticut's Historic Gardens – a consortium of 15 restored properties scattered across the state – and site manager for member Roseland Cottage in Woodstock. Some of the gardens even feature original plantings, like many of the lilacs and heirloom roses that grace the Bellamy-Ferriday estate in Bethlehem, the neatly trimmed boxwoods at Roseland Cottage, and the eponymous Harkness Heliotropes, an antique variety propagated each year from cuttings and then replanted into the East Garden at Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford.

Each of the properties designated as a Connecticut Historic Garden is associated with an historically significant domicile, so visitors not only get to observe how gardening has evolved over time, but also learn about notable figures from the state's past – including many influential women – and see how they lived.

"Women's history and garden history in Connecticut are intertwined," says Masciandaro. The women associated with these properties include Florence Griswold, who ran an art colony that nurtured many of the American Impressionists, Theodate Pope Riddle, the country's first female architect, who designed Hill-Stead, Caroline Ferriday, the prominent socialite and philanthropist





**A STately HOME:** A view of the Italian Renaissance Classical Revival-style mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park, as seen from the east garden.

behind the Bellamy-Ferriday gardens, who helped survivors of the Nazi camps, Harriet Beecher Stowe, one of the country's most influential writers, and pioneering landscape architect Beatrix Farrand, one of the first women to break into this then male-dominated field.

Connecticut has a wealth of historic gardens to choose from. Here are some of the highlights in our region:

### **Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme**

At the turn of the 20th century, Florence Griswold turned her family home into a boarding house, and hosted a group of artists that came to be known as the Lyme Art Colony. Her boarding house became the center of American Impressionism, and her colorful "grandmother-style" garden inspired artists like Childe Hassam and William Chadwick, who were drawn to the property's bucolic scenery and the quality of the light reflected off the nearby Lieutenant River. In fact, more than 50 years after Griswold's death, landscape historian Sheila Wertheimer turned to these paintings for guidance when restoring the neglected garden.



**STUNNING SYMMETRY:** The gardens surrounding the Waterford mansion once owned by philanthropists Edward and Mary Harkness are now part of Harkness Memorial State Park and are open to the public. Photo by Lori Kase

Today, as in the late 1800s, masses of old-fashioned flowers like peonies, cosmos and phlox spill from neatly bordered beds in Miss Griswold's perennial garden, and roses climb the arbor; Swiss chard, chives and sage cohabitate with towering sunflowers in the adjacent vegetable garden; and the works of the artists who once painted here hang in the galleries of the impressionist museum on the grounds. Says Wertheimer, who meets with her volunteer "garden gang" weekly to maintain the garden: "I see photographers and painters there painting the gardens, even today." **FlorenceGriswoldMuseum.org**

### **Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington**

Miss Griswold's garden may have inspired artists – but at Hill-Stead, art inspired the garden. The drifts of color along the beautiful garden's stone walls and brick walks – the blues of verbena, salvia and lavender; pinks of heliotrope, roses and peonies; and whites of cleome, nicotiana and deutzia – reflect the palette of the French Impressionist paintings hanging on the walls of the former country home, not to mention the signature style of famed landscape architect Beatrix Farrand.

After World War I, Theodate Pope Riddle, who designed the Colonial Revival structure in the late 1890s, hired Farrand to update the property's neo-classical style sunken garden according to her more informal – and artistic – gardening aesthetic. Today, the octagonal garden, which was restored according to plans recovered from an archive of Farrand's work at the University of California, Berkeley, boasts 36 beds featuring more than 90 varieties of perennials and annuals, and serves as a lovely open-air venue for the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival, an annual celebration of poetry that attracts thousands of visitors each year.

**hillstead.org**

### **Harkness Memorial State Park, Waterford**

Farrand's hand can also be seen in the magnificent gardens surrounding the Italian Renaissance Classical Revival-style mansion on the shoreline that once belonged to philanthropists Edward and Mary Harkness. "We've done the best we can to make it look like it did in 1930," says garden historian Jeanne Shelburne, who in the 1990s led





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**STEPPING INTO THE PAST:** The Colonial Revival garden behind the 1752 Joseph Webb House at the Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum features arched trellises, pebbled walkways, and beds filled with old-fashioned flowers like roses, hollyhocks, daisies, phlox and oriental lilies.

the restoration of the Harkness gardens using microfilms of Farrand's original plans, along with old photographs.

Farrand redesigned the more formal West Garden utilizing a palette of yellows, gold and maroon blooms to evoke an Italian sunset, according to Shelburne, and created and installed the East Garden, with its swaths of purplish-blue heliotropes and Asian statuary; the Alpine Rock Garden, with its spectacular bloom of English Bluebells, and the Boxwood Parterre, once known as "Toby's Garden," because the family dog is said to have been buried there.

"The scale of Harkness sets it apart from other gardens in our region," says Shelburne. Indeed, it's hard not to marvel at the estate's 200+ acres, replete with fountains, stone walls, wrought iron fencing, and other elegant structures, hundreds of perennials, annuals and shrubs, and sweeping lawns with panoramic views of Long Island Sound. Back in the day, three gardeners worked 12 hours daily to maintain the property; today, a crew of volunteers meets with the head gardener for a few hours every Wednesday morning to help keep the gardens in shape.

### **Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum, Wethersfield**

Another one of America's first female landscape architects, Amy Cogswell, designed the Colonial Revival garden behind the 1752 Joseph Webb House, a National Historic Landmark along Wetherfield's Heritage Walk. With its arched trellises, axial pebbled walkways and beds filled with old-fashioned flowers like roses, hollyhocks, daisies, phlox and oriental lilies, this garden exemplifies this gardening style, in vogue when it was designed in 1921.





Little remained of Cogswell's original design by the 1990s, but the garden was restored by the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in Connecticut. Visitors to the garden can also peek into the Webb House, where George Washington once stayed, as well as into two adjacent 18th century houses – the 1769 Silas Deane House, also a National Historic Landmark, and the 1789 Isaac Stevens House. The herb garden just outside the kitchen door of the Stevens home evokes a typical garden from the colonial period, when gardens were less decorative and more utilitarian, featuring herbs like mint, chamomile, lemon balm and thyme for eating and medicinal purposes. [webb-deane-stevens.org](http://webb-deane-stevens.org)

### **Stanley-Whitman House, Farmington**

The 1720 Stanley-Whitman House, another National Historic Landmark, offers more insight into colonial gardening. Upon entering the home's front courtyard, visitors can view raised beds containing examples of plants like hops and dyer's woad that English settlers, who migrated to Hartford in the 1600s, might have sown in their gardens.

The 18th-century dooryard garden behind the house contains the herbs and vegetables that are known to have been available to colonists, who, during the 1700s,



**A-MAZED:** Visitors enjoy winding their way along the paths through meticulously sculptured shrubbery at the Bellamy-Ferriday House & Garden in Bethlehem.

depended on their gardens to provide food, spices, medicines and dyes. Narrow raised beds feature medicinal herbs like catmint, chamomile, and feverfew, aromatic plants like basil, thyme and tarragon for seasoning, small fruits like blueberries, currants and strawberries, and vegetables like corn, beans and squash (known as “the three sisters”). Beyond the dooryard garden is an apple orchard, which supplied the settlers with hard cider, and a giant oak, grown from a seedling of Hartford's Charter Oak. [stanleywhitman.org](http://stanleywhitman.org)



**TRANQUIL SPACES:** Flowers, shrubs and carefully tended hedges surround this peaceful gazebo at Hill-Stead Museum in Farmington.





**SPRING SHOWERS:** A few sprinkles don't deter these flower fans at the Butler-McCook House and garden in Hartford.

### **Bellamy-Ferriday House & Garden, Bethlehem**

The extensive gardens surrounding the Bellamy-Ferriday House retain elements of the landscape established by Reverend Joseph Bellamy, the leader of the “Grand Awakening” religious revival who built the home in the 1740s. Yet philanthropists Eliza Ferriday and her daughter Caroline, who summered and gardened here beginning in 1912, can be credited with the design and planting of much of what visitors see today.

“The gardens were intentionally planted in such a way that the flowering plants, trees, and shrubs begin blooming in the early spring and continue throughout the summer, so it’s really incredible,” says Sheryl Hack, executive director of Connecticut Landmarks, the non-profit that now owns and maintains the stunning property. Its 10 acres boast an impressive assortment of magnolia trees – which produce the garden’s first blossoms in spring – a colorful Colonial Revival garden, a formal parterre, sweeping lawns, and many specimen trees, including a weeping willow that Caroline Ferriday cultivated using a cutting taken from a tree growing near Napoleon’s grave. “She loved everything French,” notes museum interpreter Gary Cicognani.

The garden also features a notable collection of heirloom roses and lilacs – the latter of which inspired the title of the best-selling novel, *Lilac Girls*, which tells of how Caroline Ferriday helped the Polish “rabbits” (women who were treated as lab animals by the Nazis) after World War II. The property’s roses may soon become as famous as its lilacs. Martha Hall Kelly’s new book, *The Lost Roses*, a prequel

to *Lilac Girls*, comes out in April, and the Bellamy-Ferriday House will celebrate its release with a special event on April 13. [ctlandmarks.org/bellamy-ferriday](http://ctlandmarks.org/bellamy-ferriday)

### **Butler-McCook House, Hartford**

The 1782 Butler-McCook House, another Connecticut landmark, is one of only four remaining 18th century buildings in Hartford, says Hack. (One of the others, the Amos Bull House, which serves as the non-profit’s office, sits on the same Main Street property.) The home’s restored Victorian garden, originally installed in 1865, was designed by Jacob Weidenmann, who also designed Bushnell Park; in fact, it is the only surviving domestic commission by the famed landscape architect. Four generations of the McCook family lived in the house and tended its gardens.

A formal garden on the north side of the house features rings of neatly trimmed boxwoods, with more relaxed plantings of colorful flowers like phlox, roses, peonies and iris sprouting cheerfully from their centers, while a more naturalistic garden runs along the property’s south side. A stone bench, birdbath, and stepping stones displayed on the grounds bear inscriptions dating back to the 1940s. “It’s a beautiful oasis right in the middle of Hartford,” says Masciandaro. [ctlandmarks.org/butler-mccook](http://ctlandmarks.org/butler-mccook)

### **Harriet Beecher Stowe House, Hartford**

The property surrounding Harriet Beecher Stowe’s cottage style home in the “Nook Farm” neighborhood, known for the many literary luminaries who resided there



(including Stowe's neighbor Mark Twain), reflects the Uncle Tom Cabin author's love of gardening. She particularly favored Victorian-era flowers like tulips, roses, dahlias, and daisies, and often collected and displayed bouquets from her gardens in her home. An amateur artist, she also painted her blooms; in fact, some of her floral paintings still hang on the walls of the house today.

Among the eight distinct gardens on her Forest Street property are a woodland garden, a blue cottage garden, a wildflower meadow, a Victorian texture garden, an antique rose garden, and even a "carpet bed," a fanciful Victorian trend in which flowers were planted to look almost like ornamental rugs on the lawn. One of the state's largest magnolia trees graces the property, as does a dogwood, more than 100 years old, that is thought to have been planted while Stowe still lived there.

**harrietbeecherstowecenter.org**

Other notable historic gardens in the state include the Colonial Revival Phelps-Hatheway garden in Suffield, the

Hollister House Garden in the Litchfield Hills, which is modeled after a classic English garden and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Gertrude Jekyll Garden at the Glebe House Museum in Woodstock – the only garden designed by the renowned English horticultural designer in this hemisphere. And Elizabeth Park in Hartford, though not associated with an historic home, is the oldest municipally run rose garden in the country, featuring 15,000 plants and 800 varieties of roses.

Connecticut's Historic Gardens Day, a statewide celebration of historic gardens in which member sites hold special events and activities, will be held on Sunday, June 23 this year, though guests are welcomed at all of the state's historic gardens throughout the season. "Visiting Connecticut's historic gardens is a wonderful way to enjoy this state's incredible and deep history," notes Hack. "And it's always good for the soul to get out and enjoy nature."

*Lori Miller Kase is a freelance writer living – and gardening – in Simsbury.*



**MAJESTIC BEAUTY:** Elephant ears are the unexpected centerpiece of this circular garden feature at the Harriet Beecher Stowe House in Hartford.





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# Soul Fitness

Feeling better from the inside out

By SARAH WESLEY LEMIRE

**F**or many of us, getting into shape means going on a diet or hitting the treadmill. But there's more to being fit than just cutting back on cookies or signing up for a gym membership.

In fact, while physical health is important, internal wellness plays an equal role in determining our overall happiness.

So it's not a bad idea to take some time to focus on strengthening the strongholds that contribute to our emotional well-being, including spirituality, fulfillment, relationships, finances and sustenance.

Like anything, however, knowing where to begin can sometimes be a challenge. Fortunately, with help from the experts, getting on track only requires a little know-how and the motivation to start.

## WORK. LIFE. BALANCE.

Life moves fast and trying to keep pace is stressful business. That's why finding time to slow down and recalibrate is nothing short of essential.

While everyone has his or her own way of coming to center, an increasing number of people are turning to meditation, due to its well-documented benefits, including reducing stress and increasing relaxation.

"It's a great way to just make yourself present," says John Odlum, LMT, CMA, QTP, a nationally certified and Connecticut licensed massage therapist and the founder of Tru Elements in West Hartford. "And the more

present you become, the more space you have to deal with things in your life, and to deal with stress."

According to Odlum, who's also a master medicinal aromatherapist and reiki master, meditation can provide much-needed perspective and self-awareness, which helps put things into their right place.

"The most important thing is to become more in the moment," he says. When you're mindfully present, it's easier to see what's influencing your life and then chose to either hold onto those influences, or let them go because they don't align with your own beliefs.

To get started, Odlum suggests taking a few minutes to be still and become aware of your thoughts. "Imagine your thoughts as clouds, like a time lapse camera moving across the sky. There's nothing to hold onto; nothing to grab. You're just watching them and they can't harm you."

With millions of thoughts in our heads, he says, it's important to take time to observe them without any sort of judgment. "Judgment equals jail. When you judge something outside yourself, you're actually perpetuating something you do not want in your life."

The ability to objectively examine your thoughts, intentions and desires can be both liberating and empowering. "It's awareness, acceptance and allowing. When you do that, you're living your life; you're not really trying to control it," explains Odlum. "It's just bringing in perspective to whatever issue you have, whatever it is."



As with most things, meditation takes practice and the willingness to try. But once integrated, he says, it can change your entire outlook on life. “It’s finding the path that works for you and being true to yourself.”

### IT’S NOT THE DESTINATION

Studies suggest that nearly half of us are unhappy in our jobs or careers. Yet for any number of reasons, we find it difficult to make a change or pursue something different.

“Typically people are unhappy because they’re unclear,” says Jerry Gaura, life coach, therapist and founder of TOOWi Media in Collinsville. “They’re attaching to goals and outcomes that don’t really match up with who and what they are.”

To gain insight, Gaura recommends doing some self-reflection. “That first step, which is really important, is to be able to speak to the truth of yourself.”

That truth, he says, can get lost as we follow a track in life that doesn’t necessarily reflect our real desires. However, once we’re able to identify what we want, we can then give ourselves permission to honor it and take the next step, which is finding the courage to act on it.

It’s difficult, he says, because taking that leap requires us to take responsibility for our own security, rather than entrusting it to outside resources like the company we work

for, or other influencers in our life. “That’s the trust step – meaning I’m going to have to have faith that I can do what I say I can do.”

Integrity comes next. “Integrity means that when you’re moving towards your goals and vision, if you run into obstacles, you’re not giving up,” says Gaura.

Curveballs are part of life, and instead of assuming they’re roadblocks to achieving your endpoint, consider them part of the path of getting there. “You’re going to have to find ways to pause, slow down in the face of obstacles and barriers, and connect with your community – your tribe and trusted mentors,” he says.

Gaura also believes it’s important to embrace “the suck,” meaning that instead of fleeing when things get difficult, lean into the struggle in order to find the strength you need to surmount it.

The next step is showing compassion for that struggle and the emotions that accompany it. “Emotions that show up are reflections of your truth speaking to you,” he says. By ignoring them, you can actually derail the whole process.

Finally, it’s important to recognize that if after pursuing your personal truth, you don’t achieve your desired outcome, it’s not your job to give up. Instead, it’s to let go of the outcome. “You’re not doing it for the outcome,” Gaura explains. “You’re doing it to live with integrity and truth.”



## LOVE CONNECTION

According to a long-term Harvard study, there's a strong connection between happiness and our close relationships.

With that in mind, it's a good idea to take inventory in those relationships to ensure that not only your needs are being met, but that your loved ones' needs are too.

One way to start, according to Janet Peterson, LCSW, a Litchfield-based therapist who specializes in relationships, is to talk with friends and family about what you need. "People can't read minds," she says.

While it's tempting to think others know what you need, in most cases, they don't. "Identifying your needs is important because it can actually promote closeness and greater intimacy; then the other person can actually know how to help."

Peterson also suggests reflecting on early-life relationships because often they directly impact our current ones. "Ask yourself [if you got] what you needed. For example, love, trust, safety, affection, patience, consistency, encouragement; if one doesn't get those things, they will look for them in other relationships. Many times, we will give to others what we most desperately need and want, further draining our inner resources."

As adults, she notes, it's up to us to identify our unmet needs and provide them to ourselves, with the support of others.

Another way to promote healthy relationships is by being

honest and letting others know how they are affecting you. "You're telling them the behavior you don't like, how it makes you feel, what behavior you'd like to see instead, or what the consequence will be if they continue the behavior," she says. "On the flip side, be willing to admit when you've hurt someone and be able to apologize."

It's also important to be your own person and not depend on others to provide your needs. Healthy relationships consist of two emotionally mature people who know they're separate beings who share thoughts, feelings, experiences and help bring out the best qualities in each other, she says.

Follow-through is still another important component of a good relationship. "Do what you say you're going to do. This is a big factor in building trust and feeling secure."

Finally, to foster healthy relationships, Peterson explains that we need to mindfully listen to one another. "Allow the person to talk and actually finish their thoughts, and avoid defensive language," she says. "People want to be seen, heard and understood."

## A PENNY SAVED

If money grew on trees, we'd all plant orchards in our backyards.

Since it doesn't, keeping financially fit is an important part of our overall health, especially considering that for many of us, money is often the number one cause of stress.

A good place to start is with your savings, says Bill Tait,



a certified financial planner with Essex Financial, located in Essex. “How do you make sure that you’re saving, and saving in the most efficient way?”

One suggestion is to continuously evaluate any investments you might have, or work-sponsored programs like a 401K, to ensure that you’re diversifying your portfolio to optimize returns, as well as maxing out your contributions.

“If you can maximize your 401K, it doesn’t really cost you as much as it looks like on paper, because it’s all coming out pre-tax,” he says. This can ultimately help you pocket more of your hard-earned cash.

For folks without prearranged plans or who find it difficult to save, Tait recommends starting small, even if it’s \$10 a paycheck. And to lessen the temptation of spending it, have it automatically taken out of your paycheck and deposited into a separate account.

“If you have those automatic withdrawals, then that money never makes it into your checking account, so you don’t see it and you’re not putting yourself into a position where you have to take that \$10 and physically move it into the other account.”

The “out of sight, out of mind” philosophy can help build a nest egg over time, while reducing the likelihood of spending it.

Targeting bad debt is also essential to improving your financial fitness. Tait says that identifying high-interest loans and credit cards, and paying them off, or consolidating them, should be a priority. “How can we get these to the lowest possible interest rate so that more of your money goes toward paying down your debt, not interest?” he says.

Finally, one of the most important things you can do is have a long-term financial plan. “It’s a blueprint that helps you plan how long you need to work versus how long you want to work. By having that guide, it gives you some scenarios to give you a little more control over your work,” he says. “And when you have a couple of scenarios, then you know what the end zones are.”

## YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

If the goal is to feel good from the inside out, then it’s important to talk diet.

And not the kind that you go on, but rather making meaningful choices about what you put into your body, which impacts your overall health and sense of well-being. In a word, nutrition.

It’s no secret that when we eat better, we feel better. And,

according to Ellen Metzger, MS, RD, CLT, a registered dietician and nutritionist based in Glastonbury, better eating begins with going back to the basics.

“Eat organic food, or as your grandmother called it, ‘food,’ ” she suggests, explaining that back in the days of our grandparents and great grandparents, the concept of “organic” food as something separate from ordinary food, didn’t really exist.

However, recent decades have seen a dramatic uptick in processed foods loaded with preservatives, food coloring and dyes, artificial flavors, fake sugars and pesticides, as well as foods that have been genetically or chemically altered. Consuming those foods can increase the risk of a variety of health issues ranging from inflammation and allergies to diabetes and more serious problems.

So Metzger suggests returning to more basic foods that can be eaten in their natural state, or close to it. “An apple doesn’t have a label. A vegetable typically isn’t in a package,” she says. “Whole food really represents foods that retain their natural composition and don’t contain artificial additives or preservatives. They have little or no processing, they are not stripped of fiber or vitamins or minerals – basically, they are not refined.”

Changing your eating habits, however, isn’t always easy, and Metzger recommends doing it gradually, along with trying to approach food with a new mindset. “Food is medicine,” she explains. “It’s important to understand the basics of nutrition, how the fixed nutrients, proteins, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals and water all have a job to do; they all have a purpose.”

Once you’ve embraced healthier eating, Metzger says that it’s likely that your cravings for processed foods will eventually decrease and that you’ll see improvement in how you feel overall.

“My pillars of health are eating real food, changing your behavior, having a community of support, movement and sleep. But I like to optimize nutrition as being the most important,” she says. “It all stems from what we put in our bodies, and the gut is really everything.”

*Sarah Wesley Lemire is a writer, photographer, and humor columnist with hundreds of published stories, covering a diverse array of topics. For more information, visit [swlemire.com](http://swlemire.com).*

**“ONCE YOU’VE EMBRACED HEALTHIER EATING, IT’S LIKELY THAT YOUR CRAVINGS FOR PROCESSED FOODS WILL EVENTUALLY DECREASE AND YOU’LL SEE IMPROVEMENT IN HOW YOU FEEL OVERALL. ”**

– Ellen Metzger, MS, RD, CLT



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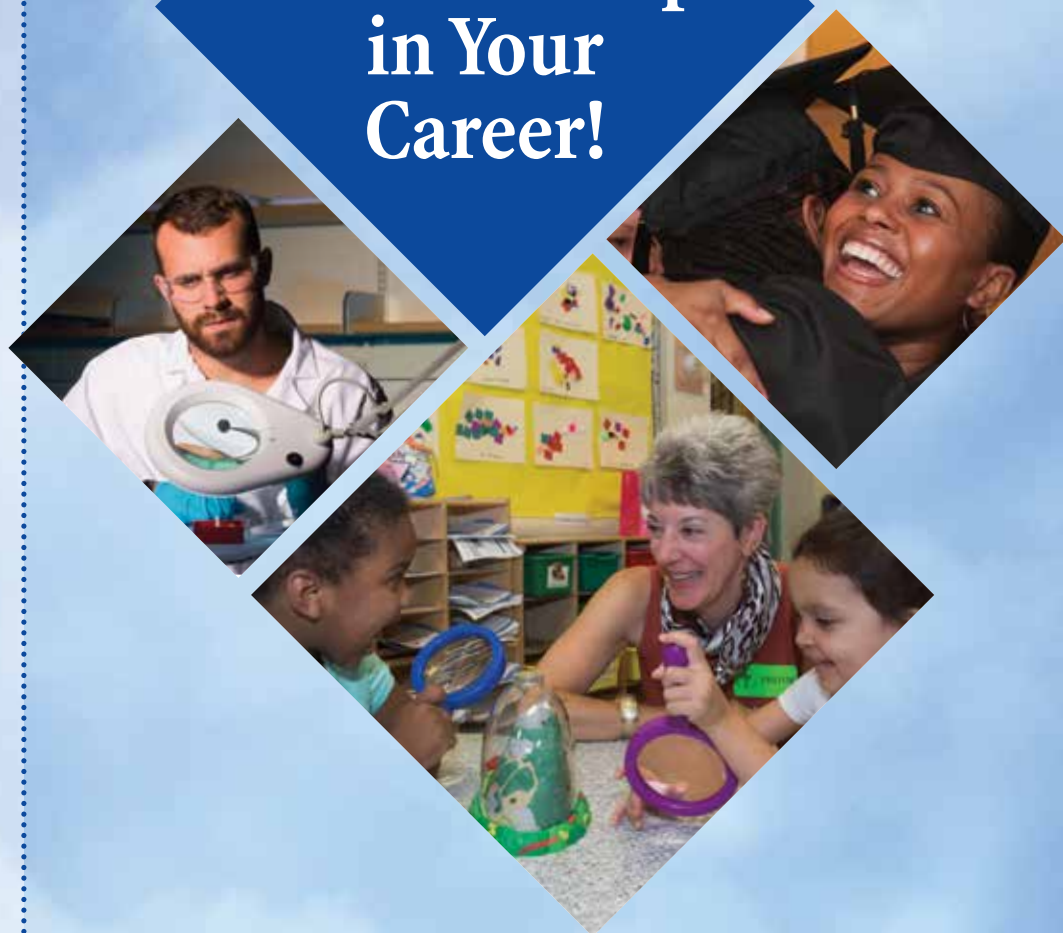
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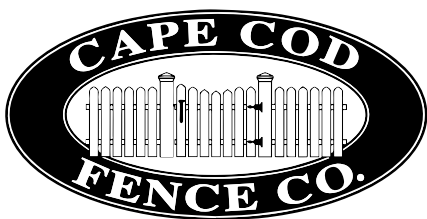


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## The Worst of Times

**M**y daughter tells me that spring is her favorite season. This, of course, is ridiculous, but she's 10 years old. I can forgive her foolishness because she still has a great deal to learn. What can I expect from a person who won't try macaroni and cheese and still tries to rationalize with her six-year-old brother?

We all suffer from naiveté from time to time.

Spring is a compelling concept but does not come close to measuring up to its claims. Conduct a Google image search of the word "springtime."

It's ridiculous.

The screen is filled with impossibly green fields of the most remarkable colors you've ever seen. Sunshine and butterflies and honeybees. Smiling children lying in swaths of pristine grass.

Nonsense.

Spring is, of course, the worst season of the year. The least defined season. Barely a season at all. Spring is the bastard stepchild of seasons. It's the season still living in its parents' basement well into adulthood, uncertain about what to do with its life.

Spring is like a philosophy major. It doesn't know what it wants to be.

"But Dad," my daughter counters. "What about all of those springtime flowers?"

Flowers? The parts of spring that aren't buried in three feet of snow or a foot of mud might have the odd blossom, but the summer and fall are filled with flowers. The flowers that finally appear at the end of spring... they are everywhere in the summer. Wildflowers and roses and mums and more.

Besides, the idealized notion of spring

lasts about nine minutes. It's more often than not overrun by winter and overtaken by summer. Snow on the ground in April. Beach days in June. Honest-to-goodness spring, with all its flowering beauty, probably lasts about three days every year.

How can you be known for flowers if it's still snowing during your season?

Fall has foliage. It's got an iron-clad contract with the trees. No leaf even thinks about changing color until autumn has arrived.

Winter has snow. Skiing and sledding and snowmen are all firmly affixed in the wintry months.

Summer has surf and sand. Bathing suits and beach towels.

Spring?

Spring is a transition from snow to slush to mud to something marginally more delightful for half a second or so.

What does spring really have?

Baseball begins in spring, but let's not fool ourselves. Baseball players are called the "Boys of Summer" for a reason, and the World Series is known as the "Fall Classic."

Easter lands squarely in spring, which might mean something to those who celebrate this holiday, but the rest of the seasons have far more impressive holidays of their own.

Winter has Christmas and New Year's Day. A formidable one-two punch. Throw in Valentine's Day and Presidents' Day, which offers a day off for many, and winter's holiday lineup is second to none.

Fall has Halloween and Thanksgiving. Another impressive one-two combination. And unlike Easter, Thanksgiving is celebrated by almost every American regardless of their religion and often comes with a blessed four-day weekend.

And summer? Besides the glory of summer vacation for children everywhere, summer begins with a holiday (Memorial Day), ends with a holiday (Labor Day) and has a holiday

Spring is a transition  
from snow to slush  
to mud to something  
marginally more  
delightful for half a  
second or so.



smack dab in the middle, too (Fourth of July). It's got fireworks, parades, backyard cookouts, and pool parties.

Easter is nice, but c'mon. Unless you're one of the few who get Good Friday off, it doesn't even offer its celebrants a day off from work.

So what does spring really have? It has a story. A story of flowers bursting forth from the thawing tundra. Trees returning to their gloriously green states. The elimination of winter coats and

hats and mittens, and all of this is true.

Maybe. Briefly. Almost imperceptibly.

Obviously, my daughter is mistaken. The season she's chosen as her favorite is hardly a season at all. It's a sloppy buffer between two well-defined, legitimate seasons. Spring is a grifter. A con artist. It's a season that offers the promise of excitement and renewal but more often than not fails to deliver on any of its guarantees.

Spring is approaching, and my advice to all you springtime lovers is simple:

Don't blink or you might miss it.

*Matthew Dicks is an elementary school teacher, a bestselling novelist, and a 39-time Moth StorySLAM champion. He is the co-founder and artistic director of Speak Up, a Hartford-based storytelling organization.*

*Sean Wang, an MIT architecture graduate, is author of the sci-fi graphic novel series, Runners. Learn more at [seanwang.com](http://seanwang.com).*

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