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EDITORS OF
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DISCOVERIES

Rural Retreat

Why four-star hotels have nothing on the farm stay. BY DONNA GARLOUGH

IT'S 6 P.M. ON A FRIDAY AND, like everyone else in New England, my husband and I are at a standstill on I-93. To pass the time, Dave talks to his mother on his BlackBerry: "We're headed north for the weekend," he says. "Get this, ma—we're going to a dairy farm." She laughs, loud enough that I can hear it from the passenger's seat.

Here's why this is hilarious: Dave grew up on a dairy farm in Ohio. He has baled hay and shoveled manure, and once found out what happens when you pee on an electric fence. For him, farm life is something kids grow up and leave behind, not something you do on the weekends for fun. I, on the other hand, am a born-and-raised suburbanite now living in a townhouse, and I'd like to get a feel for farm life.

By the time we pull up to the Liberty Hill Farm, in Rochester, Vermont, we feel worlds away from the city.

We're greeted by Beth Kennett, one of Liberty Hill's owners and a ninth-generation farmer. She shows us to a room that's outfitted simply with a quilt-covered bed. "Looks like a farmhouse," Dave says, and I swear I detect a smile.

Hardly ready for bed at 9 p.m. but not quite sure what else to do, we crack open a bottle of apple brandy, flop onto the bed, and drink and talk until we're drowsy. When



we turn out the lights, it's pitch black and dead silent. We settle in under a scratchy wool blanket. It's the best night's sleep we've had in years.

The smell of syrup and bacon rouses us. Beth has prepared a breakfast of cheddar omelets, blackberry-rhubarb coffee cake, maple oatmeal, and crisp bacon. After gorging, Dave and I linger at the table, chatting with Beth and her friend and household helper, Lois. While helping with farm chores is encouraged, if not required, on many farm vacations, the Kennetts are happy to let their guests relax, wander the property, and absorb the goings-on. Beth explains that the 200-acre farm was founded in 1780 by John Emerson and taken over by the Kennett family in 1979. It has been a dairy farm for at least a century.

Later that morning, Beth's son David introduces us to the herd: 250 Robeth Holsteins. Strolling the property, we see milking cows, hugely pregnant cows, and newborn calves. A few bulls, kept for breeding, grunt as we approach.

At 4 p.m., dinner's already under way. At 6, a dozen guests sit down to a meal of roast pork; scalloped potatoes with cheddar; roast carrots and parsnips; and apple crumble with maple ice cream. Afterwards, we crowd around the TV; the Winter Olympics are on, and we cheer a few Vermont skiers to victory.

That night, there's no need for brandy. We're asleep by the time our heads hit the pillows.

On Sunday, we wake to pancakes, blueberry sausage, breakfast potatoes, and cinnamon rolls. The group, familiar by now, chats about all things dairy: organic standards, inspectors, expiration dates, hormones, veterinarians, and feed. Beth tells us about local farms that have prospered, and those that have gone under. As one of the first area farms to offer accommodations (the Kennetts took their first guests in 1984), Beth recently began collaborating with Cabot, the company that purchases their milk, to promote agritourism. Dairy farming is a low-margin business, after all, and guests help pay the bills.

Ask Beth, though, and the farm stay is about more than just money. "Some people call this a B&B, but we like to think it's not about the bed," she says. "It's about being on the farm, gathering around the table, eating, and learning."

As we pack our things and get ready for the trip back to Boston, Dave stops by the kitchen to say goodbye. Giving Beth a hug, he says, "It feels like I've come home."

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