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PREMIERE ISSUE

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OLD SCHOOL, NEW SPA

New Marlborough couple transform an eyesore into a relaxation retreat BY BESS HOCHSTEIN

ALLISON GEMMEL was expecting two for her private morning yoga class, but Kipp was a no-show. Over dinner the night before at the Old Inn on the Green, proprietor Bradford Wagstaff had invited my husband to experience the beauty of hydraulics by trying out some of his big toys—an 11,000-pound crawler/excavator and a 100-horsepower crawler/loader. Kipp immediately expressed his deep appreciation of hydraulics and jumped at the chance to dig up boulders with Brad. The fact that it took him less than a second to choose boulder-relocation over yoga gave Wagstaff a new idea for an activity for companions of sybarites spending a day at his spa.

So while Kipp moved boulders around the grounds, Allison, a

dark-haired, bright-eyed yoga waif, was helping me move my energy and get grounded in the brand new spa's sun-filled yoga room. This was an ideal start to a day at the Mepal Manor and Spa.

Since opening the Old Inn as a B&B in 1979, Wagstaff and his wife, Leslie Miller, have capitalized on serendipity. And the addition of Mepal Spa to their hospitality empire—which over time has included the Thayer House and Gedney Farm—in New Marlborough, Massachusetts, is no exception.

The couple had already been considering creating a spa when the opportunity to buy Hildreth Bloodgood's stately stone manor from the Kolburne School suddenly arose in the summer of 2000.



HOT HAVEN

Bathers relish the rolling landscape while soaking discreetly in the hot tub at the brand-new Mepal Spa in New Marlborough, Massachusetts.

lifestyle

New faces transforming
old places

- 60 Stonover Farm
- 65 Mepal Spa
- 69 Red Lion's New Chef
- 72 Winter Kitchen
- 75 In the Galleries
- 79 Music for Living
- 80 The Right Stuff



The 1906 Manor, which had been the Marlboro Academy in a previous incarnation, boasted grand architecture as well as a set of original design plans that Wagstaff and Miller assiduously followed in their extensive, three-year renovation of the mansion into a twelve-room country inn.

But marring the property was an eyesore: a low-slung, 1970s steel structure that had served as classrooms and a gymnasium for the school. Wagstaff and Miller wondered if this was their spa. After all, with thirty weddings held each year at the related properties, they already had a built-in customer base. But it was difficult to imagine how this unsightly structure could house a haven

of health and beauty.

"It was such an ugly building," explains Wagstaff, who manages to appear both laid-back and restless at the same time. "Of course I wanted to start anew. But it had all the mechanicals, and my Yankee frugality wouldn't let me tear it down."

Their trusted architect, Bob Swain, who had transformed the twin barns of Gedney Farm into luxurious accommodations and a function hall, made the case for adaptive reuse. "Bob told me, 'I can't make it anything other than an unattractive, rectangular building. But we can landscape it to improve the view from the Manor, and we can transform it from the inside.'"

And so it is that stepping into Mepal Spa is a transporting experience. Visitors depart staid New England for a dose of high-impact, contemporary design, warmed and softened by bucolic views from the spa's many windows. Bold use of color, texture, light, and natural elements define transitions between each room in the 6,000-square-foot retreat.

The most striking vantage point is from the hot tub on a deck in the "Quiet Room." Due to its clever configuration, soakers can relish the rolling landscape without fear of being observed by passersby. Or they can relax on wavy, maple chaises before being whisked into one of four peaceful, cork-floored treatment rooms.



Spa Serenity: Behind the cold steel exterior of the former, 1970s-era school building, visitors to Mepal Spa relax in softened, candlelit spaces.

Here visitors can experience a selection of massages, facials, and body treatments, or continue into a funky, bright, white zone to choose from a full range of salon services. Mepal is the only spa in the region using Comfort Zone products, an Italian skin-, body- and hair-care line that melds botanical ingredients with high science to create effective, sensually-pleasing potions.

Most visitors won't see that Mepal remains a work-in-progress. Behind closed doors are 6,000 more square feet still awaiting transformation. Wagstaff and Miller intend to double the space of the spa, adding fitness facilities, exercise equipment, a basketball court, and flexible areas for one-on-one sessions of Pilates, Physioball, or other mind/body disciplines. Further down the road are plans for a pool. All will be executed with the same high-style flair and quality.



Rural Relaxation: A visitor to Mepal Spa relaxes in the lobby, unaware that behind closed doors another 6,000 square feet of space await renovation.

But even without these additional amenities, Mepal Spa has attracted fans among both visitors and locals. Since quietly opening in August, "The spa has been astonishingly busy," notes Wagstaff. "We're blown away by the reception the spa has had." Adds Miller, "We've gotten great local business, and we haven't even had our official opening yet. People have heard about us and they come by to see what we're doing."

Miller and Wagstaff hope to serve the local community. Non-guests can use the facilities for a fee and take yoga classes by reservation. When it's completed, community members will be able to purchase spa memberships.

By the time I met Kipp for lunch on the

sun-dappled terrace of Mepal Manor, I was glowing from my fifteen-step Hydramemory Facial at the soothing hands of Missy Ketchum, and anticipating the manicure, pedicure, and Skin Repair Body Treatment yet to come. Kipp had reluctantly relinquished boulder patrol for a massage at the spa, and he was glowing, too, but mostly from enjoyment of his earth-moving experience. It's clear that the restless mind of Brad Wagstaff is once again onto something big: heavy-machinery sessions for the spa-shy are now under serious consideration for programming at Mepal Spa. **Bl**

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