

The Inn Crowd



For these urban tastemakers turned countryside hoteliers, a new career in hospitality is more than a second act. It's a lifestyle upgrade.

by KEVIN WEST



FRANCINE ZASLOW; OPPOSITE: FRANK MUYTJENS

The restaurant at the Maker in Hudson, New York. *Opposite, from left:* The Inn at Kenmore Hall; the inn's owners, Frank Muytjens (*left*) and Scott Edward Cole.



Clockwise from left: The Maker's Alina Roytberg and Lev Glazman; the King Loft at the Maker; the dining room at South Harbor Inn.



Clockwise from left: The lounge at Tourists, in the Berkshires; one of Hotel Kinsley's historic buildings in Kingston, New York; a guest room at Hotel Kinsley.



She was an interior designer. He worked in television. They lived in New York City and shared an implausible daydream: Amanda Zaslow and Joe Moseley would become country innkeepers.

The wild notion was conceived on their 2005 honeymoon in Spain, when the newlyweds spent a few magical days at a humble posada where the chef-owner cooked for them with vegetables they'd helped gather from the garden. "It was so special," recalls Zaslow with emotion. "We had an epiphany: If we could do something to make people as happy as we felt right then, what could be better?" Like most dewy daydreams, however, theirs evaporated when they returned to their New York lives.

Cut to 2010. Instead of buying an overpriced apartment in Brooklyn, Zaslow and Moseley looked two hours north in the Hudson Valley town of Saugerties and purchased a modest 1920s Mediterranean-style house with a barn and enough land to encompass their forestalled but not forgotten dreams. In their mind's eye, they could already see a few guest rooms and an owners' apartment in the refurbished barn. She would design it and he would do the cooking.

The opening took nearly six years. The quick renovation became a demolish-and-rebuild saga worthy of a Netflix docu-series, but finally, on New Year's Eve 2016, the Villa at Saugerties (thevillaatsaugerties.com) welcomed its first eight guests—a full house. Zaslow has since regaled her visitors with stories that are equally harrowing and hilarious, like when Hurricane Irene struck and frogs came up through the barn's floorboards. Through thick and thin, Zaslow and Moseley stuck it out. They



had to. With no fallback plan, they had staked their future on being full-time, on-site, 24-hour innkeepers.

Has the life of a country hotelier been everything they dreamed it would be? "It is so much better than we expected," Zaslow says, with Moseley seconding the opinion. In fact, they wouldn't change a thing.

It turns out that Zaslow and Moseley aren't the only second-act innkeepers within driving distance of New York City.

Seemingly all of a sudden, otherwise rational people have decided it's a sensible choice to open a small hotel, inn, or B&B—the same way that burned-out professionals once fantasized about chucking their day jobs to open cozy little restaurants. For these next-generation hoteliers, the owner-operator lifestyle isn't a retirement project for the golden years but a mid-career course correction. Some, like Zaslow and Moseley, were successful in their previous careers but yearned to do something more meaningful. Others are serial entrepreneurs leveraging the insight and capital they earned in another industry. In every case, these newbies bring something fresh to the hospitality game, combining cosmopolitan sophistication with a small-town charm that city slickers find hard to resist. In the process, they have found a more fulfilling life. (Some have even turned a profit.)

An hour's drive northeast of Saugerties, in the Berkshires, former fashion designer Frank Muijtens and former restaurateur Scott Edward Cole stumbled upon their version of "the dream" in a stately 18th-century mansion. It was 2017, Muijtens had just left J. Crew, and the couple, on one of their many weekends upstate, discovered the Georgian estate on 20 private acres. It had great bones and an air of Yankee panache. They made a decision to start anew. Though updating the grand house's 1930s-era wiring, plumbing, and other "unglamorous stuff between the walls" cost significantly more than the purchase price, the couple thrived under the challenge, designing, renovating,

collecting furniture, gardening, and eventually opening the Inn at Kenmore Hall (theinnatkenmorehall.com) in 2018.

The inn is far from the Ye Olde style of a classic B&B. Its five rooms and neighboring cottage are decorated with Persian rugs, contemporary art, and antiques like velvet chaises. In the center hall, a begonia sprouts from a marble table. Guests come from as far away as Europe, and 98 percent of the time, the experience is perfect. (The other 2 percent includes the occasional guest who is "rattled" after a frantic drive up from New York City, as Muijtens tactfully puts it—and even then, after a soothing night's sleep in the country, "they come back to themselves.")

Muijtens insists he's well-suited to his new life—he's the temperamental opposite of John Cleese's put-upon hotel owner in the English sitcom *Fawlty Towers*. Surprising though it may seem to anyone who recoils from the thought of tending to the physical and emotional needs of the paying public, he and Cole are

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JESSICA ANTOLA; NICOLE FRANZEN (2). OPPOSITE: CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY THE MAKER; FRANCINE ZASLOW; COURTESY SOUTH HARBOR INN

typical of second-act hoteliers. They have embraced their place in the service sector, almost as if they had created an American version of *Downton Abbey* and cast themselves not as drawing-room aristocrats but as the domestic help.

“I feel giddy when I see people making use of all the things we put out for them,” Muytjens admits. “When they use the cocktail bar and light the fireplace, it makes the house come alive. It doesn’t feel like a hotel. It feels like someone’s home.” In fact, it is. It’s where Muytjens and Cole live, although their rooms are discreetly hidden from public view. “We live in the staff quarters,” Muytjens says with a chuckle.

With careers in luxury hospitality under their belts, Dan DeVito and Alex Azcona thought they knew what it would take to transition to being innkeepers. DeVito, currently head of residential operations for Mandarin Oriental, and Azcona, who previously managed housekeeping at the Conrad New York, opened the four-room South Harbor Inn (*southharborinn.com*) on Long Island’s North Fork last year—and quickly realized their backgrounds had only partially prepared them for the challenges of a more intimate guest experience.

“We thought we knew what we were in for,” says DeVito. The difference, he explains, is that as owner-operators they

feel compelled to customize everything. If someone has a birthday, Azcona gets busy in the kitchen baking treats. For a wine enthusiast, DeVito will arrange a tour of local wineries and call ahead to request that specific dishes be paired with each tasting. “Guests put their experience in your hands,” he explains. “All that detail takes time, energy, and effort. It’s what sets us apart.”

Surely a person’s career choice is influenced by psychological factors, but that seems doubly true of a profession in the service industry, where the goal is for your hard work to appear effortless so that someone else can enjoy the benefit. Ben Svenson—managing partner of the team behind *Tourists* (*touristswelcome.com*), a midcentury roadside inn in North Adams, Massachusetts—has a simpler explanation for why he’s enjoying his new life in the hospitality trenches: “A hotel is a smile factory,” he says unironically. “Everybody goes there to have their special weekend.” And who wouldn’t want to be part of that?

Tourists was supposed to be a hobby. It came about after Svenson met John Stirratt, bassist for the band Wilco and cofounder of the Solid Sound music festival at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams. The two vibed, and eventually formed a small group of partners—including Scott Stedman, cofounder of the now-defunct *Brooklyn Magazine*, and Eric Kerns, cofounder of Bright Ideas Brewery—to freshen up the forlorn 16-room property with a Brooklyn-meets-Marfa makeover. The plan was to slap up some plywood and fresh paint for a low-cost, high-impact relaunch. Stirratt remembers thinking they could fund it out of their own pockets.

“It was a restaurant-size investment,” he says, citing inspirations such as San Francisco’s Phoenix (the original rock-and-roll no-tell motel) and Liz Lambert’s paradigm-shifting Hotel San José in Austin. “It just seemed possible to do it with friends.” In time, the modest vision ballooned into a full-blown New England summertime resort on nearly 70 acres. Svenson, who planned to be on site for only a year, has since permanently moved his family to the Berkshires and funnels 90 percent of his time into the project. “I kind of fell into a rabbit hole,” he concedes without a hint of regret about his new small-town life.

Architect and restaurateur Taavo Somer sees the flight of the urban refugee as a full-on demographic trend. The founder of Freemans—the Manhattan restaurant that presaged the hipster era’s taxidermy-and-plaid aesthetic in 2004—has since turned his attention upstate to the Hotel Kinsley (*hotelkinsley.com*), in the Hudson Valley town of Kingston. For Somer, the project isn’t a second act so much as an answer to a growing movement. “In a way, the customers were here before the product,” he says, referencing what he calls “a decentralization of where cool people need to live”—the city-to-town trajectory that has resulted from a digital world where almost everything is a click away and remote work environments are more common than ever.

Right: Amanda Zaslow and Joe Moseley, owners of the Villa at Saugerties. Below: The pond and barn at the inn.



Somer was lured to Kingston by New York City real estate developer Charles Blachman, who had been observing the same phenomenon from his vacation home in the Catskills. Blachman sensed that the Hudson Valley was on the rise, with its farmers’ markets, nose-to-tail butcher shops, vinyl-record emporiums, and scads of self-serious neo-traditionalist craftspeople making pottery and woodwork. In other words, the hipsters Somer had anticipated years earlier with Freemans had migrated—and they needed a place to gather. Blachman snapped up properties in Kingston’s historic Stockade District, then brought Somer in to help turn them into a small-town version of an Ace Hotel, with a restaurant and plans for 43 rooms spread over four buildings.

The Hudson Valley has also drawn the entrepreneurs behind a worldwide luxury skincare brand. Lev Glazman and Alina Roytberg, the founders of Fresh, first dipped their toes into the hospitality pool in 2016 when they opened their small bakery, the Bartlett House, in the town of Ghent. This year the partners, along with Damien Janowicz (formerly of the Kennebunkport Resort Collection), will become first-time

hoteliers when they unveil the Maker (*themaker.com*) in ever-gentrifying Hudson.

Inspired by the area’s artisans (hence the name), the hotel combines three neighboring structures—a Greek Revival building from the 1840s and a Georgian mansion and carriage house from the 1890s—and has just 11 rooms. Each is individually decorated in the taste of rich bohemians who have circled the world twice. Glazman and Roytberg insist their latest project isn’t a B&B, but rather a fully equipped “micro-hotel” with a restaurant, a café, and 24-hour room service. Inspired by Italy’s Villa Feltrinelli and other idiosyncratic hostelries the duo has frequented in their own travels, the Maker is an antidote to the trends that make larger hotel brands, in their opinion, boring. Glazman and Roytberg see the Maker as a tiny but mighty disruptor—an acorn that may one day grow into a thriving brand.

In simpler terms, their next act is a passion project. “We have to be passionate,” Roytberg says, reciting the essential lesson the duo carried from their first career to their second. “It’s the key to the world we create.” ☞