

A Thanksgiving
to Remember | Small-Town
Holiday Spirit | Ideal Slopes
for Every Skier

YANKEE

FALL / WINTER 2018

A
SPECIAL
EDITION

Our Vermont

*Yankee's favorite
stories of the people,
places, and
traditions that
make southern
Vermont
so original.*



The Sweet Passage of Seasons

Whenever people write us at *Yankee* to ask where they should go when they visit Vermont, I tell them about the more than 8,500 miles of dirt roads running past woods and pastures and stone walls in the Green Mountain State. Drive slow, windows down, I tell them. Wild turkeys will be loitering in the bushes. Be alert for the flick of a deer's white tail. Try to get lost. The roads will always lead somewhere special.

After the foliage tourists depart, leaves drift down from branches, leaving the trees to stand bare against the coming cold. Vermonters call this time "stick season," and with it comes a steady progression of chores to be completed before the first snow—woodpiles stacked, root crops stored in cellars, shelters for animals made tight. With these essentials done, the family season of Thanksgiving to Christmas slides into view. And anywhere in the country, when people dream of the bucolic holidays they wish they had known, here is what they might imagine:

Early last December I came to Weston for its annual town Christmas celebration. I took a horse-drawn wagon ride. I saw children run across the town green with friends. I watched as a Vermont couple who have portrayed Santa and Mrs. Claus for many years brought the sparkle of imagination to several hundred youngsters. In a country church I listened to carols and hymns, with locals and visitors joining their voices. Right before dark, the lights on the village Christmas tree blazed into life, and it felt as if Norman Rockwell, who once spent more than a decade painting his neighbors' portraits in a village not too far from here, could have set this whole thing up.

The snow falls early and fast in southern Vermont, so locals have their skis and snowboards tuned and snowshoes ready by December. We know the seasons will always change—yet when they do, we talk about it as if we have stepped into a new and unexpected world. These seasons are why we live here. They remain at the heart of *Yankee*. They connect us in this part of the country, all of us, ever on alert to see what the next day may hold.

Mel Allen

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YANKEE

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On the cover: Sleigh riding in Rockingham, Vermont. Photograph courtesy of The Vermont Country Store.

Contents



What's almost as much fun as a classic Vermont sleigh ride? Getting to meet some of the horsepower. *Story, p. 34.*

First Light

3 Stick Season

A meditation on the transition between fall and winter, which has its own sights and sounds ... and its own mystery.

Holiday Joys

4 Talking Turkey

Yankee's picks for an easy-to-make Thanksgiving feast.

10 The Ultimate Thanksgiving Cheat Sheet

Senior food editor Amy Traverso solves your holiday cooking conundrums.

11 Christmas in Weston

A small-town celebration tugs at memories and creates new ones.

17 O Little Towns of Vermont

Need a holiday getaway? Here's where to bask in the spirit of the season.

22 The Big Question

We ask Christmas tree grower Steve Moffatt: How can you tell if it's a premium tree? **Plus:** A roundup of southern Vermont cut-your-own tree farms.

Winter Fun

25 Ski Cozy

Take a sleigh to the slopes and rediscover the simple joys of small mountains and intimate inns.

29 Hitting the Heights

At southern Vermont's big-name ski areas, thrill seekers find what they're looking for.

32 In Praise of Jack Jumping

Celebrating a timeless Vermont tradition with the power to make anyone feel like a kid again.

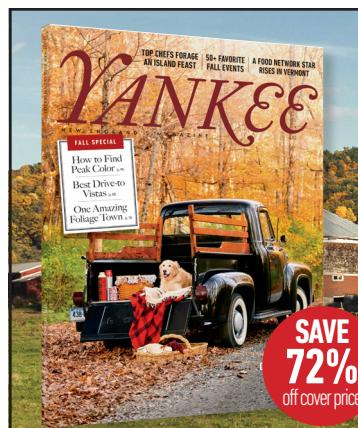
34 A Child's First Sleigh Ride

A classic winter pastime helps a mother and daughter make a lifelong memory.

Made in Vermont

35 Tough Enough

Meet the Vermont sock maker who believes the way to bring back local manufacturing is to make the best product in the world.



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Stick Season

The transition between fall and winter has its own sights and sounds, and its own mystery.

Sometime on the chilly end of the fall, say a week or so either side of Halloween, a dry, pensive little segment of the year interposes itself between autumn and winter, a brown patch the color of a fox: stick season. It's the period when all the leaves that are going to fall have fallen but before they have disappeared. In that stretch of time—a week or two, not more—the country is visited with a flood, a tidal wave of dead leaves.

Not along the highways, where trees are few, but beside the lesser roads and lanes, and in the woods, the fallen leaves lie deep. They blanket the ground. They advance upon the countryside irresistibly, like high water. The leaves fill the hollows, drift knee-deep against the stone walls, overflow the roadside ditches. They heap up behind stumps and fallen trees, then bury them.

In this interval that belongs to the fallen leaves, leaves by ones and twos get into odd places, like mice or lost sparrows. Leaves are found in the parlor; perhaps they blew down the chimney. They fill the corners of the woodshed and float on the coffee left in cups on the porch.

There is a hard new light in the woods when the leaves are gone, like the unexpected light that comes into a house whose roof has been blown off. The down leaves also have a voice. Stirred by the wind or by your passage through them, they protest with a shuffling rattle. On a damp day, especially, the fallen leaves fill the air with a peculiar smell, a little like a spice you seldom have a use for: saffron or cardamom.

The brown floor of the woods, inundated with down leaves, lies beneath the gray and white of the bare trees above and gives the wooded hillsides seen from a distance the dun color of a landscape on which snow will

soon be falling. Stick season is a transition, in part. It takes the year into winter, but it is also a season by itself, a season in miniature.

What is a season, after all? Except in the strictest calendrical sense, in which they are quarters of the year bound by the fixed dates of the equinoxes and solstices, the seasons would seem to be variable and subject to interpretation. Off the calendar, then, a season is a stretch of time with a beginning and an end, both indistinct, that has

its characteristic events and tasks and that has very often something to do with vegetation. So we have lilac time, maple sugar time, apple blossom time, Indian summer, mud time—seasons that are known to all, calling up familiar responses that we may hardly be aware of.

Stick season is that kind of little season. You won't see it begin. The bright leaves start to fall heavily—when?—sometime after Columbus

Day. The hard frosts arrive. Wild geese in their clamorous echelons pass overhead all day long—and then do not. The World Series comes and goes. Then stick season is over. You won't see it end. The back roads are no longer full of leaves; the lawns no longer covered with them.

Where do the leaves go? They don't go back where they came from, like the floodwaters they resemble. They can't all be burned, or raked, or stuffed into those clever orange bags made to look like enormous pumpkins. They blow into the woods and there they darken. The cold rains fall on them and they darken more. Then the snow covers them over for good, and they are gone for another year. Stick season is not a beautiful season. Certainly it's not a famous one. It has neither press nor poet, but still it has its friends. —*Castle Freeman Jr.*





Talking Turkey

Yankee's picks for an easy-to-make Thanksgiving feast.

To determine what a traditional Thanksgiving spread ought to include, we took an informal and unscientific poll among friends and colleagues. Just about everyone agreed on a juicy turkey with crisp brown skin and stuffing, of course (although one friend claimed that a tough, dry bird was part of his holiday since childhood, so he purposely overcooks his).

With the exception of mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce, though, the "must-haves" for side dishes varied, from green bean casserole to peas and carrots to candied yams with marshmallows. Of course, everyone wanted a delicious and special feast, but not a back-breaker—they wanted time to spend with family and friends. With that in mind, we put together a collection of Thanksgiving flavors that aren't too fussy while still being wonderfully tasty. —Annie B. Copps and Amy Traverso

Roast Turkey with Cornbread-Sausage Stuffing and Gilet Gravy

If you'd rather cook your stuffing separately (which we actually prefer), butter a casserole pan and fill it with stuffing. Cover with foil, and bake with the turkey 1 hour.

- 4 sausages (4-inch links; turkey, sweet, or hot)
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil or unsalted butter
- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 carrots, diced
- 2 celery ribs, diced
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh sage
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- 6 cups day-old cornbread, cut into 1-inch cubes (one 9x9-inch pan recipe)
- 1 cup turkey or chicken stock
- 1 14-pound brined turkey, neck and giblets removed (reserve for gravy)

First, make the stuffing. In a medium sauté pan over medium heat, cook sausages, breaking them apart into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces as they cook. Drain and discard rendered oil and remove sausages to a plate. Wipe pan clean and heat oil or butter over medium setting. Add onion, carrots, and celery and cook about 10 minutes or until softened. Transfer to a large mixing bowl. Add herbs, cornbread, and stock. Cool to room temperature.

Next, roast the turkey. Heat oven to 425°. Place turkey on a roasting rack in a large roasting pan. Fill turkey with stuffing. Tie legs together with butcher's twine. Tent turkey breast with foil. Roast 30 minutes. Turn oven temperature down to 350° and roast 1½ hours. Remove foil and roast 30 minutes. Begin checking internal temperature at the thigh and cook to 165° (usually about 10–20 minutes longer). Remove from oven and tent with foil. Let rest 20 minutes before carving. *Yields 8 servings.*

GIBLET GRAVY

Giblets are the turkey's neck, heart, gizzard, and liver, which are usually found tucked inside the cavity. Giblets make a terrific gravy, but we don't include the liver (it adds a bitter flavor, so save it in the freezer for another use).

- Reserved turkey giblets (except liver)
- 4 cups chicken or turkey stock
- 1 onion, roughly chopped
- 1 carrot, roughly chopped
- 1 celery rib, roughly chopped
- 1 tablespoon Wondra flour (or other instant flour)
- Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

In a medium saucepan, combine giblets, stock, and vegetables. Bring to a boil, then lower to a simmer and cook until reduced by half. Strain and discard solids. In a small bowl, whisk together flour and 4 tablespoons hot broth. Then slowly whisk mixture back into the main portion of hot broth and cook about 5 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper.





Chai-Spiced Orange-Cranberry Sauce

A gentle hint of chai tea lends warm spice flavors to this sweetly aromatic, simple sauce. Pay close attention to the timing, though: Too much steeping will bring out the tea's bitter notes.

2 1/4 cups granulated sugar
5 bags black chai tea
8 cups fresh or frozen cranberries (about 2 1/2 bags)
1/2 cup fresh orange juice

In a 4-quart pot over high heat, combine 1½ cups water and sugar. Cover and bring to a boil; then reduce heat to medium-low and add tea bags. Simmer exactly 2 minutes; then remove tea bags with a slotted spoon.

Add cranberries and increase heat to medium-high. Simmer, stirring often, until cranberries soften, splitting their skins, and sauce thickens a bit, 10 to 15 minutes.

Remove from heat, and stir in orange juice. Let cool to room temperature before serving (the sauce will thicken further as it cools). Or cover and refrigerate up to five days. *Yields 6 cups.*



Herbed Mashed Potatoes

The secret of this recipe is to dry the potatoes fully and use a ricer or food mill. If you don't have one yet, it's well worth the short money you'll invest.

- 4 medium russet potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch chunks**
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- 4 garlic cloves, minced**
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary**
- 1 tablespoon picked fresh thyme leaves**
- 1 cup heavy cream**
- Kosher or sea salt**

Place potatoes in a large pot and cover with 3 inches cold water. Raise heat to high and boil until tender, about 10 minutes. Drain well. Pass through a ricer or food mill into a medium bowl.

In a separate small saucepan, melt butter and cook garlic gently until fragrant; don't brown it. Add herbs and stir well. Remove from heat and let rest 5 minutes. Fold into potatoes. Add cream and fold gently. Season to taste with salt. *Yields 8 servings.*

Maple Walnut Acorn Squash

Roast these delicious vegetables ahead of time, then finish them under the oven broiler while your turkey rests before slicing.

- 2 acorn squash, quartered, seeds removed**
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil**
- Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground black pepper**
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- 3 tablespoons maple syrup**
- 3 tablespoons chopped walnuts**

Heat oven to 400°. Place squash, skin side down, on a rimmed baking sheet lined with foil. Drizzle with oil and season with salt and pepper. Roast until tender, about 30 minutes.

In a small saucepan, melt butter and maple syrup. Turn oven to broil. Brush squashes with butter mixture and place a few walnuts on top. Place under broiler until deeply browned, about 2 minutes. *Yields 8 servings.*

Bourbon Walnut Pecan Pie

Fragrant and nutty, this bourbon walnut pecan pie is just as tasty as it is beautiful.

FOR THE CRUST

- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 9 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into small cubes and chilled
- 3 tablespoons ice water
- 2 tablespoons vodka

FOR THE FILLING

- 3 large eggs
- 1 stick unsalted butter, melted
- ½ cup dark corn syrup
- ½ cup light corn syrup
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 3 tablespoons bourbon
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 1 cup chopped pecans
- ½ cup chopped walnuts

First, make the crust: In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour and salt. Sprinkle the butter over the flour mixture. Use a pastry cutter to break the butter into smaller pieces, then use your fingers to smear the butter into the flour. Stop when the mixture looks like cornmeal, with pea-size bits of butter remaining.

Sprinkle the ice water and vodka over the mixture and stir with a fork until the dough comes together. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured counter, knead once or twice to form a ball, then press the ball into a disk, wrap in plastic wrap, and refrigerate at least 30 minutes and up to two days.

Preheat oven to 400° and set a rack to the lower position. Unwrap the dough and place it in the center of a large sheet of parchment paper. Cover with a second piece of parchment. Roll out to a 12-inch circle. Peel off the top sheet of parchment paper and transfer dough, peeled side down, into a 9-inch pie plate, pressing it into the sides. Peel off the remaining parchment and fold under and crimp the edges. Line dough with a piece of parchment paper or large coffee filter and fill with beans. Set the pie plate on a baking sheet and transfer to the oven. Bake for 10 minutes, then take the crust from the oven, remove the beans and liner, and reduce oven temperature to 325°. Set crust aside.

Then, make the filling: In a large bowl, whisk together the eggs, butter, corn syrups, sugar, bourbon, and salt until smooth. Spread the nuts in an even layer in the bottom of the prepared crust, then pour the egg mixture over the top. Set the pie on the baking sheet and bake until set, 30 to 40 minutes. *Yields 8 servings.*



MARK FLEMING

THE ULTIMATE Thanksgiving Cheat Sheet

It's the day before the Big Day, and you may have some questions about how to tackle the 14-pound bird that's currently brining or curing or defrosting or simply waiting in your refrigerator. Luckily, food editor Amy Traverso is ready with some expert answers.

What size turkey should I buy?

Figuring on 1 1/4 pound per person will get you enough meat for the meal, with leftovers.

How long will it take to thaw in the refrigerator?

Estimate 24 hours for every 5 pounds, so two days for a 10-pounder, three days for a 15-pounder, etc.

Help! It's Wednesday, I just bought my bird, and it's still frozen!

Leave the turkey in its wrapper and put in a large container (a lobster pot is good). Fill the container with cold tap water and let it sit for 30 minutes. Dump out the water and refill. Let it sit another 30 minutes. Repeat until the turkey is thawed, then roast immediately or transfer to the refrigerator. It'll still take about 30 minutes per pound (or six hours for a 12-pound bird), but it's faster than the refrigerator method and, most importantly, it's safe.

Can I brine or dry-cure my turkey while it defrosts in the refrigerator?

Yes. Isn't that great? You're multi-multitasking. Just use a lighter brine solution (about 1/2 cup kosher salt per gallon of water, plus sugar and spices). If you're dry-curing, use the standard recipe.

How cold does my turkey need to stay while brining?

Below 40°F.

Should I truss?

No. Well, OK, if you really like the look of a trussed turkey, you're welcome to tuck the wing tips under the breast and tie the legs together. But the legs will cook faster if you just leave them alone, and this helps ensure that the breast meat won't get overcooked while you're waiting for the legs to catch up.

How do I get crispy skin?

At least six hours before roasting, let the bird sit, uncovered, in your refrigerator. This dries the skin, which causes it to crisp up in the oven.

What about stuffing the bird?

I don't. In order for stuffing to be safe to consume, it must reach 165°. But stuffing a bird slows down the cooking, which increases the chances the breast will dry out. I cook mine in a casserole dish.

But I love the way the stuffing tastes when it cooks in the turkey!

I sympathize—but there is a middle path, courtesy of Melissa Clark of *The New York Times*: Most turkeys come with a flap of skin from the neck. Normally, you cut it off and discard it, but you can use it to flavor your dressing. Just chop up the skin and scatter it over the dressing before you put the dish in the oven. As it cooks, the fat and juices will drip into the stuffing, giving it delicious flavor. And when it comes out, you'll have turkey cracklings to enjoy.

What about basting?

Don't bother. It doesn't add flavor, and it makes the skin flabby.

What temperature should I use?

Most cooks swear by a low-and-slow approach, starting at 450° but then dropping the temperature to 325° after 30 minutes. You'll need to estimate 12 to 15 minutes per pound, including that initial 30-minute blast of heat. What really matters the most is that you pay close attention to the temperature of the meat, and take the bird out as soon as it's ready.

When is it ready?

When an instant-read thermometer inserted into the breast (all the way to the bone) reaches 160°. You can also measure the thigh, inserted to the thickest part but not touching the bone—it should read 165°.



Do I really need to let the turkey rest after it comes out of the oven?

YES. This is essential for juicy meat. Let the turkey sit, tented with foil, for at least 30 minutes.

Amy Traverso is *Yankee's* senior food editor and cohost of our TV show, *Weekends with Yankee* (weekendswithyankee.com).



Christmas in Weston

*A small-town celebration tugs at memories
and creates new ones.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMIE WALTER



Sometimes the gifts we remember most come from the simplest of places: the heart. Weston, Vermont, a pretty village with a river flowing through it, has known this for a long time. Weston is famous for its professional theater, and it is unlikely that there is more talent seen onstage in a town of fewer than 600 anywhere in the country.

Here, on the first Saturday of December, when Weston greets the yuletide season with a celebration called Christmas in Weston, the holiday spirit is distilled to its essence of goodwill, far from the furious pulse of packed malls. Marshmallows roast over an open fire on the village green. There's a cookout, and the steady rhythm of draft horses pulling wagons, and a petting farm snuggled into a barn, a gingerbread contest, a magic show, caroling, visits to historic museums, a tree lighting. And, of course, Santa.

Before Santa and Mrs. Claus arrive, I stop at the tidy post office and meet Melvin Twitchell. This is his 33rd year as postmaster in southern Vermont, and he's been in Weston since 2011. Laughing lightly, he tells me that the postman who delivers the mail has a hole in his muffer, and the 200 or so families on his rural route don't want him to fix it. "They want to know when he's on his

Peter Hudkins and his Suffolk Punch draft horses, Sarah and Betsy, clip-clop past the festive facade of The Vermont Country Store during the Christmas in Weston celebration.

way," he says. A woman comes in and hands Melvin a brown paper bag. He smiles. Inside sits a pear the size of a softball. "She just came back from California," he explains. "Merry Christmas," she calls out as she leaves. "This is my world," he says.

I stroll to the green, rimmed by its vintage iron fence. A Christmas tree festooned with unlit lights stands inside the gazebo; at dusk, the day will end with townspeople pressing close, expectant. The story goes that this is the nation's only town common not owned by a town but by a group of nine women, who keep it trim and neat. The green was once part of the homestead of Captain Oliver Farrar, who in 1797 built a tavern here (now a museum), and his heirs left the land to be kept in perpetuity by town trustees, who since 1886 have always been women.

By 9:30 a.m., Jonathan Bliss, pastor of the Old Parish Church, is coaxing flames to life in a fire pit. Every

1780

THE WESTON
MILL · MUSEUM

A corn-grinding demonstration
(and the warmth of a potbellied
stove) beckons visitors to the
Weston Mill Museum.





At the heart of Christmas in Weston is the town green, where friends and family congregate and the smell of roasting marshmallows fills the air.

year, he says, Christmas in Weston raises money for a local charity; this year it is Just Neighbors of Vermont, which helps people here and in surrounding communities weather temporary hardships and emergencies.

At 10, a horse-drawn wagon clops by the green, its bells ringing, and turns in to a lane by The Vermont Country Store. Two wagons sponsored by the store will trek by all day (and pedestrians will learn to keep their eyes on the ground along the wagon route).

I climb aboard behind Peter Hudkins's team. His wagon is pulled by Sarah and Betsy, Suffolk Punch draft horses, a heritage breed with only about 1,500 remaining in the world. They are handsome veterans, aged 19 and 14, and they wait patiently in the cool damp for the wagon to fill. Then they head north along the road to Walker Farm.

Sitting beside me is a young couple from New York. He says he is "in film" and she is an actress. They stumbled upon Christmas in Weston last year, snow fell, and "it felt magical," he says—so here they are again. They remembered drinking mulled cider and "the best

grilled cheese ever" at the Bryant House Restaurant.

After we return, Santa arrives on a blaring fire engine. He dismounts and, accompanied by Mrs. Claus, threads his way past waiting families inside The Vermont Country Store, where he settles into a deep, cozy chair. A young woman is first in line. She has come from Massachusetts with her three children, who range from 10 months to 5 years old. The two oldest climb onto Santa's lap. "Oh, you have the devil in your eyes," Santa says to one. "You wish real, real hard, and I'll try and get my elves working."

Santa's beard is real, as is his ease with kids, and he has been doing this for 40 years. As each child climbs off Santa's lap, Mrs. Claus hands down a candy cane. I ask how he knows how to respond when an all-trusting child asks for a gift. "I never promise," Santa says. "But I watch the parents to see."

The Vermont Country Store's front-door bell rings all day long, as it has for decades. What Vrest Orton and his wife, Mildred, created here was an idiosyncratic and whimsical shopping experience. They understood

Holiday Joys

Scenes from Christmas in Weston, including Santa Claus meeting a grinning young fan who's clearly on his "Nice" list (below right) as her family looks on.





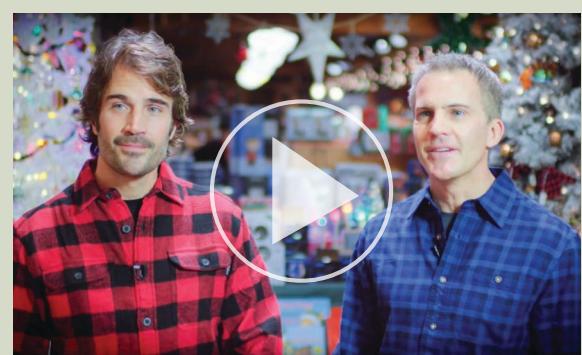
the powerful tug of memory, the appeal of nostalgia to our imagination, and they packaged that experience not only on store shelves but also in catalogs that found their way around the world. Hang out for a few moments by the glass jars full of penny candy, and you'll hear, as I did, someone describe seeing striped gum and candy straws, and how suddenly 45 years melted away and he's a child again.

With the afternoon winding down, I walk to the Church on the Hill for carol singing. A woman named Pat Connelly leads the singing while playing guitar. Her voice is easy to listen to, and songs fill the room. "I can hear your spirits in your voices," she says. I see the young couple from New York joining in.

At dusk, seemingly everyone in Weston is gathered around the gazebo. Santa and his missus walk by. The tree blazes to life, a shared amen on the day.

As I drive away, I think of when I stopped earlier at the Mill Museum and chatted with Bob Brandt, president of the Weston Historical Society. "I am a historian of a town where nothing ever happened," he told me. Nothing but songs in a church, smoke rising from fire pits, a store with bells, children nestled in their parents' arms. I take his words as a promise. —*Mel Allen*

Santa and Mrs. Claus and their friends wave to the crowd as they pull into town.



A Tale of Tradition

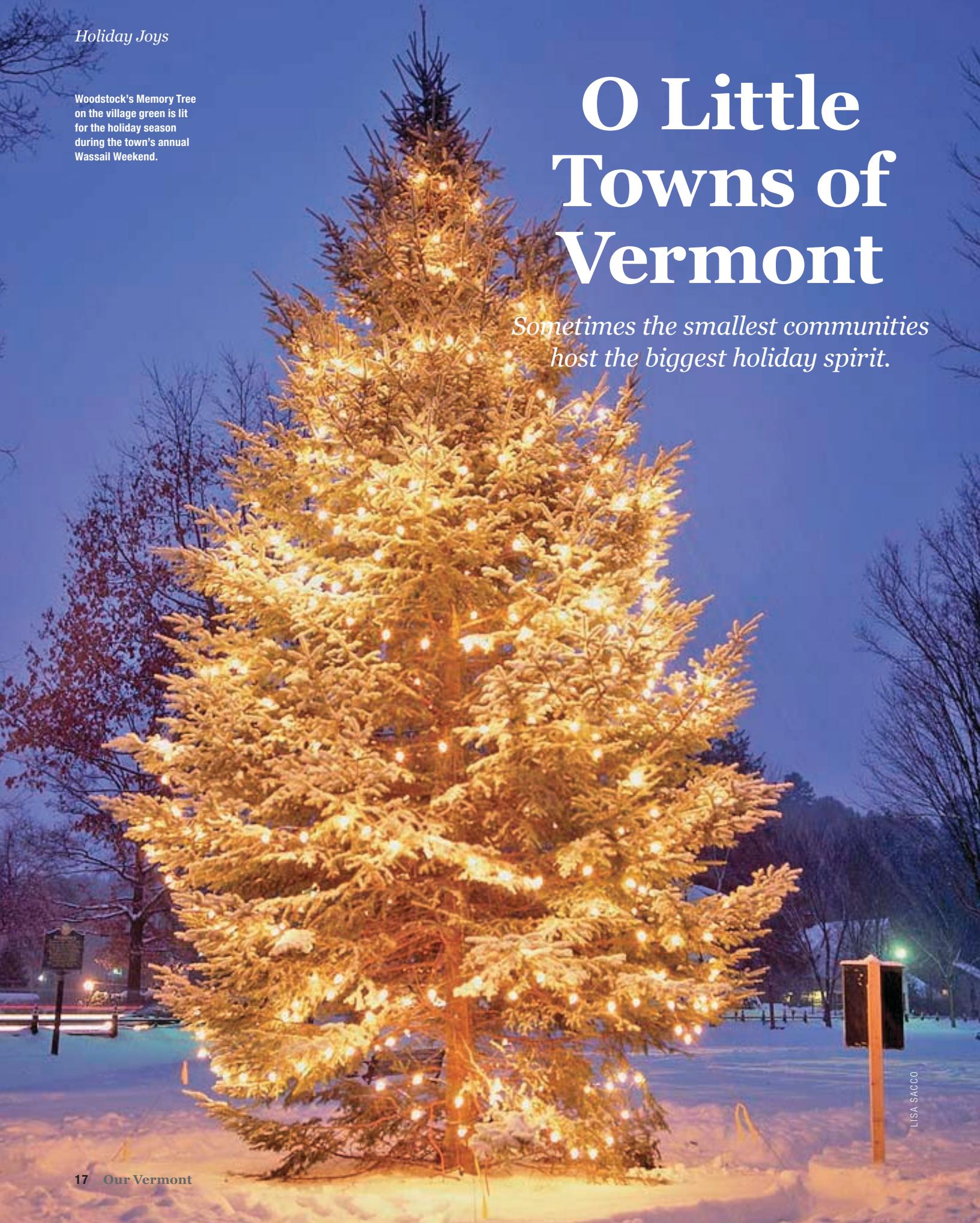
Video Extra: The Vermont Country Store proprietors Eliot and Cabot Orton join Weston residents in sharing the story of Christmas in their town.

Holiday Joys

Woodstock's Memory Tree
on the village green is lit
for the holiday season
during the town's annual
Wassail Weekend.

O Little Towns of Vermont

*Sometimes the smallest communities
host the biggest holiday spirit.*



LISA SACCO



In the early December dusk, carolers gather around the lighted tree and gazebo on the green in Chester, Vermont. The sky glows, but the air is frigid, and after the final “Silent Night,” everyone heads to the Fullerton Inn for cocoa. Earlier on this same afternoon in Woodstock, 25 miles north, a top-hatted Father Christmas, costumed choristers, and hundreds of carolers sang around a blazing Yule log on the town’s green. The event, one of many during the annual Wassail Weekend, capped a parade of elaborately dressed celebrants on horseback and in carriages. In Grafton, seven wooded miles south of Chester, the village is dressed sumptuously for the season, decked with 250 wreaths and 3,000 yards of roping. Different as these communities are, all three towns offer real season’s greetings, about as far from hectic mall traffic as you can get.

Chester

In winter, cars heading north to Okemo Mountain stream past Chester (population about 3,000). Few stop. If they did, they’d likely discover why Chester residents call their town “the Vermont you’ve been hoping to find.”

Chester consists of three villages, with its core along the stretch of Main Street, flanked on one side by its



FROM TOP: The Woodstock Elementary School chorus sings noels outside the town library; the Fullerton Inn has long been a landmark on Chester’s village green.

mellow brick Academy building and graveyard, and on the other side by the green, backed by a line of shops, restaurants, a church, a Masonic hall, and the inn. Folks who fork north onto Route 103 will find Chester Depot, a late-19th-century village centered around a brick railroad station and the town’s terrific general

Holiday Joys

Built by George Barrett in 1841, the Grafton Village Store was recently revived and renamed MKT: Grafton.



LISA SACCÓ

store, **Lisai's Chester Market**. Route 103 doglegs northwest at Stone Village (formerly North Chester), a striking double line of early-19th-century houses, all built from locally quarried granite. In the middle of the village an "Open" flag is usually out, marking the home of **Bonnie's Bundles Dolls**.

"I want to meet the people who buy my dolls," explains Bonnie Watters, who welcomes visitors into her parlor to inspect dozens of one-of-a-kind cloth dolls.

Nearby, the watercolor artist Jeanne Carbonetti greets visitors in the many-windowed **Crow Hill Gallery**, which she and her husband designed and built on a rise off above the meadows. It's an ideal setting for her richly colored paintings.

For many residents and visitors, **Phoenix Books Misty Valley**, on the green, is the heart of Chester. This independent bookseller offers frequent author readings and hosts a "New Voices" weekend in January that features first-time novelists. It's also a place to find information on local activities and a trail map to the town's hiking/snowshoeing trail.

Grafton

Arriving in Grafton (population roughly 670) during snow season is like entering a Christmas card. Although it's an easy drive to several ski resorts, Grafton on a wintry night seems a long way from anywhere. But serious cross-country skiers know Grafton. The 15-kilometer trail network at **Grafton Trails & Outdoor Center**



The Grafton Inn has been hosting weary travelers since 1801, including Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ulysses S. Grant.

is meticulously groomed. Trails meander off from the warming hut, out over meadows, and up into the woods on Bear Hill, where there's plenty more back-country skiing opportunities.

Grafton's attractiveness owes as much to the Windham Foundation as it does to nature. The organization bought up most of the central village, buried the power lines, revived the general store, and tackled renovations on the imposing three-story Old Tavern, now the **Grafton Inn**.

The holidays are a busy time at the **Grafton Village Cheese factory**, producing some of Vermont's best prize-winning cheddars. Visitors are welcome to learn how 6,000 to 10,000 gallons of buttery milk predominantly

Holiday Joys



A merry group enjoys a sleigh ride across the fields at the Billings Farm & Museum in Woodstock.

from Jersey cows are processed daily, from cutting the curd to waxing the wheels and blocks of cheese.

Within its few streets, Grafton offers a surprising amount to savor, especially once you adjust to its pace. Step into the vintage 1811 **Butterfield House**, now home to the town library; stop by the **Nature Museum** and be amazed by the extent of its exhibits, both interactive and stuffed; and don't miss the **Jud Hartmann Gallery**, where you'll find yourself in the midst of lifelike statues of Iroquoian and Algonkian warriors and chiefs.

Woodstock

"Summer people" began arriving in Woodstock (population about 3,000) in 1875 with the completion of a railroad trestle and spur line from White River Junction over Quechee Gorge. The town's year-round resort status was assured in 1892 with the opening of the lavish Woodstock Inn, which drew guests from New York and Boston—even in winter for snowshoeing and skating.

Today, Woodstock is indeed most welcoming in winter. Alpine skiers have long known that **Suicide Six** (in nearby South Pomfret) is far gentler than its rugged name, and cross-country enthusiasts head to the beautifully groomed 1880s carriage roads climbing to the summit of Mount Tom. Across town, more extensive trails radiate from the **Tubbs Snowshoe & Nordic Adventure Center** and loop up into the woods on Mount Peg.

And then there's the village itself. Each of its more than a dozen inns has its own story—not the least of which the **Woodstock Inn & Resort**, a major focal

point of the town. Central and Elm streets showcase some of Vermont's best artists and craftspeople and are home to venerable institutions such as **F.H. Gillingham & Sons** general store; **Woodstock Pharmacy**, with its basement trove of educational toys; and **The Prince and the Pauper** restaurant, featuring chef Charles Dziedziech's globally influenced cuisine.

This year, December 7–9 marks the 34th annual **Wassail Weekend**, Vermont's most elaborate winter celebration, combining outdoor spectacle, indoor performances, and community events at which visitors feel genuinely welcome. And throughout the holiday season, the Rotary Club's Christmas star, with its 100 bulbs, beams down from Mount Tom on what remains, especially when the cold and snow settle in, a little Vermont town. —*Christina Tree*

Online Resources

Chester (meetchestervermont.com)

Find handy downloadable maps for trail hikes and town walking tours; information on shopping, dining, and lodging; a community calendar; and links to local resources.

Grafton (graftonvermont.org)

All the don't-miss attractions and shops are highlighted on a one-page town map as well as in website listings, nearly all of which include a preview photo.

Woodstock (woodstockvt.com)

The town's official visitor information portal is robust with suggestions for things to do—from arts and culture to health and wellness—and places to go during your stay.

The Big Question

*We ask Vermont Christmas tree farmer Steve Moffatt:
How can you tell if it's a premium tree?*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY COREY HENDRICKSON

At his tree farm in Craftsbury, Vermont, Steve Moffatt surveys his evergreen kingdom.





Steve with his father, Jim, who established the tree business on what was then the family's dairy farm.

Steve Moffatt and his family live inside an orderly forest. Moffatt is a third-generation tree farmer in Craftsbury, Vermont. What began as his grandfather's sideline to dairy farming—cutting wild conifers in old cow pastures—became his father's full-time tree farm. Now Moffatt manages 100,000 Christmas trees on parcels of land spread out across several towns. On a crisp December day, we took a tour with Moffatt of his property and trees; here's what we heard. —*Julia Shipley*

“When I first started, we didn’t inventory or grade. We’d go cut trees and then realize, *Oops, we got to go cut some more*. Now everything’s deliberate: I’ll go out and get 220 premium 5-to-6-footers and 230 premium 7-to-8-footers, and when I get done I’ll know exactly what I’ve got.”

—
“When I took over the business from my father, the first thing I did was change the color of the ribbons we use to flag the trees. I’m colorblind, so I cannot see a red ribbon on a green tree. My school reports always said, ‘Steve needs to learn his colors.’ Now I use the blue ribbon for flagging premiums.”

—
“What a lot of people don’t realize is that June sets the pace for Christmas, grade-wise—it’s when all things go right or wrong. Native balsams have their bud break around Memorial Day. We selected these trees because their buds break two weeks later, giving them a better chance of surviving frost, insects, disease. We like to shear trees early, in July, when they’re super-soft. By September they’re sort of woody.”

—
“The tree industry’s idea of a great tree is one that’s really dense, but when it’s decorated it’s not as pretty. Because



if you've got decorations on a tight, dense tree, then the decorations are flopped on the outside.”

“Europeans have a different standard altogether. They like it kind of wild-looking—they call it ‘old-fashioned,’ which means it’s not sheared.”

“There’s a knack to shearing. This knife [it looks like a light-saber with a serrated blade] is specific to the industry. It also works good for watermelon. It’s called a ‘sharp shop.’”

“With premium trees, it’s all about the height. Everybody calls and says, ‘I want 6-to-7-footers’ or ‘I want 7-to-8-footers.’ Greenwich [Connecticut] only wants premium. But Shelburne [Vermont], they’ll take anything, as long as it’s big.”

“I’m also going to put a tag on this tree, but I’ll bet someone’s going to look at this and say that it’s small. But look [he places the shaft of his loppers against the tree like a measuring stick], this lopper is six feet tall.”

“This batch of trees is genetically more consistent than the average batch—but when they’re all Nicole Kidman, some of them start to look homely.”

“See this Siamese tree—I’ll put a yellow flag on it—that’ll cut a nice tabletop [tree] out. People think a little ugly tree is cute, but they think a big ugly tree is just ugly.”

“The Christmas tree I pick and the Christmas tree my wife, Sharon, and our boys would pick are totally different. Sharon’s not as fussy. I chose one based on size—we have a space issue, so it needs to be narrow—and ease. I like to find one that’s close to the house.”

“I’ll find the right one and think, *Yeah, this one should die for me.*”

Evergreen Adventures

FIND AND CUT YOUR OWN PERFECT CHRISTMAS TREE AT THESE SOUTHERN VERNON FARMS.

Christmas Trees at Bishop Farm

Five generations of the Bishop family have been growing Christmas trees here for a century. Choose from thousands of balsam and Fraser firs. Tractor rides on weekends. *Park Farm Road, Springfield. 802-768-1402; thebishopfarm.com*

Christmas Trees of Vermont

This farm has been selling cut-your-own Fraser firs since 1982, and it began transitioning into a fully organic operation in 2017. Wagon rides and visits with Santa on weekends. *987 Connecticut River Road, Springfield. 802-885-9597; christmastreesofvt.com*

Goulden Ridge Farm

Though best known for its blueberries, this farm gets into the holiday spirit with a balsam fir crop. *1462 Goulden Ridge Road, Weathersfield. 802-558-2082; gouldenridgefarm.com*

Green Mountain Orchards

The Darrow family’s orchard is more than a century old, and they bring that experience to their Christmas tree operation too. Look for ciders, jams, and other local foods and gifts in the farm store. *130 West Hill Road, Putney. 802-387-5851; greenmountainorchards.com*

Paxton Greens

Fraser fir, balsam fir, and white pine available; precut trees are also offered. Wreaths, tree stands, and hot mulled cider available at the farm’s Christmas shop. *97 Stewart Lane, Cuttingsville. 802-492-3323*

Pleasant Valley Tree Farm

More than 30,000 cut-your-own trees populate the farm’s 80 acres. Precut trees also available. Visit the holiday gift barn for wreaths, garland, and other decorations. *313 Pleasant Valley Road, Bennington. 802-442-9071; pleasantvalleytrees.com*

Walker Farm’s Elysian Hills

Twenty acres of organically grown trees and wreaths and garlands galore, plus free refreshments in the farm store. *223 Knapp Road, Dummerston. 802-254-2051; elysianhillstreefarm.com*

Winslow Farms

A go-to for pumpkins and fall products in autumn, this family farm transitions into cut-your-own trees after Thanksgiving. *506 Rte. 7, Pittsford. 802-773-3220; winslowfarmsvt.com*

Ski Cozy

Take a sleigh to the slopes and rediscover the simple joys of small mountains and intimate inns.



Turn back the clock, bundle up, and climb aboard for an old-fashioned sleigh ride from lodge to slopes at Ski Quechee.

COURTESY OF THE QUECHEE CLUB



You don't have to pull on a reindeer sweater and buckle into a pair of seven-foot hickories to recapture the era when a ski trip was as cozy as a cup of cocoa, with small, familiar hills patronized by congenial crowds. Southern Vermont is home to both boutique-size hills and low-key major players—and none of them is more than a few miles from an inviting guesthouse, inn, or B&B.

Dating back to the 1930s, **Suicide Six**—named for South Pomfret's wild “Hill No. 6,” though it probably never lived up to its more fearsome moniker—must have once boasted only half a dozen slopes. Today it has almost four times as many and sprawls across a 1,200-foot hillside, not far from where a group of weekend ski pals set up the East's first rope tow. It was purchased by Laurance Rockefeller in 1961 and is now part of the **Woodstock Inn** resort complex. Inn guests ski here as part of their package.

But the rest of us are welcome, too—welcome to tear down the Face, a minute's worth of hell-for-leather schussbooming, or to meander along the aptly named Easy Mile, a looping novice run. Head over to an inter-

The Woodstock Inn lobby's oversize fireplace has been a favorite winter amenity for generations of guests.

mediate cruiser called the Gully early enough after an overnight snowfall, and you'll likely get first tracks. At the bottom, the big, open fireplace in the glassy lodge burns four-foot lengths of hardwood.

Even dedicated connoisseurs of Vermont ski areas may never have heard of **Ski Quechee** in Quechee—much less know that on weekends it welcomes folks who aren't even remotely connected to the upscale Quechee Lakes development and its private Quechee Club. As for the way it welcomes them, Quechee is the only ski area in Vermont where you might ride from the parking area or lodge to the foot of the slopes in an open sleigh pulled by a pair of handsome draft horses.

Like the horses, Ski Quechee's trails are gentle and very well groomed. The lower reaches are wonderful

Winter Fun



A snowboarder kicks up a plume
of powder at Middlebury Snow Bowl.

BRETT SIMISON



learning areas for youngsters, but even a reasonably advanced skier or snowboarding enthusiast can have a fine time here. The Quechee Express, beneath the chairlift, has a good pitch, and you can veer off onto several broad, undulating chutes.

The Quechee Inn at Marshland Farm is the snuggerly of choice in these parts. Its original section dates to 1793, and its talkative, wide-board pine floors are part of the pedigree every cozy old inn ought to have. Just as important: the big, antiques-filled common room with a crackling wood fire. The inn stands at the head of the Wilderness Trails cross-country ski center, and it's just a five-minute drive from Quechee Ski Hill.

At **Middlebury Snow Bowl** in Hancock, the atmosphere is not only congenial but collegiate. That's because the Snow Bowl belongs to Middlebury College, though the area has been open to the general public since its first trails were cut by students and Civilian Conservation Corps workers in the 1930s.

The grooming is first-rate, giving the slopes a clean-cut, Ivy League-style corduroy look, and the terrain is remarkably varied for a small area. There aren't too many intermediate trails, but the black diamonds aren't all that scary—they're divided between mogul runs and broad steeps. For novices, Wissler and Voter offer gentle cruising terrain. And the summit views at Middlebury Snow Bowl are among Vermont skiing's finest, with the peaks of the central Green Mountains rising to the north, south, and east.

A favorite place to put up is the **Inn on the Green**, adjacent to Middlebury's town common. The touch that puts this 1803 mansion high on the coziness scale is breakfast in bed. Just tell the innkeeper what time you'd like to have your tray delivered, and it will arrive laden with fresh-baked treats from Middlebury's Otter Creek Bakery. —*Bill Scheller*

Built in 1793, the Quechee Inn at Marshland Farm was originally the home of Colonel Joseph Marsh, Vermont's first lieutenant governor.

When You Go

Suicide Six Ski Area

Rates: adult weekday \$35, weekend/peak periods \$72.
27 Stage Rd., South Pomfret. 802-457-6661; woodstockinn.com

Ski Quechee

Rates: adult weekend \$45. 3277 Quechee Main St., Quechee. 802-295-9356; quecheeclub.com

Middlebury College Snow Bowl

Rates: adult weekday \$35, weekend and holidays \$55.
6886 Rte. 125, Hancock. 802-443-7669; middlebury.edu

Woodstock Inn & Resort

\$\$. 142 rooms and suites. Breakfast buffet. 14 The Green, Woodstock. 802-332-6853; woodstockinn.com

The Quechee Inn at Marshland Farm

\$\$. 25 rooms and suites. Full breakfast. 1119 Quechee Main St., Quechee. 802-295-3133; quecheeinn.com

The Inn on the Green

\$\$. 11 rooms and suites. Continental breakfast. 71 S. Pleasant St., Middlebury. 802-388-7512; innonthegreen.com

Winter Fun

A state-of-the-art six-person heated bubble chairlift ferries skiers to the top of Okemo Mountain.

Hitting the Heights

These big and midsize ski resorts have downhill thrills to spare.



COURTESY OF OKEMO MOUNTAIN RESORT



The sport of skiing owes a debt of gratitude to New England. Some of its earliest history is centered in the region, and many pioneers cut their teeth on its breathtaking slopes—especially in southern Vermont. Today this region features some of the best ski resorts in the Northeast. Come winter, they turn the Green Mountains into a snowy playground. —*Ian Aldrich*

Killington Resort, Killington

Affectionately referred to as “the Beast of the East” by skiers, Killington boasts a vertical drop that ranks as the biggest in New England. But this is a resort that caters to all abilities, and among the mountain’s impressive lineup of 155 trails, one of its most popular is the beginner-friendly Great Eastern, which provides a three-mile run down the mountain. A recent \$25 million investment has significantly improved the resort’s snowmaking operation and modernized its lift offerings, which now include an all-new high-speed six-person chair. Don’t miss the Stash, the resort’s all-natural terrain park, where visitors can experience a 350-foot-long Superpipe with 18-foot walls. When you’re ready for a little après-ski action, check out Killington’s lively restaurant and bar scene. *800-734-9435; killington.com*

Hitting the slopes at Killington Resort, which by many measurements is the largest ski area in the eastern United States.

Okemo Mountain Resort, Ludlow

Set in the snow-friendly town of Ludlow, Okemo Mountain was born as a community-run ski hill that eventually morphed into a top-tier four-season resort. Come winter, Okemo’s 2,200-foot vertical drop gives it the most in all of southern Vermont, and its 121 trails offer something for every kind of skier. Freestylers can take advantage of the resort’s 450-foot Superpipe and eight terrain parks. In 2018, Okemo came under the ownership of Vail Resorts, whose popular Epic Pass system allows holders to ski or board at the group’s other resorts in the U.S. and abroad—some 65 destinations in all. *800-786-5366; okemo.com*

Stratton Mountain Resort, Stratton

Stratton Mountain is steeped in outdoor lore. The creation of both the Long Trail of Vermont and the Appalachian Trail was inspired while their respective founders explored its peak. Today, both legendary trails run along



its ridge. In winter, the highlights at this winter destination include 97 trails, more than 100 acres of glades, and a network of prized terrain parks, as well as the fastest set of lifts in the East. Stratton is consistently rated by *Ski* magazine as one of the country's top 10 resorts for snow, grooming, and lifts, among other categories. Stratton also boasts 11 lifts, including a summit gondola and four high-speed six-passenger chairs. *802-297-4000; stratton.com*

Magic Mountain, Londonderry

It was on the side of Glebe Mountain that Swiss-born ski instructor Hans Thorner discovered a terrain that reminded him of the challenging slopes he'd once skied in his home country. So, in 1960, he opened the first Magic Mountain trails and infused the local ski scene with a Swiss feel that quickly caught on. Teamed with the neighboring areas of Stratton and Bromley, Magic Mountain became a part of what was called Vermont's original "Golden Triangle" of ski areas, all located within 10 miles of each other. The spirit of what Thorner created very much lives on today. Magic offers some of the most demanding black diamonds in New England: steep, with unique obstacles and packed with real snow. Fifty trails course through the resort's 205

Despite its compact size, Bromley Mountain Ski Resort offers families a lot to love, including a childcare center and lessons for all ages.

skiable acres. Overall, the mountain features a vertical drop of 1,500 feet and offers six lifts. *802-824-5645; magicmtn.com*

Bromley Mountain Ski Resort, Peru

There's a special place in the hearts of beer nerds for Bromley. Its founding in the late 1930s came at the direction of Fred Pabst Jr., the grandson of Captain Frederick Pabst, founder of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. It may be the smallest of the mountains featured in this package, but Bromley does not disappoint. Its size, in fact, enhances its family-friendly feel. Forty-seven trails blaze across 178 skiable acres. Known as "the Sun Mountain" due to its southern exposure, Bromley improved its snowmaking operation for the 2018-2019 winter season and added Bromley Parks, a terrain area that caters to snowboarders of all abilities. *802-824-5522; bromley.com*

In Praise of Jack Jumping

Celebrating a timeless Vermont tradition with the power to make anyone feel like a kid again.

I find myself in the garage a few days before Christmas, searching cluttered corners for bits of scrap lumber and dusty Rossignols. My sister, Molly, an avid skier, gave birth to her first child last summer, and I'm thinking that a jack jumper—that's right, a jack jumper—will be the perfect present.

Jack jumping is without a doubt my favorite sport, and that's because it's more than a sport, more than exercise and technique and thrill; the satisfactions are athletic, sure, but historical too. In the pre-chairlift, pre-snowboard 1800s—an era of rolled rather than plowed roads, horse-drawn sleighs, and what must have felt like interminable gray months—Vermont farmers cobbled together snow-sliding devices for their kids that used a barrel stave as a runner, and a wooden bench on a short post as a seat. Legend has it that loggers also used rudimentary jack jumpers to move efficiently through the woods while sawing. And though I have no evidence on this front, there's certainly a family resemblance between jack jumping and the European activity called *skibock*. As with many great folkways, the origins of jack jumping are uncertain, and it is this uncertainty—this power of a history bigger and deeper than any individual person or place—that I consider so enlivening.

Nowadays, in barns and basement workshops across the state, enthusiasts like myself take the basic elements—a single ski, a platform upon which to rest the fanny—and construct funky, one-of-a-kind models. I've seen the gamut, from a toddler's toy (the Junior) to a sculptor's art project (the Smithsonian) to welded steel frames with shock-absorbing springs (the Cadillac) to beery slap-together jobs (the Jalopy). Despite the variability in design, every jack jumper gives a respectful nod to the

same shared heritage, the same New England of old.

But honestly, I'm not musing on heritage as I search the cobwebbed hinterlands of the garage. Finally I locate the outdated, badly dinged, perfect-for-a-jack-jumper Rossignol that I stashed for safekeeping way back when. Unlike the fancy, factory-produced gadgets we commonly rely on for fun in the 21st century, what I'm about to create will be candid, humble, pure.

A few cuts, a few screws....

I grin. In an hour I'll be carving the packed driveway, test-driving my sister's surprise.

—
A week later, on a zero-degree afternoon of thin clouds and glittery light, we drop my niece Daisy at Grandma's and head to a nearby state park. There, a field beside the parking lot will serve as today's bunny slope.

"Think of it like a bike," I say as Molly takes a seat, gripping the underside of her jack jumper's bench with her hands and extending her legs straight out in the manner of a hamstring stretch. "You're going to need some speed before things stabilize, you know?"

Her initial attempt is understandably timid, which means wobbly, which means one, two, three, four, five seconds and she's flopped over on her side.

Asks the smiling heap of yellow and blue Gore-Tex, "What should I do?"

"Nothing," I reply. "It's intuitive. Believe me, you'll be ripping on your next try."

Sure enough, within 10 minutes the jack jumper appears glued to Molly's snowpants, and within 30 minutes she's arcing graceful turns, hooting and hollering.

"I can't believe I've lived in Vermont all my life and am only now getting into this," she says.



If you have some scrap wood and an old ski, you've got the makings of a respectable jack jumper.



Despite being a jack-jumping novice, the author's sister, Molly, is sitting pretty after just a few runs.

By the time we wrap up our jack-jumping session, the sun is sinking orange in the west. A woodpecker drums from the forest below. I imagine the hardworking farmer who stole away from his chores to assemble a pair of jack jumpers—one for his young son, one for himself. I imagine him and his boy standing at this exact spot in 1903 or 1913 or 1923, enjoying the stillness that anticipates the rush.

“Maybe we can get Grandma to watch Daisy again tomorrow?”

—

There’s so much that contributes to jack jumping’s allure, far more than I could ever hope to articulate. Following a session at the workbench, fitting together bits of so-called trash to form an elegantly simple device, it’s the Yankee thrift and do-it-yourself ingenuity. Following a two-mile cruise on Lincoln Gap, an unplowed pass in the serene heart of the Greens, it’s the engagement with wilderness, with a landscape that brooks no nonsense (roaring snow guns, \$100 tickets, etc.). Sometimes, in the company of goofy friends, I’m convinced that the best thing about jack jumping is the way it returns us to childhood, to innocence, to play. And, of course, there’s the adrenalized glee, which is beyond fantastic.

But the tradition, the pay-it-forward quality, the generational aspect—this is what strikes me as most nota-

ble on the afternoon of Molly’s introduction. Driving to Grandma’s afterward, our toes numb and noses nipped, she can’t stop talking about how Daisy will learn quickly and go faster than the boys and love jack jumping from the get-go. Listening, I recall my own initiation to the cult. When I was 18, a friend’s father shared with me his jack jumper, along with a story about the mentor—a blacksmith with a shaggy beard—who had loaned him a jack jumper a decade before. I learned to “jump” that day, and I also learned to revel in the awareness that this under-the-radar pastime persists in hollows and on hillsides all over Vermont—persists, it seems, as genes persist in a line of ancestry. I learned, in other words, that a historical awareness allows us to ride out of the past, into the future, and, simultaneously, back into the past.

At Grandma’s I bring Molly’s jack jumper inside, set it by the fire, and balance Daisy on the bench. Brown eyes instantly fill with tears. The frigid wood through thin pajamas is sudden, shocking, and she shrieks.

“Just give it time,” I say, swooping my niece up with one hand, dusting snow from her diaper-puffed backside with the other. “Just give it time.”

Already I’m planning next year’s Christmas present, shaping it in the dusty, cluttered garage of my mind.

—Leith Tonino

Ella meets one of the Friesians, a famed horse breed from the Netherlands, on the Labrie family farm.

A Child's First Sleigh Ride

As my 3-year-old daughter, Ella, and I drive up Maggie Ladd Road, we spy black horses dotting the fresh white snow on either side of us. The scene is like something out of a fairy tale, from the beautiful Friesians themselves to the European-style barns to even the owner, Robert Labrie, who sports a handlebar mustache, giant wool coat, and fur hat. Labrie greets us warmly and is quick to introduce us to his prize stallion, Othello. As he moves the graceful horse around in a wide circle outside, pointing out his lines and the breed's specific traits, my daughter bends down to gently touch with one of her pink mittens the hoofprints left in the freshly fallen snow.

Labrie leads our sleigh team, Alfons and Diederik, from the barn, the brass bells on their black-leather harnesses tinkling with every stride. We climb into the back seat of an ornate red sleigh and settle in, covering our legs with a cozy brown blanket. Labrie's booming voice drives us forward, the horses moving fast through an open field of snow before turning into the woods. Sunlight speckles the terrain, hooves kick up fresh powder, and Ella's smile never leaves her. Neither of us, mother or daughter, wants the afternoon to end. When it does, we head back to the barns under fading afternoon light. We linger some, checking out the yearlings, before making our way home. Yes, I tell her, we will return. —Heather Marcus

Friesians of Majesty, Townshend, VT. 802-365-7526; friesiansofmajesty.com

Tough Enough

Meet the Vermont sock maker who believes the way to bring back local manufacturing is to offer the best product in the world.

I can't remember exactly when I got my first pair of Darn Tough socks. I do know that I was skeptical, as is my wont when money is on the line. But those people who extolled to me the virtues of Darn Toughs were not the usual chorus of marketing folks—they were actual *friends* who also had ponied up the 20-plus dollars necessary to take ownership of a pair. “They’re the best,” my friend Mark told me one day. Mark, who happily drives a truck with rusted floors lined in old sheet metal, is not one to spend where spending is unnecessary. “Now I won’t wear anything else.”

Still: *Twenty dollars for a pair of socks!?* It boggled my mind. I mean, we’re talking about socks, which to my way of thinking are arguably the most humble clothing known to humankind. What I didn’t know—not yet, anyway—is that I felt this way only because I hadn’t been given the chance to feel otherwise. In other words, because I hadn’t slid my feet into a pair of Darn Toughs.

—

The business story behind Darn Tough is compelling, and it’s easy to understand why. Debuting in 2004 as a last-ditch effort to save Cabot Hosiery Mills (which is located in the small central-Vermont village of Northfield and named for its founder, Marc Cabot) from near-certain demise, the brand was a response to the trend of overseas outsourcing that had brought the mill to its knees in the first place. Marc Cabot’s son, Ric, was the brains behind Darn Tough, which he envisioned as a swim-against-the-current response to the assumption that sock wearers—which is to say, pretty much everyone—cared about price above all else.

“At that time, and still to this day, nobody was really concerned about durability,” Ric Cabot told me when

I stopped by for a visit at one of the company’s two manufacturing facilities, both situated in Northfield. I’d been there less than five minutes, and already Cabot had noticed that I wasn’t wearing Darn Toughs—though he did so not with judgment, but rather as one raised in a family of sock makers who therefore cannot help but notice such things. “The whole story was that socks wear out,” Cabot continued. He seemed unaware he’d made a pun or, alternatively, was so accustomed to making such puns that he didn’t even pause to acknowledge them.

Cabot’s plan was to dramatically transform customer expectations by developing a sock that not only would outlast all others but also be the most foot-huggingly comfortable piece of apparel since the advent of bipedalism. To this end, he incorporated a seamless toe design of high-thread-count merino wool, slapped a no-questions-asked lifetime guarantee on them, and hit the ground running by donating 3,500 pairs to the Vermont City Marathon. “We’re fortunate that when we started, people were having disappointing experiences with socks. They just didn’t know how disappointing.”

Cabot led me into the production facility. I don’t know what I’d expected to find—beleaguered-looking men and women hunched over ancient sewing machines, perhaps—but this was not it. Computerized knitting machines were arranged in long rows under fluorescent lights, and above the machines hung cones of yarn in an almost overwhelming array of colors. Darn Tough currently offers somewhere in the neighborhood of 400 styles of socks, which come in enough colors to embarrass a rainbow. At first glance, the cones of yarn appeared to simply hang in the air, and this effect,



coupled with the sheer profusion of color, lent the room a whimsical, almost festive air, as if the yarn cones were balloons at a birthday party.

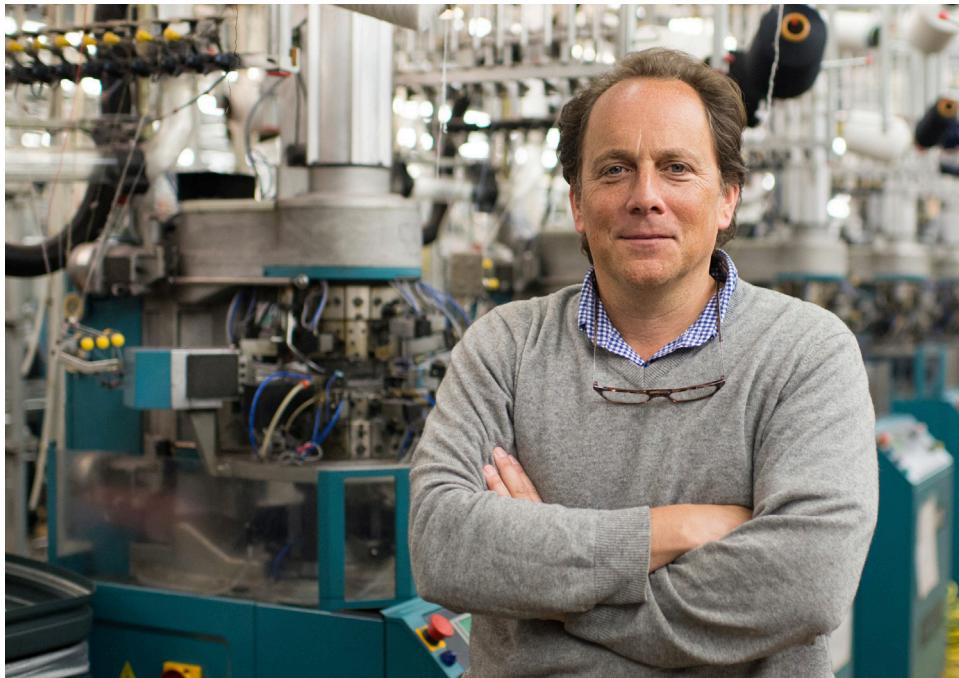
Cabot grabbed a freshly knit sock from one of the machines. “Feel it,” he implored. I felt it, nodding my approval. It really was quite soft, and I could imagine how wonderful it’d feel on my foot. I heard the high-pressure suck of air, and another new sock—one of the more than 4 million pairs of socks Darn Tough will produce this year—passed through the vacuum tube protruding from the top of the machine.

I asked Cabot how Darn Tough’s success with selling high-quality, Vermont-made socks at a premium price had shaped his view of American consumers. Might they be more willing than is generally assumed to spend a little more money in order to support a business that treats its employees well and whose products avoid the disposability of inferior quality? And if so, might it be possible to imagine a New England repopulated with the sort of decent-paying manufacturing jobs there were once commonplace?

He considered his answer carefully. “I do think people will make different choices if they’re made more aware. But it’s also true that people don’t tend to see the chess moves; they see the checkers moves. So it’s not enough for us to just say, ‘Our socks are made in Vermont and they’re better and you should buy them.’ We have to explain why they’re better, and then we have to show it. Truth is, I think a lot of companies go out of business because they just stop trying.”

The next morning, I thought about what Cabot had said as I pulled on a new pair of Darn Toughs. I’d received them only a few days before, replacements for a holey pair I’d returned under the company’s no-questions-asked lifetime guarantee. The returned socks had been at least three years old, which seemed to me an entirely reasonable lifespan (particularly given the abuses they’d suffered), but I’d known that I would be writing this story, and I figured I should at least test the promise. Journalistic integrity, and all that.

The new socks felt good on my feet—really good, in fact—and I no longer suffered any guilt about hav-



FROM TOP: Ric Cabot, founder and CEO of Darn Tough, at the company’s factory in Northfield, Vermont; a worker trims the cuff of one of the brand’s signature all-wool socks.

ing leveraged the guarantee. Heck, even Ric Cabot had suggested to me that, theoretically, a person could purchase one pair of Darn Tough socks and never need to buy another in his or her lifetime.

For a minute, I felt silly for having splurged on half a dozen pairs the previous fall. Six lifetimes of socks. It seemed a tad excessive. But I remembered that I’d probably want to wash my new socks eventually, and what would I wear then? Because by now I was in full agreement with my friend Mark: It was Darn Tough or nothing. I wasn’t going to wear anything else. —*Ben Hewitt*



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