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# IN THE *Serious Frivolity* *Northern Catskills*

## Spillian and the Renaissance of Fleischmanns

STORY BY AKIRA OHISO | PHOTOS BY KELLY MERCHANT

Like many towns and hamlets across the Upper Catskills, Fleischmanns is seeing a rebirth, fueled by the migration of full-timers to the area as more city folks choose to work remotely.

With a quaint Main Street and beautiful 19th-century homes scattered throughout town, there is a buzz of both opportunity and excitement in the air again.


"Fleischmanns has the richest housing stock from the Victorian era that is pretty much untouched," says Michelle Sidrane, owner of The Breezy Hill Inn, a restored Victorian bed & breakfast in the village. Fleischmanns now annually hosts their Memorial Day Weekend Street Fair that draws thousands of visitors. The 2nd Annual Maple Festival returns in March.

Six years ago, a feasibility study conducted by students from SUNY New Paltz concluded that there were enough people and resources working to make Fleischmanns a vibrant village again. The result was Fleischmanns First, a community enhancement organization. (Sidrane serves as its current president.) Grants by the MARK Project have assisted in beautifying Main Street. State grants have helped expand Internet service to once-remote areas.

Among the creative people drawn to the rejuvenated Fleischmanns are Leigh Melander and husband Marc Somerfield. Both originally from Pennsylvania, they just returned to the Northeast after 12 years in Southern California, to start a new chapter. Their dream was to create a retreat center that would encapsulate their intellectual, creative and civic passions.


CONTINUED ON PAGE 32



The Paintings, Watercolors,  
Drawings of  
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*American Impressionist*  
*b. Pittsford, NY, 1864; d. Stamford, NY, 1934*

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Prattville, NY, Dec 2011



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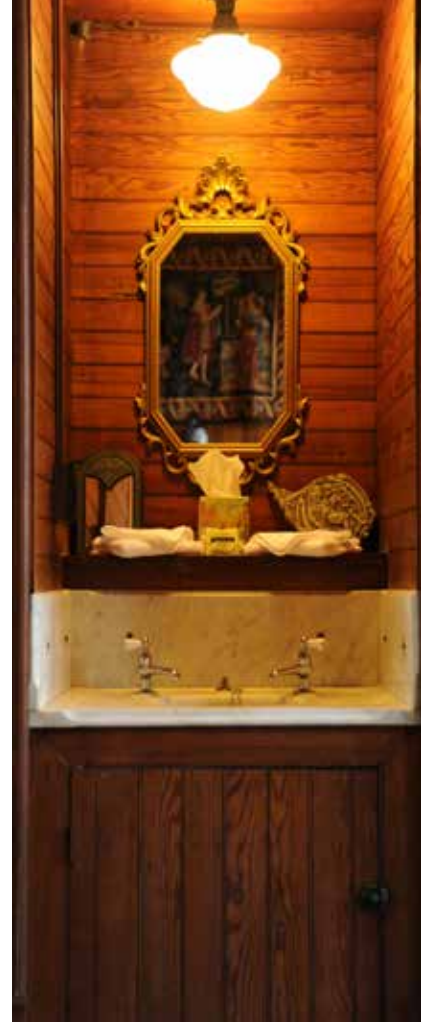
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*Charles Louis Fleischmann*



*Rabbi Aharon Kotler (left)*





## REVELRY | SPILLIAN

### CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

Melander and Somerfield spent two years searching for the perfect place when they found the 19th century summer retreat estate of Charles Louis Fleischmann, founder of the Cincinnati-based Fleischmann's Yeast Company and the namesake of the town previously known as Griffin Corners.

Today, Spillian is a multi-use retreat center and hotel with a commercial kitchen, 8 bedrooms, sprawling grounds and grand rooms for entertaining. It is the perfect place for a wedding, special occasion, weekend getaway or extended vacation in the Catskills.

The pair purchased the property from a Japanese woman named Haruna Kimura. She had envisioned a meditation center here, but that never came to fruition. Kimura placed an enormous amount of money into the reconstruction of the house and kept it from becoming another Catskills ruin.

"She saved it," says Melander. "In a quiet way, her tenure was just as important as anyone's in the history of this house."

Somerfield, a lighting and scenic designer for theater, opera, and ballet, spent a year bringing the old Fleischmann's mansion back to life. Melander named the house Spillian, an Old English word which means to play, jest or revel.

"I got a kick out of it because it is the root of my mother's maiden name: Spillers," says Melander. "The suggestion is that her ancestors were magicians, jugglers or entertainers of some sort."

Melander received her doctorate in psychology and mythology and did her thesis on "frivolity." While the word reflects negative connotations, it actually means a lack of seriousness or a lightheartedness.

"I was looking at frivolity as an opening into imagination and to step away from being outcome driven," says Melander. "I was working on the Kantian idea about the purposefulness of purposelessness."

In California, she founded The Imaginal Institute, a precursor to Spillian, offering conferences and online learning that reflect her prevailing philosophy: "frivolity as a curative to 21st Century blues."

Further research revealed to Melander that "frivol" came from the same root as revel and rebel. "There was something about the constellation of these three words that I really liked."

As one delves into the history of the estate and its eclectic residents, Spillian emerges as a historically fitting name.

Prior to the 1870s, Griffin Corners, settled by Matthew Griffin, was a small mountain village surrounded by large swathes of farmland. It was a difficult place to reach by horse or stagecoach especially during the winter months when muddy dirt roads were treacherous. In the 1870s, the Ulster & Delaware Railroad connected Griffin Corners to Kingston, NY, the first capital of New York State and a mercantile hub with access to the railroad and canal system. The railroad suddenly made Griffin Corners accessible to New York City.

In the early 1880s, a local businessman named John Blish sold the property to Charles Louis Fleischmann. Charles' brother Louis was appalled by the poor quality of baked breads in the states. In 1876 he built a Model Viennese Bakery at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and introduced millions of America to the distinctive and delicious Austrian standard of pastries, bread and coffee. It propelled his fledging yeast company to national status. The term "bread line," often associated with the Great Depression, was actually coined in response to men with no money lining up outside his bakery enticed by the aroma of freshly baked bread.

As a Jew of Eastern European descent, Charles and his other brother Max were well aware of the anti-Semitic climate across the globe. It was a time when Jews were the target of intense scrutiny. Theodore Herzl was under fire for championing Zionism and a Jewish State. Tsarist pogroms were on the rise. In 1894, The Dreyfus Affair scapegoated a Jewish artillery officer.

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 64**





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STORY BY AKIRA OHISO  
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An apocryphal story suggests that the Fleischmann family once visited Conrad Hilton's hotel in Saratoga Springs and were turned away for being Jewish.

"They didn't land in some of the places the uber-wealthy were landing because they were Jewish," says Melander. "There was a real awareness in the Jewish wealthy community so they created their own fiefdom."

To rebel.

Griffin Corners became the fiefdom and center of the wealthy Jewish world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "The Fleischmann family was absolutely representative of the nineteenth century gilded era rise to enormous wealth," says Melander.

The Fleischmann family traveled from New York City by yacht to Rondout where they would then take a private car on the Ulster & Delaware Railroad to a depot at the foot of their estate. The family was greeted regularly by its own hired brass marching band in livery.

Anton Seidl, conductor of both the Metropolitan Opera and The New York Philharmonic, was a frequent guest. Bernard Ullman, the major opera impresario of the 19th Century, had a house nearby. The Fleischmanns hosted New York luminaries, artists and writers in gatherings reminiscent of the era's European salons. "This was high Belle Époque," says Melander.

During the summer months, the Fleischmann house was filled with the creative and playful energy that Melander continues today. There are no televisions at Spillian and guest often repair to common rooms to sit by the fire, listen to music (Melander is a harpist), read or enjoy a restorative walk in the fresh mountain air. As in centuries before, the Catskills still provide a healing environment for frazzled city folks.

To revel.

In 1894, Charles' son Julius became the President of Fleischmann's Yeast. Julius was the owner of the Cincinnati Reds during his tenure and is responsible for building baseball fields in the center of town where his players practiced before the regular season. The diamonds are still in use today. Julius ruled the dynasty until 1925 when he died in a polo accident. His brother Maxmillian was briefly at the helm until 1929 when the company merged into Standard Brands.

The Fleischmann family sold the estate in 1915. The village was incorporated in 1913 and officially named Fleischmanns. The house was renamed The Fleischmann Park House and catered to urban Jews seeking cooler climes during the summer months.

After World War II, the estate was sold to the Lederer family during the Golden Age of the Borscht Belt hotels. Calling it The Lederer Park House, the family kept a strict kosher kitchen that became a popular retreat for leaders in the Jewish world.

Melander explains: "They attracted internationally renowned Talmudic scholars who were really thinking about how to re-approach the Torah and how American Jews in particular could reimagine themselves after the catastrophic experience of the Holocaust."

In recent years, a resurgent Hasidic community living in Fleischmanns during the summer months has made a pilgrimage to Spillian to inquire of the historically prominent Orthodox rabbi, Aharon Kotler, who once frequented the estate.

Most of the original interiors at Spillian – low-lit hallways and dark wood interiors – were unchanged by generations of short-lived design trends.

The interiors are covered with a series of flower murals that fascinate and puzzle historians. Despite her own research, Melander cannot pin down the artist or artists. But theories abound.

One suggests that the murals were painted by scenic painters from the opera, because the Fleischmann family had strong relationships with professionals in the performing arts. Another insists that the daughter

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of Max Fleischmann had hay fever and couldn't go outside during the summer, so murals brought the gardens inside.

A noted preservation and restoration company was commissioned to investigate. They surmised that the murals were painted by at least a couple of painters because some murals are technically superior to others. The company finally determined that the art was not created by itinerant wall painters because almost all were classically trained during that era.

Melander is developing eclectic programming for Spillian, from lectures on sustainability to Fondue Fridays to summer camp for grownups. These programs may seem disparate, but they all center around bringing people together where magic and serendipity can occur. "We are inviting people to play with whatever ideas are emerging," says Melander. "We want people to imagine past what they thought was possible and to do it in a light, engaging and epicurean way."

She is applying for status from the National Register of Historic Places, stressing that Spillian has local, regional and national importance.

Spillian is a special place that has been fortunate, over many generations, to be nurtured by respectful stewards. Melander and Somerfield continue that tradition. But Melander is quick to point out a third partner in this current enterprise: the house itself. "This place engenders the magical mythical response," says Melander.

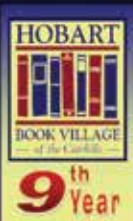
When Jon Blish sold the estate to the Fleischmann family more than a century ago, he envisioned a Griffin Corners revitalized by city folks. Today, Michelle Sidrane of Fleischmanns First, working with passionate people like Melander and Somerfield, continues to follow the very same vision.

"We," says Sidrane, "are definitely a village on the up."

**FOR MORE INFO** [www.spillian.com](http://www.spillian.com) [www.fleischmannsfirst.com](http://www.fleischmannsfirst.com)



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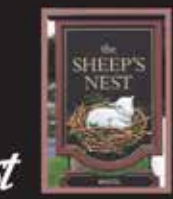


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