



New Haven offers an art-filled retreat close to home



When Charles F. Vatterott Jr. built the Western Town in the it was just a facade from an old movie set. Today, you'll find a restaurant, a brewery and a tasting room behind that facade. photo by Brian Sirimatuross

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NEW HAVEN • The first time I visited Cedar Creek resort it was in the middle of a giant storm last summer. Rain was pounding our windshield as we pulled up the gravel drive. Winds thrashed so violently we could feel the car shake. Through the haze, we saw what appeared to be a scene from the Wild West. There was a saloon made of wooden planks, a boardwalk, a stagecoach and I could swear I saw a tumbleweed go by.

Charles F. Vatterott Jr. built the Western Town in the 1950s from an old Hollywood movie set so that his 17 children and numerous grandchildren had a place to play. Back then, it was just a facade. Today, it houses a restaurant and a brewery.

Son John Vatterott, founder of Vatterott College, bought his parents' former summer retreat in 1978 and used it mostly for training of college employees. About 10 years ago he started marketing its use to corporate groups.

Today, under the leadership of grandson Patrick, the resort, located about an hour and half west of downtown St. Louis, is taking on a more universal appeal, offering a nearby getaway for St. Louisans.

"We do weddings, birthdays, romantic getaways, family stays ... anything," Patrick said.

We returned there recently, to celebrate my husband's birthday. This time, we stayed overnight in the lovely Little Lodge, which includes a living area, kitchen and three bedrooms and a sun porch with views of the resort and pool area.

We had arranged for a private dinner in our cozy cottage through the resort. On both of our trips, chef Jacob Smith created meals for us beyond our expectations. The first time, it was a perfectly grilled chicken in a mushroom sauce. The second time, it was a filet with crab legs and a side of squash and zucchini sliced to look like spaghetti noodles with a spinach pesto that I'm still trying to re-create. And the cheesecake had to be some of the best I've had, perfectly smooth and creamy. The resort even offers a cookbook of some of its popular dishes.

Other accommodations on the property include more traditional hotel-like features in the Cedar Lodge; the Manor House, with four guest rooms; and various other houses around the grounds. Rooms start at \$99.

And speaking of the grounds. They are full of so many things to do, you really won't have to leave the resort (though you should, more on that later). There's a nine-hole golf course, tennis, sand volleyball, a swimming pool (in season), a ropes course (schedule in advance), two hiking trails, an outdoor area for summer concerts, two restaurants, a wedding venue and a brewery and tasting room.

The brewery, 2nd Shift, is located in Western Town, along with one restaurant. A cozy fire pit separates the two. At 2nd Shift, you can saddle up to the dark wood bar and get a sampling of beers with intriguing names such as Cat Spit Stout, Art of Neuroses and my favorite beer, Albino Pygmy Puma.

THE TOWN OF NEW HAVEN

Though you could easily stay in the confines of Cedar Creek, it's worth it to venture out into the town of New Haven, which is undergoing something of a renaissance.

Sitting along the banks of the Missouri River are a few blocks of quirky stores, art studios, restaurants and a distillery.

When Gary Rice opened his Astral Glass studio in New Haven in 2009, it was "almost like a ghost town." Having owned a glass-blowing studio in Clarksville for years, he saw something in New Haven.

In addition to magnificent works of art, his shop includes a viewing area where visitors can watch glass-blowers.

"The people here are really supportive of the arts," he said. "They supported us right away, and now they support all the other businesses moving in."

Those include stores like Jerry Hoffman's ukulele shop, Hoffman Lutherie; Front Street Artisans art and antique gallery and pottery studio; Elizabeth's Antiques and Decor and more.

Rice says New Haven is special because of its trifecta: a brewery (2nd Shift), a winery (the nearby Robller Vineyard and Winery) and distillery (Pinckney Bend).

At Pinckney Bend, just around the corner from Rice's glass-blowing shop, you can taste a series of spirits for \$5 (and get to keep the glass). First is the vodka, followed by several whiskeys and gin.

Tara Steffans, senior tasting staff, walked us through the world of distilled spirits, even showing us their still and bottling procedures. The best, was the last drink. A full gin and tonic, made with their signature tonic and a twist of lime. "I get people in here who say they don't even like gin and tonic but love this," Steffans said.

And don't miss the annual FireFest in November when the town comes alive with arts and fire. The festival features all the usual festival attractions: parade, food, music, arts demonstrations, petting zoo — and more unusual ones: trebuchet pumpkin chunking, an ice house, a burning man and re-enactors from the Civil War, World War I and World War II.

More information:

Cedar Creek: cedarcreekcenter.com

Pinckney Bend: pinckneybend.com

Astral Glass: facebook.com/astralglasstudio

FireFest: NewHavenFireFest.com