

GETAWAYS

DESTINATION: HOMESTEAD INN, GREENWICH, CONN.



Left: Built in 1799, the 18-room Homestead Inn was originally a farmhouse. Above: Zagat guide rates the Thomas Henkelmann Restaurant among the country's top 11.

# No passport required

A luxe weekend at Homestead Inn and Thomas Henkelmann Restaurant offers European comfort, flair—and flavors. By Sarah Gilbert Fox

Upon my arrival at the Homestead Inn in Greenwich, Conn., Corine Berlioz, the front desk manager, greets me with alternating-cheek kisses on the wisteria-covered wraparound veranda. It is the perfect beginning to a weekend that feels more like a European escape than a jaunt up I-95. Berlioz leads me into the lobby, where the walls are covered in an aubergine-colored Brunschwig & Fils fabric, and are complemented by bold, painted Teton chartreuse woodwork. Two brass planters holding eye-catching Scotch Brooms sit on either side of the archway leading into the bar.

“Theresa picks things so unusual. Very magical everywhere,” she says in her French accent, referring to Theresa Henkelmann, the wife and co-owner with Thomas Henkelmann. Thomas Henkelmann, one of the world's top chefs (he is

one of 13 chefs in America to have earned the esteemed ‘Les Grandes Tables du Monde’ award), and Theresa, an extraordinary designer in her own right, bought this property in 1997. The house, built in 1799, had been the main farmhouse of Belle Haven, Conn., a playground for wealthy New Yorkers seeking refuge from the city. After going through many owners, it landed in the Henkelmanns’ hands, and has become a premier destination for those seeking quality everything without ostentatious glitz. Precisely why the Homestead Inn is a Relais & Chateaux property.

Most Americans—even travel writers—don’t know that Relais & Chateaux is a prestigious membership of the best luxury hotels in the world, and represents the opposite of see-and-be-seen-in hotels. To be a Relais & Chateaux property, the hotel must have the required 5 C’s: charac-

ter, courtesy, calm, charm and cuisine. Says Berlioz, “This is where the ‘quiet money’ comes.”

And they probably return often, because each of the Homestead Inn’s 18 rooms is charming in its own way. Some are painted in sunny yellows, others in brilliant asparagus greens, still others in Moroccan-spiced orange tones. One room seems Provencal French, with large ceramic roosters on the tables in the sitting area; others fuse Alice-in-Wonderland merriment with Chanel-red chairs and carpet; another has a heavily filigreed hand-carved bed, the kind seen at Versailles; and still others defy description, such as room 124, with its deep green-yellow walls, and its sitting area with Donghia gray chaise lounges and a topiary ball-trimmed tree.

Like every other room at the inn, my room, No. 113, is dressed in fine details,

from the monkey lamps above the dresser, to the brass stand on the upstairs porch holding orange and pink umbrellas. Most charming of all is the coffee table, decouped with antique Asian rice paper that has little prints of kimono-wearing rabbits flying kites, playing mah-jongg and musical instruments, drinking sake and the like. Hand-painted leaves trail across the bedroom wall at eye level, leading into the enormous bathroom, complete with a luxurious assortment of Bulgari bath items and more lavish, plush towels than I could ever use in one stay. I am as tempted by this rich display as I am by the dining room.

Downstairs, the maître d’ leads me to the porch section of the restaurant, and a table set with Konigl pr. Tettau ceramic plates and Christofle silverware. My table captain, Edgar Rojas, seats me and hands me the menu—a huge presentation splashed with a lovely impressionistic watercolor. Rojas then introduces my sommelier, Pierre Grall, a Frenchman from the Alsace-Lorraine region. Together, Grall and Rojas decide that I should try the lobster bisque and the sea bass.

The bisque comes to my table first as a bowl of finely cut fresh lobster and, second, as a saffron, butter and wine-reduced lobster bisque that is poured over the lobster meat. With this, Grall serves a Sauvignon Grape Sancerre 2007 Pascal Jolivet from the Loire Valley. Even if you think you know everything about wine and food, spending an evening with Grall offers a new window into the taste palate. When I comment on the lovely combination, he explains, “It is basically nature. The deep-

er the root of the grape’s vine, the more layers of stones the roots go through, and in this wine, the roots go deep enough to pick up the minerals from the ancient seashells below. So you have a combination texture of creaminess and mineral.”

Soon the sea bass arrives. It is salted at the last minute, cooked with shallots and a touch of butter in a red wine sauce, and served with black truffles and potato gnocchi. Upon tasting, it becomes obvious why Henkelmann is considered a great chef of the world, and why people travel far and wide to eat here. Henkelmann understands how to let food sing. Having reviewed some of the best restaurants around the world, I can honestly say there is no comparison.

The dinner and décor convince me that I don’t want to meet either Theresa or Thomas, but rather want to maintain the too-good-to-be-true illusion. I now simply want to wake up the next morning, explore Greenwich, then take room service and head back to Baltimore, satisfied.

Greenwich Avenue is a shopper’s delight that is a 10-minute, tree-lined walk from the inn. There is an Anne Fontaine boutique, where every type of elegantly designed white shirt one can imagine can be found. There’s Graham’s, a locally owned, high-end toy store (with a cute kid’s hair-cutting section) where the owner takes you under her wing and makes you feel at home. There’s also a Design Within Reach furniture store, a Lilly Pulitzer dress shop, Kate’s Paperie, Restoration Hardware, Petit Bateau and a Michael Kors Lifestyle Store. A dip into the Bruce Museum to see “The Mouse House: Art from the Collection of Olga Hirshhorn,” with works by Pablo Picasso, Man Ray, Georgia O’Keeffe, Louise Nevelson and Alexander Calder (until Oct. 18), is also a great find, but I wish

I’d started there, instead of arriving burdened with shopping bags!

I take a taxi back to the inn, prepared to soak in the tub, order room service and forgo meeting my new heroes, but my plans suddenly change, as none other than Theresa herself greets me at the door of the inn.

Theresa is gorgeous and genial and instantly puts me at ease. When I comment on the brass buckets in the hallway, full of fragrant red and green apples, and inquire whether this is common here, she replies, “Always. I grew up in Michigan and we always had apples in the breezeway. I just love the aroma.”

She then explains a particular challenge she contends with as the inn’s owner. “There’s a dichotomy here. The Thomas Henkelmann Restaurant is world-renowned, and you can’t advertise a luxury restaurant,” she says. “You just don’t do that.” However, the restaurant is well-known (Zagat rated it among the top 11 in the country, as well as No. 1 in Connecticut; *The New York Times* has awarded it four stars), so the restaurant brings the people to the inn, and, says Theresa, “Vise versa!” Though the inn reflects traditional tastes, Theresa insists that it is not historic. “Everyone who has ever owned this house has done something to it,” she says. “It’s so ersatz. This place is more about Thomas’ and my travels. Every room could be found on the spice route in Portugal, ‘La Route des Epices.’”

A few minutes later, the reserved and handsome Thomas Henkelmann makes his way onto the porch to discuss his food over a cup of tea. “For me, I am trained in the classical tradition, but I am not trapped in that time,” he says. “I try to prepare honest food, focus on the product; you can always cook for the time you live in (continued on page 120)

Below, left and right: Each guest room at the inn is decorated in a unique style and color scheme. The lushly landscaped terrace is a charming spot to take tea or enjoy a leisurely cocktail after a day of shopping.

