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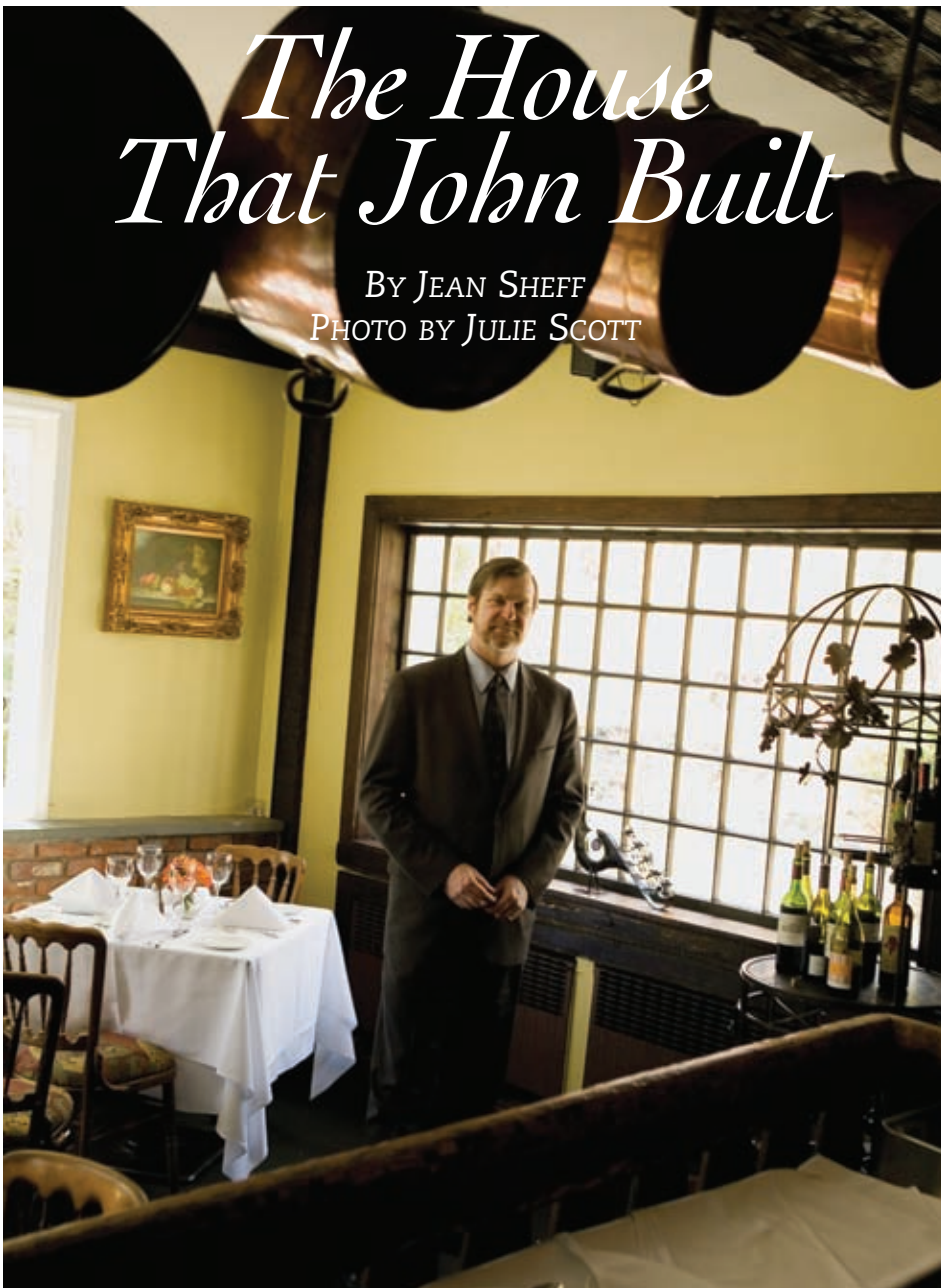
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The House That John Built

BY JEAN SHEFF
PHOTO BY JULIE SCOTT



Tucked just off Route 117, far enough from the daily traffic patterns of life sits the Kittle House. Built in 1790, this historic building has served many purposes. It's been a barn, a guesthouse, a school and a roadhouse for weary travelers. In 1936, it became a restaurant and inn, and, despite ups and downs, its four large towering columns and huge center lantern have set the scene for many memorable meals and events. No doubt this historic home has character and depth, just like its present owner, John Crabtree.

Walking Tall

Crabtree might be unassuming, but at 6'3", this handsome, stately man

is hardly easy to miss. Of course, Crabtree will point out that his one-time business partner and father, Richard "Dick" Crabtree, was 6' 6". Height aside, the real tall order these gentlemen filled was reviving the Kittle House, which was in complete disrepair when they purchased it back in 1981. Now in his early 50s, John has run the Kittle House for 27 years, which slightly surprises him, since that's not how he imagined his life's journey.

Crabtree, a 1974 graduate from high school in Eastchester, had full intentions of becoming a writer. He attended and graduated from Columbia University in New York, studying English literature while working in his father's restaurant

business, learning from the bottom up. "I started as a dishwasher, then bartender and so on, learning each new position along the way," he says. He even helped rebuild Crabtree's, his dad's well-known restaurant in Eastchester, after it burned to the ground.

Crabtree returned to Columbia to earn a Master's degree in government. He took some time away from the family business and served as an administrative assistant to Gordon Burrows, former deputy minority leader of New York State Assembly. "I wanted to get an inside look at politics since I was preparing to write the great American novel," says Crabtree. At that point, it looked like restaurant work was a part of his past; he was ready to move on. "My dad said great, but before you go, I want you to take a look at this place up in Chappaqua that's for sale; it's in complete disrepair and we can get it for a song," says Crabtree.

There was something about the Kittle House that hooked both men—they purchased the place and started work on it. Soon after, the Eastchester restaurant was sold and the Crabtrees focused solely on the Kittle House. Crabtree found he was passionate about the project. "The restaurant business can get under your skin," says Crabtree, by way of explanation.

Dick Crabtree retired in 1999 and now lives with his wife in Myrtle Beach. "My dad is a legend, larger than life, a real people's person," says Crabtree. His parents still make the trip back north, having recently come to celebrate his mom's 75th birthday.

Family and Business Growth

Crabtree says running a restaurant also made sense if he was going to support a growing family. Crabtree had married his childhood sweetheart, Amy, a nurse. They lived in Millwood for a time and when the family grew, moved to Pound Ridge to raise four daughters, now ages 16 to 24. John already had experience living with a lot of females in one household, as he was third in a family of seven kids—six of them, girls. Crabtree says he first came to appreciate food and wine at Amy's family's grand Italian Sunday din-

ners. "There was always plenty, and being a young boy, I devoured it."

It takes a lot to run the operation, which Crabtree describes as three businesses in one: a banquet hall for special events, a daily restaurant and a twelve-room inn. "The dynamics of each are very different," he says. Yet Crabtree has always made time for family.

"Wednesday is technically my day off," he says, his blue eyes twinkling, letting you know it isn't always the case. "We do everything on Wednesdays. We were married on a Wednesday; we took Lamaze class on Wednesdays." They even cook. "We cook a lot at home. It's very relaxing for me."

Crabtree tells stories with ease. He sits, twirling his eyeglasses in his left hand, one ankle crossed over a knee, as he speaks slowly and purposefully. Relaxed in a light gray suit and tie, he has a direct, yet subtle manner. There are so many things he's quietly passionate about—namely, his wife and daughters, food, wine, animals and the

organizations he supports in the community.

He sees his work as creative. "We help people make wonderful lifetime memories here," he says. Sure, famous people have graced the historic dining room. People like the Clintons, Isiah Thomas, Chevy Chase, Glenn Close and Vanessa Williams are practically regulars. That's very nice, but Crabtree's goal always is to create an open spirit, an ambience where *all* are welcome.

An Unassuming Giver

Crabtree's giving spirit carries over into his substantial charitable work. President and CEO of Make-A-Wish Foundation of the Hudson Valley, Thomas Conklin, chuckled a little when he was told *Inside Chappaqua* planned on doing a profile of Crabtree. "Really, did he talk to you?" We had to admit that Crabtree was reluctant, but once we mentioned that we were interested in the many charities with which he was involved, he warmed to the idea. "Yes, that's John, doesn't that tell you a lot about the man?"

Conklin says Crabtree has been involved with the 22-year-old Make-A-Wish Hudson Valley Chapter from its humble beginnings. Crabtree related the story of how he first became involved with the foundation.

It all started in the late 1990s when he sent over some food for a function at the small space Make-A-Wish occupied in Mount Kisco. His chef came back with a touching story of a critically ill little girl who had gotten her wish that day. Crabtree was inspired to do more to help her, but a short time later, when he tried to reach her family, he was told she had died.

"I have four healthy kids; what a reminder to count your blessings," he says. Crabtree promptly increased his participation with the organization.

"John's been an honoree and currently sits on the board," says Conklin. "He's so unassuming; he asks for nothing in return except to help with the cause; he's an invaluable board member." Under Crabtree's leadership, the founda-

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tion thanks major donors with an annual gala event at the Kittle House sponsored by Crabtree.

“John is insightful and instinctive; he is so mission-focused—they just don’t come any better,” says Conklin. Today, Make-A-Wish has a beautiful wish house in Sleepy Hollow. “We’ve gone from giving out 30 wishes a year to 150,” says Crabtree. “It’s wonderful.”

Crabtree is also very fond of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Northern Westchester. “There’s more need than ever for the Boys & Girls Clubs,” says Crabtree. Many children are at a loss after school because parents work two or more jobs to make ends meet, he explains. The Boys & Girls Clubs are also helping in Tarrytown where families are still struggling ever since the General Motors plant closed.

“John and Amy were the recipients of our annual Humanitarian Award in 2006 and John currently serves on the board of directors,” says Boys & Girls Clubs of Northern Westchester Executive Director, Brian Skanes. Each year, Crabtree hosts and spon-

sors the Boys & Girls Clubs Youth of the Year dinner, an event that honors the exemplary character, superior leadership skills, academic achievement, outstanding service, and community outreach of one deserving young person. “John is so humble; he’s one of the nicest guys you’ll ever meet. Both he and Amy are terrific people,” says Skanes.

In turn, Crabtree admires the work of people like Bonnie Trotta and others who he says “invest all their time and energy in seeing the Club succeed.” Speak to people like Bonnie Trotta and you’ll get another story. “John does so much; he just couldn’t be more self-effacing. He and Amy, and the girls—what can I say, they are such a wonderful family.” Trotta, who got to know Crabtree through their mutual involvement on the Boys & Girls Clubs board, says what he does for the organization is “enormous.” She recalls the year that the Crabtrees were honored by the Club. “The response poured out from the community; everyone wanted to make a donation to honor them—we heard from their friends, neighbors, even their

vendors. Ask anyone; the people who work for them, the people who do business with them, everyone loves them.”

And More

The Rotary Club of Chappaqua has been holding weekly meetings at the Kittle House since 1982. John Buckley, president of the Rotary, Chappaqua volunteer fireman and town board member, says, “It’s been a privilege to get to know John Crabtree; he’s an exceptional person.” Buckley says Crabtree regularly ‘bends over backwards’ to support those in need. “Not only that, John also runs a flourishing business where he delights in offering a warm dining experience with top rated service to everyone,” he says.

The Chappaqua Chamber of Commerce started meeting at the Kittle House one year ago. The group, originally an informal gathering of civic leaders who called themselves the Nifty-Niner’s (nine businessmen from Chappaqua), now have more structured gatherings under Crabtree’s hospitality. The Lawrence Farms East

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Painting and Carpentry



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Association Board also meets at the Kittle House. Crabtree is also partial to the good works of Food Patch and the United Way. The list could go on and on.

One wonders where Crabtree's empathy comes from. "I see people, I hear stories, it's just natural," he says modestly. He surmises it has something to do with the way he was raised. "I come from compassionate people," he says.

Back to Business

Crabtree is also one terrific businessman. He oversees a friendly and professional staff offering Hudson Valley-influenced, sophisticated American fare. Although it's now very in vogue, Crabtree has been using local products since 1992. He serves Bedford Hills' Rainbeau Ridge goat cheeses as well as produce from local farms. "We're always looking for great local products," he says.

Crabtree has also assembled an award-winning wine list that has been honored year after year by the Wine Spectator. Crabtree's Kittle

House is one of the 76 restaurants from around the entire world to receive their Grand Award honoring establishments with "an uncompromising, passionate devotion to the quality of their wine program." Crabtree says his wine cellar started with just a simple passion for wine. While dating Amy, they found they enjoyed wine. "When I started the Kittle House, I thought, wouldn't it be nice to have a really nice wine list with maybe 100 great wines." Once that was accomplished, he aimed for 150, and so it goes. Five years ago, he built a tasting room next to the cellars. It's a gorgeous wood-paneled oasis for oenophiles.

European tourists visiting New York regularly take limousines up from New York City for a night of wining and dining in the suburbs. They admire the depth of the wine list; and, "it's more economical than the city," adds Crabtree. Another source of pride is the three stars (top honor) Crabtree's Kittle House has received from The New York Times; although he notes that keeping the stars is a lot harder than getting them. "Once you have the notoriety,

people can change their attitude; they come in looking for something wrong, rather than discovering what's wonderful," he says with a smile, as if to say, it's just part of the business.

What excites Crabtree today is the relatively new team he's put together with General Manager Glenn Vogt and Chef Kevin Bertrand. "There's such synchronicity—the three of us work especially well together. It feels like the place has been infused with new blood," he says. You can almost hear Crabtree's creative juices humming.

Maybe someday, John Crabtree will put pen to paper, but for now, he is busy living the great American novel. And who knows, perhaps he has touched more lives this way. No doubt his passion has brought joy and happiness, as well as a good meal, to many.

JEAN SHEFF is a Chappaqua-based writer and editor. She has enjoyed dining at the Kittle House, but this is the first time she personally met John Crabtree.

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