

# In scenic Simsbury, Conn., the past prevails



A symbol of Simsbury: The 165-foot-tall Heublein Tower, built for liquor and condiment magnate Gilbert Heublein in 1914. (Jim Church/Simsbury Historical Society)

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*Second in a month-long series spotlighting the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Distinctive Destinations for 2010.*

Poking around Rosedale Farms & Vineyards in Simsbury, Conn., I felt like Peter Rabbit with a secret fruit addiction. The strawberries, primed for picking, dared me to step off the dirt path and pluck one, two, maybe three. As I strategized my attack, a truck drove up and stopped, a poof of dust atomizing the air.

Quick, hide: It's Farmer McGregor.

No, wait, freeze: That man is smiling warmly and holding a pile of berries in the palm of his hand. For me to eat. Gee, thanks, Farmer Epstein.

Rosedale's co-owner, first name Marshall, encourages visitors to explore his family's 110 acres and savor their bounty. In addition to the sweet-as-candy strawberries, there's wine made from grapes grown on his property; peaches; squash; lettuce; sweet corn, whose stalks form the walls of a fall maze; and two acres of flowers overseen by the family matriarch.

This year Rosedale turns 90, and because of the Simsbury Land Trust, we can expect 90 years more. By placing more than 830 acres of local land under easement, the nonprofit group guarantees that the fields of today will not become the strip malls of tomorrow.

"We want to preserve the character and legacy of Simsbury," said farm manager Jon Kozlowski, Epstein's son-in-law. "We are concerned about living in a town that is not fully developed, in an area abundant with history going back to Colonial times."

The protective shield doesn't stop at the farmland borders. Founded in 1670 by English settlers, the town 12 miles northwest of Hartford covers just 34 square miles but packs in four historic districts plus assorted structures listed on the National Register of Historic Places: the 19th-century Old Drake Hill Bridge, abloom with flower boxes and hanging baskets, for example, and the Simsbury 1820 House, birthplace of Gifford Pinchot, the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service and, appropriately enough, a committed conservationist. (It's now a B&B.)

"We want to show people that history is alive," said Sarah Nielsen, executive director of the Simsbury Main Street Partnership, who nominated the town for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Distinctive Destinations designation. "It's not just old buildings and museum collections."

On the main drag of Hopmeadow Street, the Phelps Tavern Museum provides a visual lesson about Simsbury as told through 14 period and modern structures, including the tavern built for Capt. Elisha Phelps in 1771.

"Hops were grown in Connecticut," said guide Barbara Strong as we stood in the front room of the dual-purpose watering hole/travelers' lodge, the smoky scent of the cooking fireplace still lingering in the air. "Beer was the drink of choice in the 1700s. No one drank water back then. It was considered unhealthy."

The tavern is one of two buildings original to the site; the others, such as the one-room red schoolhouse and the Victorian probate court, were moved from elsewhere in the Simsbury area. However, their "outsider" status does not diminish their impact.

Ensign-Bickford was, and still is, one of the biggest employers in town. Its widget: fuses. Things that make other things go boom. The company donated to the museum a 1966 building filled with samples of its equipment, including fuses whose names -- Hemp, Special XX, Gutta Percha -- seem better suited to marijuana strains than explosive wicks.

"This is the industrial history of Simsbury," said a retiree from nearby Bristol, who in his free time is trying to visit every historical society in the state. "It is as much a part of the town as the mining settlement and the transcontinental railroad."

For more historical acknowledgments, I stopped for a bite at Abigail's Grille and Wine Bar, housed in a Revolutionary War-era public house, Pettibone's Tavern. Though it might seem odd, in the spirit of Simsbury I recommend ordering a Smirnoff vodka tonic and, when your entree arrives, giving your dish a generous splash of A.1. Steak Sauce. Then before tucking into your meal, take a moment to thank Gilbert Heublein, the German native who made a fortune selling alcoholic beverages and condiments for America's tables. He and his family summered in a five-story tower atop Talcott Mountain, a few miles from town. The site, noticeable from a number of vantage points, is as attached to place as India's Taj Mahal and Seattle's Space Needle.

"The tower is definitely a symbol of Simsbury," said Alex Rickert, a seasonal park interpreter. "It sticks up out of nowhere in the Farmington River Valley."

During the warmer months, staff members lead tours of the house, starting at the front door and ending closer to the clouds. According to Rickert, however, the park might extend the tour to include the 1 1/4 -mile hike up the mountain. As one who made up her own facts during the trek, I can say in hindsight: I wish I'd had a guide when the valley erupted with explosions. I passed them off as the fuse company detonating new products but was later corrected by a local man standing at a scenic overlook. "We have two shooting ranges," he said. "One is a gun club, the other is the police department's." Glad I wasn't a moving target, or on the lam.

Though I arrived a few days before the tower's official opening, Rickert agreed to stop gardening to show me around. We ascended floor by floor, pausing in our climb to inspect a small museum on the second floor showcasing the products that made Heublein rich and beloved at cocktail parties and barbecues. As we progressed to the top, Rickert explained that in 1943, the family sold the residence to the Hartford Times (now Courant), which used it as a gathering place for newsworthy individuals (Ronald Reagan, Frank Lloyd Wright) and events (the Republican Party asked Gen. Dwight Eisenhower to run for president here).

The stairs ran out in the former ballroom, now an enclosed observation deck unadorned except for the 360-degree views of the surrounding landscape. To the north lay western Massachusetts; to the east, Hartford and its compact skyline. Looking west, I revisited the farms and golf courses that had padded my hike up. To the south, the Sleeping Giant (a.k.a. Mount Carmel) rested on his side, ignoring the hikers on his left hip.

Every hearty trek deserves a treat, and mine sat in a freezer on a farm that has been active since 1768. Protected by the Simsbury Land Trust, Tulmeadow Farm features cut flowers and homemade ice cream in its front yard and crops in its back fields. The conservation group created a short walking path lined with placards describing the terrain and reassuring visitors worried about the fate of the Metacomet Ridge, the 20-million-year-old geologic line that runs from Massachusetts to Long Island Sound. In 1998, 17 area towns signed an agreement pledging to preserve the vista and habitat and protect the ridge from development. So if you're looking to set up a mountaintop Starbucks, go find another mound.

Before heading back for my cone, I considered taking a photo but realized it wasn't necessary: I could return to Simsbury in any number of years and find the scene unchanged.