

# SAVOR LIFE

{ adventures }





# *Be Merry at Merrie Mill*

Merrie Mill Farm and Vineyard in Keswick is Charlottesville area's newest tasting room with a playful spirit

**Story and Photos by Arielle Patterson**

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Guy Pelly, Co-Founder & Vineyard Manager  
 Elizabeth Pelly, Co-Founder & Creative Director  
 Willow & Clementine, Associates  
 Photo by Kate Thompson

The rural community of Keswick, located outside of Charlottesville, is a picture-perfect countryside. Sprawling fields with horses and rolling green hills catch your eye as you meander through the mountain town. A long stretch of road leads to a fork in the road at Merrie Mill Farm, with a sign pointing left towards the brand-new vineyard. While a traditional, farmhouse-style tasting room has become the expectation for Charlottesville-area wineries, an unexpected surprise awaits at Merrie Mill Farm & Vineyard.

“We wanted always to design a place that was completely unique,” explains Merrie Mill co-owner and vineyard manager, Guy Pelly. “We looked at what other people were doing, and we felt that quite often it was different variants of the rustic barn.”

Guy and his wife, Elizabeth, bought the 413-acre historic Merrie Mill Farm in 2018. The Pellys first fell in love with the area in 2017 after attending a friend’s wedding at nearby Castle Hill Cider. Once they returned home to London, Guy started looking at property in Keswick to open their own vineyard. The Pellys moved across the Atlantic and currently live in Merrie Mill Farm’s main house, originally built in 1857.

While both Guy and Elizabeth, who serves as the vineyard’s creative director, have backgrounds in business and hospitality—he owned bars and nightclubs in London, while Elizabeth’s grandfather founded the Holiday Inn hotel brand—the winemaking process was a new adventure for the duo.

“I loved the idea of doing it, but I didn’t have the expertise,” Guy says. “I knew from the start that I needed someone to help me do that, so that’s what I did.”

The Pellys received support from the community, a region known for producing top-rated vintages from homegrown vines. They enlisted the help of a vineyard management consultant who taught them about soil testing and planting grapes. The Pellys learned that most of the property has an uncommon soil called Manteo soil.

“It’s a really rare soil for Virginia,” explains Guy. “Usually in Virginia, you grow grapes in red clay. Virginia has become really, really good at growing grapes in this soil and making really nice wine, but no one would say it’s ideal.

He describes the preferred conditions for growing grapes. Manteo soil, as opposed to red clay, is rocky and well-draining,

which is better for the grapes. This soil is particularly good for producing Cabernet Sauvignon, a wine that typically doesn’t fare well in Virginia’s clay-based soil.

The couple planted their grapes on 12 acres of vineyards and were excited to enjoy the literal fruits of their labor. However, an industry-devastating frost in 2020 destroyed Merrie Mill’s first viable crop. They started again in the spring with seven types of grapes, and the Pellys plan to serve Merrie Mill’s white wines by spring 2022 and reds by the end of the year.

While it’ll be a little bit longer until Guy and Elizabeth will be able to pour their own vintages, that didn’t stop them from officially opening their tasting room over Memorial Day weekend this year.

At first glance, from the outside, Merrie Mill’s tasting room is simply a beautifully restored barn, blending perfectly with the other pastoral buildings on the property. The Pellys demolished the existing tractor barn, taking advantage of the location’s views, to build Merrie Mill’s new tasting room in its place. The result: a funky, eclectic space that’s both homey and endlessly fascinating.

“What sets us apart is the look and the feel of the tasting room. It’s the kind of space where we have great views, great wine and great food, but you also want to come here and look at the space and all of the fun things within it,” Guy describes of the 5,250-square-foot tasting room.

From the variously shaped light fixtures on the ceiling and animal-themed wallpaper to the larger-than-life corkscrew and seal hanging above, the Pellys put thought into each stand-out design element.

Elizabeth worked with interior designer, Jenn Grandhamp of Kemble Interiors, to curate the tasting room, sourcing antique furnishings, personal artwork, taxidermy pieces and more into a space that you have to see to believe. The giant corkscrew hanging over the backdoors came from an art gallery in California, while the 150-year-old sea lion, floating with pink balloons, was found in an antiques gallery in Europe. The tables on the first level of the tasting room were from an old sage tree that fell down and the couple was able to repurpose. According to Guy, “everything’s got a bit of meaning,” including the use of pelican art to symbolize the Pellys themselves.

Upstairs, take in second-story views of the entire property, including the wide-

open field decorated with oversized Jacks game pieces. The Pellys want Merrie Mill to be a place where people can bring their whole family, even the dog.

"I grew up with a small farm. We've got two little girls and one on the way and I love the idea of them running around on the farm," Guy expresses.

On the back patio downstairs is even more seating with room for live music, something the Pellys have started doing now that COVID restrictions have ended.

Inside, at the shiny copper bar, flights and glasses of neighboring True Heritage wine are poured. True Heritage wines are made with grapes sourced from vineyards in the Keswick area to produce Cabernet Franc, Viognier and Petit Verdot. Guy breaks down the plan to serve True Heritage wines until Merrie Mill's grapes have matured. By next year, the tasting room will offer both, and by three years, it will be solely Merrie Mill wines.

All the wines at Merrie Mill's tasting room have been paired with the vineyard's menu of cold foods.

"Virginia is a great intersection of old-world winemaking style," says Dave Kamienski, a wine tasting associate at Merrie Mill. "We tend to make wine that pairs well with food—it's very pleasing to all palates."

The sharable platters include a charcuterie board, with meats and cheeses from around the world, a chicken salad share plate, hummus platter and a pimento cheese platter that adds a touch of the South. The tasting room receives fresh bread, delivered daily, from Albemarle Baking Company, and will also feature food trucks on-site.

The Pellys hope that Merrie Mill will be a complement to Central Virginia's other beloved wineries—bolstering Virginia's reputation as a wine destination.

"The countryside in Virginia is incredibly beautiful. You nearly argue that it's even prettier than Napa or Sonoma," Guy praises. "Virginia is creating these venues that have great quality wine, really pretty settings and it's on the East Coast."

Guy hopes to see wine lovers and travelers from across the state, and mid-Atlantic, come to Merrie Mill and experience the food, wine, breathtaking scenery and eclectic tasting room décor first-hand.

To learn more about Merrie Mill Farm & Vineyard, visit [MerrieMillFarm.com](http://MerrieMillFarm.com). 



Photo by Kate Thompson

