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County & Quinte LIVING

PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY AND QUINTE REGION



INSIDE:
The Drake Devonshire,
Water Buffalo, Murder,
and so much more. . .



The Drake Devonshire



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The Drake Devonshire is all that and more. Its hype doesn't come close to the reality. It is the Drake by the Lake. It is a nuclear fusion of urban country. It is sensory overload, a spin class for the eye. It is an eclectic mix of thoroughly random perfectly curated brilliance. It takes the disconnected oddities of two foreign worlds and smacks them into chaotic harmony. It is a bespoke hotel offering cultural sleepovers.

This side street is the new main street in rural chic. It's farmhouse industrial. It works. It works so well it should have been there forever.



It is a trip inside Jeff Stober's brain, and it's a kaleidoscope of a journey.

The yellow lights along the entrance walkway draw clientele like moths to a flame. Before visitors reach for the floating handle on the glass sheet door, it's difficult to not notice the Barn Light USA fixtures lighting the walkway. They are not the bug light glow of midsummer; they are a quirky comfortable beacon blazing a trail.

If Jeff Stober and his team of creative brains make a sidewalk this enticing, what treasures await within the newly anointed

Drake Devonshire – the Drake on the Lake in Wellington?

Certainly the hosting crew is at the top of the list. Chef Matt DeMille never strays too far from the kitchen and dining areas and general manager Chris Loane is everywhere, maybe directing traffic in the parking lot or keeping a watchful eye over the beachfront – which is a gem all on its own.

The lake is the star of this property, and owner Jeff Stober makes no apologies for his love of the temperamental shoreline. "We architecturally recreated

the Devonshire to frame that ridiculously beautiful view," he shared hours after returning to Toronto from an early November visit to Wellington. "This time of year, the lake has an attitude. During construction we would stand and watch the mist freeze and form mountains of ice. The colours over the lake are magnificent. Today started out overcast and then the sun broke through. It was a moody magical grey rainbow."

Jeff's passion for the Drake Devonshire is not abating with time. His dream of adding

a rural property to the Drake collection is realized, but he is far from finished with it. “We have always played with the ironies and juxtaposition of rural and urban.”

The Drake Hotel - the company’s flagship presence on Queen Street West in Toronto - has a rooftop garden. In the winter, a fireplace warms guests during outdoor events like maple syrup tasting. It’s perfectly orchestrated campy fun.

“We’re bringing rural out of context to an urban setting. We play a lot with rural influences at the Drake.”

Similarly, the Drake Devonshire brings urban touches to rural Prince Edward, capitalizing on the travellers. “I’m fascinated with the idea of people taking road trips,” Jeff admitted. “The Devonshire is the next generation vacation opportunity.”

He compares the Drake Devonshire with those historic vacation outposts of the 1950s and 1960s, reinvented for the next millennium. “We see the Devonshire in a similar light as leaving Los Angeles for Palm Springs, or New York City for the Hamptons. They are modern throwbacks – all of those small hotels and repurposed country inns brought into this age.”

Growing up in Montreal, Jeff spent summers visiting the eastern townships of Quebec. “They were also founded by Loyalists, and it’s the same idea of older hotels from a simpler time updated and given new life.”



The quest for a rural property started about five years ago and Jeff happened upon the Devonshire. “When I first saw Prince Edward County, I got it right away. It’s Palm Springs and the Hamptons and the Laurentians. It’s the same.”

The Devonshire was a natural but challenging addition to the Drake stable. Where others saw obstacles, Jeff and his creative village saw opportunity.

The history of the building was irresistible to his curiosity. The first structure on the property was a plain brick building built in 1860 housing the Wellington Iron Foundry. Sometime around the turn of the century W.P. Niles of the seed company fame added another building



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to the foundry and turned it into his residence. When he died, his wife's nephew assumed ownership and took in tourists during the summer, calling it Clinton Lodge. The tourism operation morphed into a nursing home called Thistle Lodge until 1974 when it was again renovated, repurposed into guest rooms, and renamed the Devonshire Inn and then the Devonshire Inn on the Lake.

Its next incarnation as the Drake Devonshire officially began when Jeff purchased the property in 2012. It has 12 guestrooms and two suites including the famed owner's suite, a multi-function room appropriately called The Glass Box, a full service restaurant, a bar, large decks, and beachfront, and a tilted piano outdoors whose sole purpose seems to be to listen to itself. That is the magic of the space – the careless happenstance of object placement hides the exceptional intention of every single element.

“There was a painful process of execution to make this look easy,” admitted Jeff, adding he loves hunting for art and treasures. His eclectic style shows at every turn. Beneath a paper and pipe cleaner suspended quilt is a two-foot long fishing lure. A short walk past the front desk is an inviting room filled with art and seating areas, leading to The Glass Box – an architecturally stunning room decorated with vintage furniture, meticulously chosen fabrics, curated art, beautiful flooring, and a ping-pong table.

“The Glass Box tells a beautiful story,” related Jeff. “It is newly architected and open for



interpretation and we wanted to make it welcoming. There's a lot going on, a lot of modern busyness, and then there's the ping-pong table. It's a throwback thing. Who doesn't want to play ping-pong? We're living in complex times, in an information revolution. We're all tied to our gadgets and

we crave simplicity. There is an insatiable appetite for that."

Those who visit the Drake Devonshire for a single purpose have a battle ahead. The mantra seems to be, "Yes, you can come for coffee," because there is a perception it is only a hotel, only open to overnight guests,

when in reality it is so open to everyone, always. Chris shared a story of a couple from Quebec who took a detour through Prince Edward on the way home. They stopped in for a coffee in the morning, took a walk through Wellington and came back for charcuterie in the afternoon, decided



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to stay for supper, and booked a room for a few nights.

That in a nutshell is the Drake Devonshire.

The setting is quaint – a lakeside venue in a charming rural Ontario town. The entrance is beguiling, and the interior stunning. Even a quick cup of coffee means experiencing more than one slice of the Devonshire pie. As overnight guests check in, day visitors relax in several dining areas, and others explore the beach. It is impossible not to see more than expected, to not feel part of something wonderful.

To Jeff, it is a canvas created by a village of creative minds.

“It’s a cultural community centre, a living breathing contributing member of the neighbourhood. It’s a role all of the great hotels have always played. We curate our food, our mixology, our art, our rooms, our outdoor spaces. We are hospitality curators and cultural preservationists.”

Acknowledging it would have been much more efficient to build a 200-room cookie cutter hotel, Jeff stressed that simply is not his goal. “We want to embed ourselves deeply into our communities.



The canvas will respond to the conditions it faces. We’re just participants and it’s all about the partnership between us, our customers, municipal officials, suppliers, and neighbours.”

Relying on long-term associates to run the Drake Devonshire solidified an

immediate County connection. Chef Matt DeMille, his wife, and their families are from the area, and Matt worked at the Drake Hotel with Chris, who now lives close to work. A couple of others moved to the area, but most employees are local and by all accounts loving this new opportunity right in their backyard. Chris estimates 80 per cent of staff are local, and for many, it means changing careers and finding their dream job. “One of our front desk people used to work in factory until she came here. We’re looking for passion; we can train the skills.”

Chris sees the hotel’s role as a County concierge, giving visitors a starting point to explore the area, connecting farmers, foodies, communities, and beaches. As head chef, Matt is committed to local sources and inspiration. “We’re high volume and heavily supporting area farms. We’ve exhausted small local farms of their entire supply of rabbit, lamb, and leeks.”



In awe of Matt's resourcefulness, Chris remembered serving strawberries and tomatoes still warm from picking, going from field to table with the least amount of processing and handling. Autumn brought dishes inspired by squash and cabbage. "We're blessed with such great local choices and we let the season and the terroir dictate what we serve. People supplying our beef eat here. We're inspired by the lake to table opportunity and the availability of beautiful perch and pickerel. We build on that with a lake and sea menu. It's all connected."

Matt admits to some crossover items with the Drake Hotel, and then stressed the differences. "Our burgers are better," he smiled, leading to the next ethos of the Drake mindset. "We're elegant dining and we're true inn or tavern style. If we're open, the kitchen is open. We'll make a guy a burger when he's hungry. When the wineries are harvesting late into the evening, their people can stop by for a drink. It was a huge learning curve for us and an adjustment for the community, too. People can stop by for a drink at 9 or 10 in the evening."

With seating for 85 on the main floor, plus 45 on the patio and 48 in the pavilion, Matt can feed a crowd, but the zones are at once both open and intimate. "We're giving people options," he said, with a nod toward

the bar stocked with an array of bourbons, scotches, and wines – with emphasis, of course, on local wineries.

The menu, in Matt's words is, "Not pretentious. It reads simple but is surprising when it arrives at the table. The dessert menu has a milkshake on it."

The duo, friends and co-workers for so long, vibrate with excitement and energy in their new project. They miss nothing, focus on the most minute of details, and truly get the big picture.

"Hospitality is a term thrown around a lot," explained Matt. "This company encompasses it holistically. People come for a coffee and can watch surfers and kayakers; they come for dinner and suddenly they're treated to live bluegrass music. There is a touch of New York, a touch of Europe, and a lot of Prince Edward in every room, and it all works. It's a wonderful welcoming experience in a sophisticated setting."

They also recognize how personal the Drake Devonshire is to its owner. "This is Jeff's dream project. He spent years on the details and sourcing the décor. It's homage to his childhood."

It is all of that, and more. It is more than the hype. It is the Drake Devonshire, and it might just be the start of a new wave of hospitality in Prince Edward County.



