


4th Tour of Tours

Story and photos by Matt Freeman

When Chester County Day opens the
doors to magnificent area homes.



HOUSES CHANGE AND GO THROUGH PHASES, much as people do. That timeless-looking fieldstone farmhouse you've admired from the road might have spent many decades as a stuccoed-over Victorian when that was in fashion, before a later owner revealed the original, period-appropriate look.

That sort of transformation is one of the fascinating discoveries you can make on the Chester County Day House Tour, when scores of the finest examples of original, reclaimed, restored, new and historically significant homes open to the public on the first Saturday in October.

It's one thing to see a house in the distance and very much another to visit and see it inside and out. You discover that a classic-looking house may have a surprisingly imaginative, contemporary decor, or sumptuous gardens, or has been a home-away-from-home for an A-list rock star.

This year the featured houses are in Chester County's northeastern quadrant, and five of them are profiled here, all perfect examples of the surprises and pleasures within, waiting to be discovered on Chester County Day.

We hope you enjoy our annual preview. For tour information, see our Events sections.





Willowbrook Farm

Meg Veno says she and husband Chris searched for a farmhouse for five years before they moved to Willowbrook Farm on North Valley Road. “We’re lovers of history and all things old,” Veno says. She would go out looking at properties, and when she got home her husband would ask, “Does it speak to you?” Nothing did, until she saw Willowbrook.

The setting is secluded, well shaded with mature trees over a pond, and Valley Creek flows through it. The house was a typical farmhouse until about 1920, Veno says, when the owners, who enjoyed traveling in Europe, hired an architectural firm to renovate it as a typical European country home.

The European touches include soaring free-standing white stuccoed chimneys, white stucco exterior walls contrasting with fieldstone sections, a terrace with a pergola, a courtyard, and a hipped roof. The interiors are decorated with a variety of art and objects that are elegantly historical but arranged with a lighthearted whimsy. Meg Veno collects and makes an eclectic variety of furnishings and sells them through a business called Life’s Patina, based in a repurposed barn on the property.

Over the years many notable people have visited the farm, including Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards. And now maybe you...





Flyaway

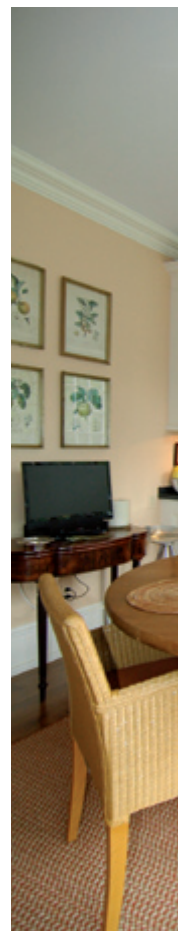
When you first see Peter and Eliza Zimmerman's fieldstone house and pastoral grounds on Chester Springs Road, they seem unchanged by the centuries since Colonial times. In fact, the original house was built in the 1760s, but the 1850s saw the addition of a structure with a mansard roof. A later owner gave it the Colonial-style stone exterior so prevalent in Chester County.

An acclaimed architect whose specialties include historic preservation, Zimmerman and wife Eliza, who works with him, set about transforming the house and the 10 acres they acquired around it. They planted trees to screen neighboring houses from view, and bought land to preserve historic outbuildings and a charming pond. On their spacious yard, once farmland, they installed more trees to "pull back the imposition of man on the landscape," Zimmerman says. An extensive brick terrace allows them to enjoy the peaceful-by-design views.

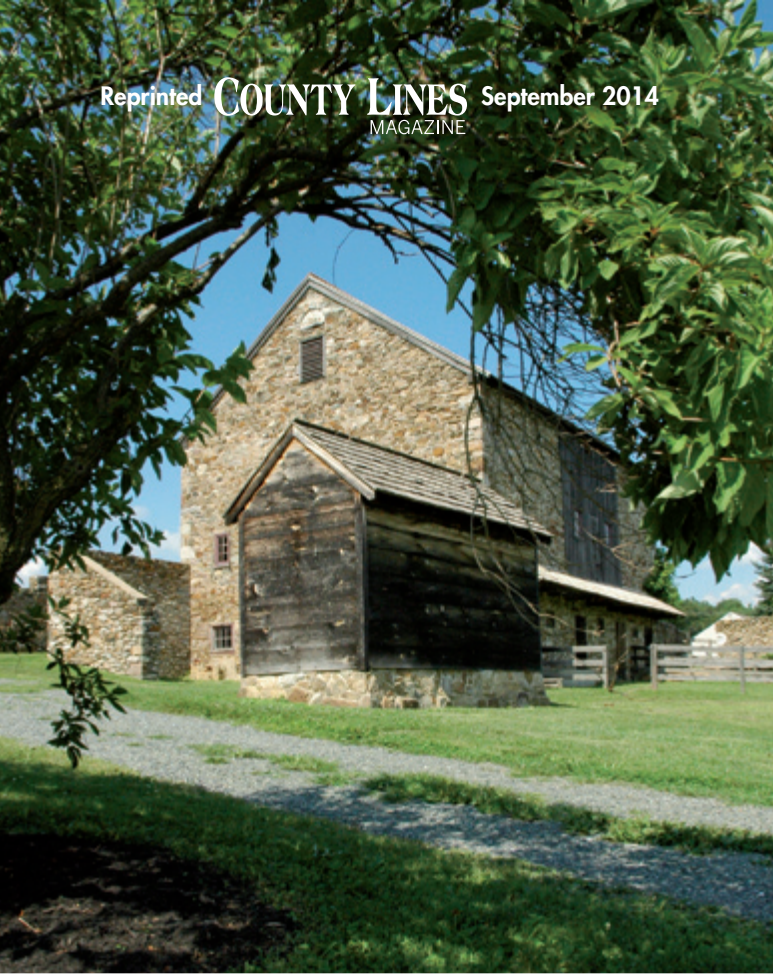
The house reflects Zimmerman's practice of combining the charm and grace of historic architecture with the comfort and functionality of modern construction. The ground floor includes a formal dining room and two living rooms, one cozily wood-paneled, another larger and airier, meant for summer use.

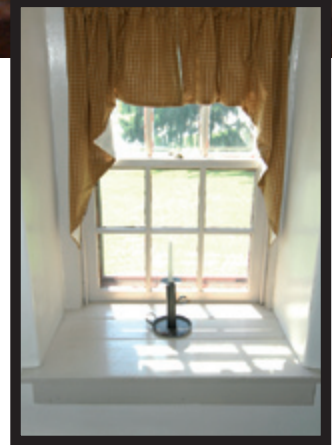
The Zimmermans felt the original kitchen's design impeded the flow through the house, so they raised the ceiling, put windows all along the exterior, and connected it to the family entrance. A French oak table, butternut cabinets and soapstone sink add to the décor.

Other changes are in store. The house, the Zimmermans say, is a kind of laboratory for them, always a work in progress.









The Whelen House

The Whelen House on Conestoga Road, now Vivian McCardell's home, is another example of a house you might assume, if you drove past it, was charmingly preserved from its earliest years. It was built as a log house in about 1750, with a stone addition 30 years later, and a summer kitchen added in 1820. (A large barn also graces the property.) At some point it was stuccoed over, a common practice at the time.

Happily, it was restored to its original appearance by the time McCardell encountered it. She'd seen it and heard about it being for sale several times over the years before she first looked at it. "When I walked in, I was like, 'this is it,'" McCardell says. "It was kind of serendipity."

Or was it destiny? McCardell says she has Quaker ancestors who lived in the area, and the Whelen family knew members of her family. But whether fate or chance brought her there, McCardell liked the house.

The rooms tend to be very large for an 18th-century home, and McCardell says it was described as a mansion from its early days. Three large walk-in fireplaces are part of the appeal, with exposed-beam ceilings in many rooms and much of the original flooring adding character.

The house is furnished with pottery and other decorative items McCardell has collected.



Snapfinger Farm

When Cindy Howe and her husband Doug first saw Snapfinger Farm, it was winter, and the Dewees Lane property didn't strike them as the sort of horse farm they had in mind. But then they saw it again when the weather had warmed and the property was green, and they thought, Howe says, it "had possibilities."

On Chester County Day, visitors can stroll about the 10-acre property and see those possibilities realized. Howe is an avid gardener, and there are plantings all around the house and garden, and a large 30-by-60-foot garden between the house and the barn, both of which were built around 1790.

The Howes renovated the barn—Doug is an avid equestrian—and the house as well. The original kitchen was cramped, so they added a larger one, with a laundry and mudroom downstairs and new master bedroom above. The decor is a contemporary mix of white and black with splashes of color throughout, and like many such updates, it works surprisingly well in this traditional Chester County farmhouse.

Another unique feature is the swimming pool outside with a round fieldstone hot tub next to it. When not in use, the hot tub cascades cool water into the pool, but when switched on, the cascade stops and the water warms.





For a VIP—Lunch and Tour

Those with a special VIP ticket (\$100, all of which benefits the Chester County Hospital) have a special treat in store: a private tour of Casa di Tutto Sorrisi (House of All Smiles) and a gourmet lunch prepared by Peter Gilmore, acclaimed chef and veteran of Le Bec Fin and his former restaurant Gilmore's, alongside homeowner Cindy McClure.

The Rosewood Lane home is like many houses in one, an eye-popping phantasmagoria of classic European architectural styles along with an elevated walkway and elaborate fountains front and back. More than 100 artisans, including stonemasons from Italy, helped craft the home, which sits on a 13-acre estate with sweeping views of the surrounding countryside. The indoors features a French style luxury kitchen, wine cellar and two-story media room.

The VIP lunch will be served on a large open terrace created in the style of a Mediterranean villa, and the menu includes a variety of turkey, salmon and vegetable sliders, pasta salad, fruit and cheese, homemade soup, beverages and desserts.

To celebrate Chester County Day in style, VIP tickets also include a preview party and reception at Vickers Restaurant on Sunday, Sept. 28, and the chance to drive a BMW on the day of the tour, courtesy of Otto's BMW.



Tally Ho!

It's early morning on Chester County Day. The weather is crisp and the sunlight filters through the treetops at the West Meadow in Historic Yellow Springs. Men and women in riding coats, high black boots and helmets, mingle and eat. The aromas of strong coffee, hot mulled cider and freshly baked pastries—provided by the Chester County Hospital Women's Auxiliary—waft over the autumn morning and growing group of spectators.

The whippers-in are sharing last minute advice. Gradually, the 20-or-so riders finish and put aside their stirrups cups. Riders mount their horses, whose warm breath hangs in the air, their hooves shuffling, still testing and scratching the slightly muddy ground. A restless horse whinnies and rears.

In the near distance, the hounds are approaching. They are alert, speak and busily sniffing the air, their noses already casting for a fox's scent. The onlookers, who have come to admire the countryside and pageantry, wish the riders good luck and back away.

At 9 a.m., the field is off! After a short while, the hounds have caught the scent. Galloping horses follow. The pace speeds up. Horns sound. A bushy red tail darts beneath a wooden fence, then hustles through a field.

After a few miles of turning and backtracking through bramble and mud—the fox is very clever—the quarry will “go to ground,” finding a hole and staying there. In America the foxhunt is really a foxchase. The fox is not harmed.

The hunt will continue for several hours. Back at West Meadow, Dr. Don Rosato, assisted by his wife Judy, will start the day by speaking on the origins of the sport and hunt attire. Sandy Dunn, Master of the Kimberton Hunt, shares the history of that Club.

By day's end, all—horses, hounds and humans—will be muddy and tired, yet exhilarated. Another Chester County Day will be done. ♦

WHERE: West Meadow in Historic Yellow Springs, across from the Washington Bldg.

WHEN: Saturday, October 4. Cars must be parked by 8:30 a.m.

BREAKFAST: Served by Chester County Hospital Women's Auxiliary

