

# The Berkshire Eagle

## Breakfast with The Eagle: How Susan Wissler developed 'nerves of steel'



GILLIAN JONES — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

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By Benjamin Cassidy, The Berkshire Eagle

WEST STOCKBRIDGE — Was Edith Wharton a breakfast person?

"Certainly, she wasn't a social breakfast person because she would take her breakfast in bed while she was writing. I imagine her breakfasts were probably spare," The Mount Executive Director Susan Wissler said in response to the question posed at No. Six Depot Roastery & Cafe on Tuesday morning. "I imagine Edith Wharton as more of a picnic person."

Wissler enjoys picnics, too — for her September birthday, she often revels in a spread at Tyringham's Ashintully Gardens — but the day's earliest meal owns her heart.



Wissler enjoyed a breakfast of fried eggs over medium with bacon and toasted Berkshire Mountain Bakery ciabatta bread.



#### ON THE MENU ...

Where we ate: No. Six Depot Roastery & Cafe, 6 Depot St., West Stockbridge

What Susan Wissler ordered: Eggs over medium with thick-cut smokehouse bacon and grilled Berkshire Mountain toast, along with black iced tea

Price: \$11 plus tax

"Breakfast is my favorite," she said between bites of eggs over medium, bacon and Berkshire Mountain toast.

She's partial to diners, though she's quick to note that West Stockbridge Public Market is currently her favorite food source in the area, particularly for takeout dinners.

"Tonight is buttermilk fried chicken, which I've already ordered two of," she said.

In 2008, Wissler inherited a situation at The Mount that would have caused plenty of institutions' executive directors to lose their appetites. Saddled with debts, Wharton's old estate was nearly foreclosed on. Wissler became interim executive director that year, succeeding her boss, Stephanie Copeland. She subsequently led the organization through a successful "Save the Mount" fundraising campaign and instituted other initiatives, such as robust partnerships with other cultural institutions, that have kept the Lenox organization financially viable. But Wissler, now long past the "interim" tag, is measured when speaking about The Mount's long-term financial health.

"There's still an incredible amount of risk because we have no endowment," she said. "We've been successful for the last eight

years in raising what we've needed to keep the doors open and do some significant capital repairs. But without an endowment, we start every year at the bottom of the hill with this huge boulder that you have to push up."

Planned giving and endowment campaigns aim to ease that burden. Yet, in the event a sizeable stone remains to shoulder, Wissler isn't one to shy away from pressure bearing down — or from a bit of a journey.

A Navy brat, Wissler moved every couple of years growing up. She spent stints at various locales along the U.S.' East Coast, Hawaii and the Philippines before enrolling at Stanford University.

"It was a great place, but it was a little overwhelming for me," she said.

She traveled to France during her sophomore year and subsequently boarded a ship for an around-the-world trip. During that voyage, she met a Greek shipping merchant, who invited her to join his family as an au pair. Wissler accepted, opting to take the year off.

"I wasn't a terribly good au pair, way too lenient with my charges," she said.

After about four months, she left the position and met a Greek couple. They lent her a Motob cane to ride around the country.

"I took the Motob cane in spring and traveled the islands, learning a fair bit of Greek in the process,

enough to be mistaken for a German, as opposed to an American," Wissler said. (Her favorite island was Ikaria, a small one near Turkey.)

Upon returning to the U.S., Wissler finished her undergraduate studies at Brown University in 1983, majoring in psychology. She started at Columbia Law School that same year. The travel bug still afflicting her, Wissler took an internship in Tokyo before graduating in 1986 and settling into a job at Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP in New York City.

"It was just the beginning of the first hostile takeover boom," she recalled.

She worked on bankruptcy and SEC-related cases, "but the bread-and-butter was definitely the takeover stuff, which I enjoyed," she said.

Work days often stretched into the wee hours. Wissler didn't mind.

"It was great training. The intensity of it was such that you kind of end up with nerves of steel. I mean nothing — even [with] the intensity of the near foreclosure in 2008, there's just no deadline that's too — you just learn to cope with incredible pressure," she said.

Her introduction to the Berkshires came when a friend invited Wissler to a Stockbridge cottage. It was February.

"It was bitterly cold, and the cottage she had had no heat, but for a wood stove," Wissler recalled.

A late-night walk resonated with her.

"[I remember] how bright the stars were. It's a very distinct memory," she said.

In the mid-1990s, Wissler made the region her permanent home following a divorce from her husband. She did pro bono work before joining Katz Murphy & Greenwald. After about six years there, she decided that she no longer wanted to work in an office.

"I took a position as a landscape gardener for, I think, \$10 an hour, which was a very interesting sociological experience," she said, noting her prior work as a trusts and estates lawyer for Pittsfield's more affluent residents.

She also worked as a painter and carpenter over a three-year period.

"It was basically going through my savings," Wissler said.

One night in 2001, a friend of Wissler's had dinner with Copeland, The Mount's then president. He asked if Copeland could use some help with operations, dropping Wissler's name as a candidate. Soon thereafter, Wissler interviewed. It was her first time on the property. She quickly grew enamored with it, relishing the walk from the top of the property down to the house.

"It was just gorgeous," she recalled.

Wharton's mansion didn't disappoint.

"The house itself is so full of light, and so soothing in a way. I just fell in love with it," she said.

She joined the staff on Labor Day of 2001 and has remained there ever since. She commutes from her home in Canaan, N.Y., where she lives on a farm with her partner, Deborah Dickman. Wissler had rented an apartment from Dickman after moving to the Berkshires.

"We immediately developed a wonderful friendship that has remained," Wissler said.

The two share a passion for rescuing animals — horses, pigs, goats and as many as 13 dogs.

"We're down to, I believe, five right now," Wissler said.

Taking over The Mount in 2008 was a salvation project. Wissler's emphasis on cultural partnerships and recurring programs, such as free jazz on the weekends, have thus far made it a successful one.

"We use programming to breathe life; we don't look at it, necessarily, as a tremendous revenue stream. But it gives reasons for people to come and to be there and to care — and to return," she said.

The 2018 season, which opens on Saturday, May 12, will add birding to the menu. Weekly "Birding at The Mount" walks, led by a Mass Audubon naturalist, will begin on June 5. They will start in the parking lot, cut through the mansion and meander through the property and woods.

"It's a beautiful walk," Wissler said.

She's also excited about bringing Pulitzer Prize-winning non-fiction author Caroline Fraser to The Mount on July 9 and 10 as part of the institution's summer lecture series.

"Our non-fiction offerings have always been great because of the lecture series, but we're really beefing up the fiction and memoir — other genres," Wissler said, citing Porochista Khakpour's talk on Aug. 17 as an example.

Wissler consulted a folder of information after being asked about summer highlights. The Mount is no longer the "silent behemoth" Wissler said she needed to revive back in 2008.

"It's hard for me to even keep up with all the offerings," she said.

*<http://www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/breakfast-with-the-eagle-how-susan-wissler-developed-nerve-of-steel,538800>*