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MICHAEL BRUNO
TOURS OLD MILL FARM

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PRIVATE OLD MILL FARM PLACES

BY MICHAEL BRUNO

1stdibs founder Michael Bruno takes a private tour of one of Greenwich's most legendary estates.



On a chilly Wednesday afternoon, I arrive at Old Mill Farm in Greenwich, Connecticut, with what feels like a golden ticket. It is rare to be granted access to such a private and legendary estate, but the owner, Richard Lichter, immediately puts me at ease.

“They do not build estates like this anymore, do they?” he proclaims as he welcomes me inside the grand 16,000-square-foot Elizabethan English Tudor he restored with his designer-wife, Margrit Strohmaier. The couple recently listed the 75-acre gentleman’s farm for \$31,500,000 with Tamar Lurie of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Greenwich.

He is right, of course. I knew it from the moment I entered its gates, driving through the meandering backcountry laced with magical James Doyle flower gardens, spring-fed lake, guest house, horse stable and bridle trails. Old Mill Farm is a pride-inducing estate—a place where legacies are born and memories are made. As a collector of fine homes myself, I know how difficult it is to leave behind an estate with such a past. Lichter recalls the first time he visited the landmark property.

“It was a sunny spring day,” he reveals as we walk the grounds with Strohmaier. “It was like being in a grand castle, yet it gave me such a happy, inviting feeling.”

In some ways, Lichter—who works in private equity—followed in the original owner’s footsteps. Investment banker and decorated World War I pilot George L. Ohrstrom commissioned architect Charles Lewis Bowman in 1927 to create his legacy home. As we continue the tour of Old Mill Farm, Lichter talks about restoring the home, its position in Greenwich history and what value a future owner may uncover beneath its beauty.

MICHAEL BRUNO: What moved you to purchase this estate?

RICHARD LICHTER: The estate is a magnificent, one-of-a-kind property. The house is solid stone (16 inches thick) with amazing architectural detailing and features from craftsmanship nonexistent today. The floor plan brilliantly integrates a large space into a very livable, cozy environment. With our renovations, we created a very comfortable, bright living space with an Old World unique architectural charm.

MB: Tell me about the renovations.

MARGRIT STROHMAIER: Our main objective was to modernize, add brightness and repair but retain all the character of the house. Specifically, we completely renovated six bathrooms and updated several others.

MB: It’s a delicate balancing act between maintaining a home’s historic character and modernizing it. What was your philosophy as you were updating the property?

MS: Our philosophy was not to do anything that changed the character of the house. We only changed things that made the home more comfortable, livable and brighter.

MB: When you purchased the property, was privacy a factor?

RL: Yes. Although Greenwich and the surrounding areas have plenty of activity, once you enter the gates of Old Mill Farm, you are in a totally private enclave. No neighbors are visible or to be heard.

MS: The property is totally enclosed with a 1.6-mile fence. Children or pets can play freely outside without thought of cars, strangers, etc. You can easily even land a helicopter in several locations on the property.

MB: The property and surrounding land are substantial. What was your approach to managing an estate of this size? And how was it different from, say, a person like me, who views it from a preservation standpoint?

RL: Of the 75 acres, about 55 are woods, which enable privacy and recreations of hiking trails. Old Mill Farm consists of four separately deeded lots, with approval for construction of four very large homes. A buyer could easily put a conservation easement on the four lots in order to create a large tax deduction and reduction of property taxes. Nothing would change at Old Mill Farm, except the owner would give up rights to build additional homes on the estate.

MB: Is it your hope to pass on the infrastructure improvements and efficiencies you’ve created to the new owner?

RL: Yes. As an experienced private equity professional, I am accustomed to turning around good companies that are run inefficiently. Similarly, with Old Mill Farm, I vastly improved its management so it operates efficiently and for a small fraction of the previous cost (literally about an 80% cost reduction). It is now a well-oiled turnkey operation requiring little management, which a new owner can easily take over with little effort.

MB: The previous owner of the home is a well-known Hollywood celebrity. Are there any elements of his ownership that still remain?

RL: Yes. Mel Gibson commissioned a most spectacular landscape design. All elements remain, but they are even better now because the hedges and trees have matured from their installation in the mid-1990s.

MB: Did it give you pause to purchase a property once owned by a celebrity? Or did you feel that it added to the pedigree of the home?

MS: We purchased the property because we loved it. The prior celebrity ownership was not a consideration, but it is additive to the estate, as many still refer to Old Mill Farm as the “Mel Gibson estate.”

MB: The home certainly has a strong Old World European feel to it. What pulled you to this style as opposed to something newer?

RL: If we had tried to create European charm in a new house, those homes always seem to come across as unauthentic and disappointing because one cannot reproduce the craftsmanship and techniques.

MB: The coat of arms collection in the great room is an intriguing addition. Can you tell us about its provenance?

MS: Yes. One of the coats of arms is from the architect, Charles Lewis Bowman, and the others are from the original family who built the house.

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MB: What kind of buyer do you see purchasing this estate?

RL: Families who want a luxurious lifestyle with great outdoor activity and have the taste to appreciate unique architecture. The property is also set up for large and intimate parties, both indoor and outdoor. In fact, the Clintons inquired about having their daughter's wedding at Old Mill Farm.

MB: That would have made for an interesting story!

RL: Indeed. And that's what we love about Old Mill Farm. It has been a wonderful life experience to live on an estate of this caliber. Few people have such an opportunity to have this experience.

Michael Bruno is the creator and founder of 1stdibs, the online luxury marketplace for antique and vintage design, and the creator of HousePad app, a tool he designed to help families refine their lives at home, launching in spring 2015. Catch the rest of his exclusive interview with Richard Lichter at www.previewsinsideout.com/oldmillfarm.