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Celebrating Local Foods of the Hudson Valley & Catskills, Season by Season

No. 22 Summer 2014

DAN BARBER'S THIRD PLATE • INVASIVE SPECIES
BILLY GOATS • FOREST FARMING • RUSSEL WRIGHT
THE INN AT POUND RIDGE



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COVER: A still life within the kitchen of The Inn at Pound Ridge;
photograph by Meredith Heuer

RIGHT: Spring starts on their way to becoming crops at Locusts on Hudson; *photograph by Meredith Heuer*





Russel Wright
circa the
mid-1950s

THE WRIGHT STUFF

Easier living through artistry

BY LAURA SILVERMAN

As in the quintessential chicken-egg conundrum, the best design seems to both spring from and engender social change. It arises from a need but also helps define desire. The renowned industrial designer Russel Wright and his wife, Mary, are credited with revolutionizing the way Americans live, and their work reflects an enormous sensitivity to the collective mindset during the years between the world wars. It was a time of real complexity, when the exuberance of the 1920s gave way to the anxiety of the Depression, and people needed hope, reassurance and a new way forward. Perhaps Russel's greatest genius lay in his understanding that real change begins at home, and that the heart of every home is the table.

Russel Wright designed in layers emanating from the table, the place where we congregate, where we share stories over meals, where the dramas of life play out. He started with tableware—his colorful American Modern ceramics are the most widely sold American dinnerware in history, and his melamine collection earned him the Museum of Modern Art “Good Design Award” in 1953—and then moved on to furniture, architecture and ultimately landscaping. Russel Wright, the first true lifestyle designer (predating Ralph Lauren by about 40 years) had an all-encompassing vision that touched every part of daily existence. He was all about simplicity, convenience and efficiency, with one very important distinction: he never sacrificed comfort and beauty.

Better Living Through Artistry

An Ohio native, Wright (1904-1976) attended the Art Students League of New York before studying for a legal career at Princeton University. He left to pursue work as a set designer in New York City and eventually started his own design firm making theatrical props. In 1927, while attending an artists' colony in Woodstock, he met a sculptor and designer named Mary Small Einstein (a relative of the more famous Albert). They married shortly thereafter and together formed Wright Accessories, launching their first line of spun aluminum serving pieces. Everything that followed—dishes, textiles and

furniture—supported the modern notion that life could be informal but organized, practical but elegant. Many of the early lines focused on serving pieces for buffets and cocktail parties because it was an easier, more casual and less expensive way for people to entertain. In 1950, Mary and Russel wrote the definitive tome on this lifestyle, with detailed instructions on everything from how to set a table to how to furnish the new open-plan home.

In Chapter 1 of their *Guide to Easier Living*, they wrote of the American people, “We are victimized by the illusions of generations who had the kinds of servants we do not have, afraid to change anything in the interest of comfort, work-saving or better family living, hearing inside our very walls the scornful whisper that we can't afford or don't know how, or haven't the taste to do things ‘properly.’” As homes slowly lost their parlors and separate dining rooms, Russel and Mary Wright helped dispense with the stale notion that formal and fancy are better. Their inexpensive, easy-care, mix-&-match designs and forms set us free.

The Wrights' partnership was a successful one, with Russel heralded as the design guru and Mary responsible for the company's innovative marketing. She was the first to dub pale wood furniture “blond,” she pioneered department store appearances and converted Russel's name and signature into a recognizable trademark on all their designs. Tragically, Mary's important role in the company was cut short when she died of cancer in 1952, leaving Russel with a business to run and their 2-year-old daughter, Annie, to raise on his own.

Russel hired a housekeeper and soldiered on, taking an even more hands-on approach to the running of the household to the care of young child. Though father and daughter still maintained an apartment in New York City, Russel turned his attention to a large piece of property in Garrison, New York, where he had long dreamed of building a home. The site was an empty granite quarry—stone from there was used in the construction of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in Manhattan—and Russel sketched out a structure buried right into the rock. He hired David Leavitt,



“The house
is with nature,
not standing
above it”

a young architect who had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright on several commissions in Japan. Together, they brought to life Russel’s vision of a house that is seamlessly incorporated into the landscape, created from elements both supremely modern and totally organic. “The house is with nature, not standing above it,” says Annie of her childhood home. When it was finished, she named it Dragon Rock because of the shape of the surrounding rock formation.

The Nature of Design

The first house ever to be featured in *Life* magazine, Dragon Rock embodies all of Russel’s theories of modern living. There are actually two structures, the main house and a smaller, one-bedroom studio where Russel worked and also lived during his later years. Both buildings are full of beautiful details transposed from nature: pine needles are embedded in epoxied walls and ceilings; stones from the quarry are repurposed as doorknobs; a cedar tree trunk serves as the main house’s principle column; butterflies and native grasses are captured between translucent fiberglass panels in a twist on Japanese shoji screens; a door is entirely covered with an enormous sheet of papery birch bark. In a cedar-lined bathroom, the low tub has a waterfall instead of a faucet, perfectly mimicking the view of the waterfall outside. Many of the textiles, fixtures and panels rotate with the seasons, changing color and texture to reflect the climate and mood. There are ingenious built-ins and systems designed to streamline effort and maximize pleasure.

It was at Dragon Rock and its surrounding 70-plus acres—known collectively as Manitoga, meaning “place of great spirit” in the language of the native Algonquins—that Wright finally found a canvas large enough to fully express his vast talent and vision. Undeterred by the condition of the grounds, which had been somewhat disfigured by a long history of lumbering and

quarrying, he began a careful manipulation of the materials at hand: trees, wildflowers, ferns, water, shade and light. He also brought in new elements, including seven different kinds of moss that he enlisted Annie’s help in painstakingly planting throughout the property. He became an inspired ecological designer, sculpting the landscape and carving out paths that would lead to the most dramatic vistas. “He loved to art direct life,” Annie recalls. “He was all about that ‘aha!’ moment.”

No detail was too small to merit Russel’s attention. His daughter remembers him setting the table for breakfast the night before so everything would be just so. Cooking and entertaining were like design projects to him, and he was passionate about every detail, from the food to the serving dishes to the table settings. Not satisfied with the housekeeper’s limited repertoire, Russel took it upon himself to cook new dishes, compiling the recipes in a large notebook that remains part of Annie’s archive. It is heavily annotated in Russel’s hand, broken down into seasonal menus with scheduled preparations and specific directions for which of his own tableware best showcases each meal. As with all his undertakings, every occasion is beautifully orchestrated and exhibits Russel’s bold, unfussy style. His ad hoc cookbook



Lunch at Dragon Rock

PHOTOGRAPH: GEORGE BILLARD

Perhaps Russel's greatest genius lay in his understanding that real change begins at home, and that the heart of every home is the table.



Russel and recipe collaborator Margaret Spader cooking together in the kitchen at Dragon Rock

contains ideas for homey meals—Chicken Fricassee and Lemon Pudding comprised Annie's favorite—and elegant ones for entertaining, like the Green and White Cocktail Party. Shortcuts and convenience foods are recommended anywhere they don't detract from the quality of the experience. More than 25 years after his death, Annie Wright, together with Mindy Heiferling, a chef and food writer, published a slightly updated version of what was essentially a complete cookbook, entitling it *Russel Wright's Menu Cookbook: A Guide to Easier Entertaining* (Gibbs Smith, 2003). In the foreword to the book, Martha Stewart, a longtime collector of Russel Wright tableware, writes, "The recipes are mouthwatering yet simple, the table settings fine yet casual, and the information as timely today as when it was originally compiled more than 50 years ago."

The same can be said for all of Russel's work. His tableware is still highly collectible and looks remarkably fresh in a contemporary setting. In 2009, *American Modern* was reissued by Bauer in its original colors of Seafoam Blue, Coral, Bean Brown, Chartreuse, Grey and White, plus four additional shades. Dragon Rock's intimate connection to nature and plan for indoor/outdoor living seem even more relevant today. Manitoga, now known as an "ecologically designed landscape and education center," is a model of sustainable landscaping. It has been deemed a National Historic Landmark and an affiliate site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and between May and mid-November offers four miles of public hiking paths as well as programs that emphasize ecology, science, art and design, including a summer series of one-week nature and design camps for children.

An essential part of the Wrights' enduring legacy is a frank pragmatism we now take for granted in this country, but a reverence for nature and the way it can enhance everyday life is equally important. Their notion of easier living requires less formality and fewer steps, but they must be the right steps, the ones that lead us always in the direction of freedom and beauty. ✂

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Moss Green Salad with Sour Cream Dressing

from *Russel Wright's Menu Cookbook:
A Guide to Easier Entertaining*
Serves 8

- 1 cup sour cream
- 2 scallions, ends trimmed, rinsed,
and cut into large pieces
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 2-3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- ½ cup crumbled Bleu cheese
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1 pound baby spinach
- 1 bunch watercress
- ½ head escarole
- 2 green bell peppers
- ½ cup thinly sliced scallion greens or chives
- ½ pound haricots verts

Combine the first five ingredients in a blender or food processor and blend until smooth. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Wash spinach, trim thick stems from watercress, and wash escarole. Dry greens well and chill. Cut off the top and a bit of the bottom from the green peppers and slice thin, lengthwise. Combine with scallions and chill.

Trim stem ends from beans and cook in a pot of rapidly boiling salted water until crisp and tender, about 2 minutes. Transfer to a colander and rinse under cold water. Dry well and chill.

To serve, combine all the chilled salad ingredients in a bowl, season lightly with salt and pepper, and then pour the dressing over the salad. Toss to coat well and serve right away, ideally on chilled plates or bowls.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, COURTESY OF MANITOGA/THE RUSSEL WRIGHT DESIGN CENTER; BELOW, GEORGE BILLARD



Wright's extensive and well-worn recipe archive