

Charles Fipke greets one of his runners in the Keeneland paddock.



# *Bluegrass* **TREASURE**

*Charles Fipke,  
the larger-than-life  
“Diamond Hunter,”  
is mining jewels  
of another kind  
at his Kentucky farm*

By Cynthia Grisolia

Photos by Anne M. Eberhardt

Charles Fipke has spent the better part of his life hunting for rare things — minerals, gold, gems. In 1991 he found the rarest of them all in the most unforeseen of places: diamonds in Canada’s far-flung Northwest Territories, an austere region north of the tree line and around 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle. Established in 1998, the Ekati Diamond Mine is now one of the world’s most successful mines.

Fipke's adventures as a geologist are so acclaimed they've been documented in not one, but two books: *Fire Into Ice* and *The Barren Lands*. He has been called driven, complex, brilliant. He's been called a real-life Indiana Jones. People who know him best though just call him Chuck. And they will tell you the one thing Chuck Fipke cares about more than the pursuit of hard, colorless minerals is the pursuit of something even more ephemeral: the perfect racehorse.

Since buying his first Thoroughbred in 1981, the Kelowna, British Columbia-based Fipke has become a prominent owner and breeder — one who is restoring methods long lost in the art of making racehorses. He breeds to race, not for sales, and he approaches matings with the same precision he uses in the chase for precious stones. "He's a student of pedigrees," said Roger Attfield, who has been training horses for Fipke since the 1990s. "He has his own theories on breeding, and he's very keen and conscientious."

Having successfully campaigned such homebreds as Ca-

nadian turf champion Perfect Soul, Queen's Plate winner Not Bourbon, Wood Memorial winner Tale of Ekati, and 2011 Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf winner Perfect Shirl, Fipke has been

compared to such fabled horsemen as Ogden Phipps and C.V. Whitney. "I definitely would like to be at that level," said the soft-spoken Fipke. "I am very interested in breeding."

And like those other luminaries of racing, Fipke believes growing good horses is best done in Kentucky. Which is good news for the Bluegrass. "If you're competitive, that's where you have to go," he said, citing the region's limestone

shelf and good weather as factors. "I don't think there is a Kentucky Derby winner that came from western Canada."

Last year Fipke bought land in Bourbon County. By summer he had relocated 138 broodmares from Darby Dan Farm where he has had a long affiliation (it still stands Tale of Ekati) and set up his own breeding operation. "I'd been shopping for about 10 years," said Fipke, who worked with well-known real-estate agent Arnold Kirkpatrick, himself a racing-industry icon and

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— Charles Fipke



The yearlings gazing out of this barn at Escondida Farm are products of Fipke's personal approach to breeding.



Farm manager Elke Krohn, leading in Bourbon Belle and her foal, helps prepare the farm's young horses for the racetrack.

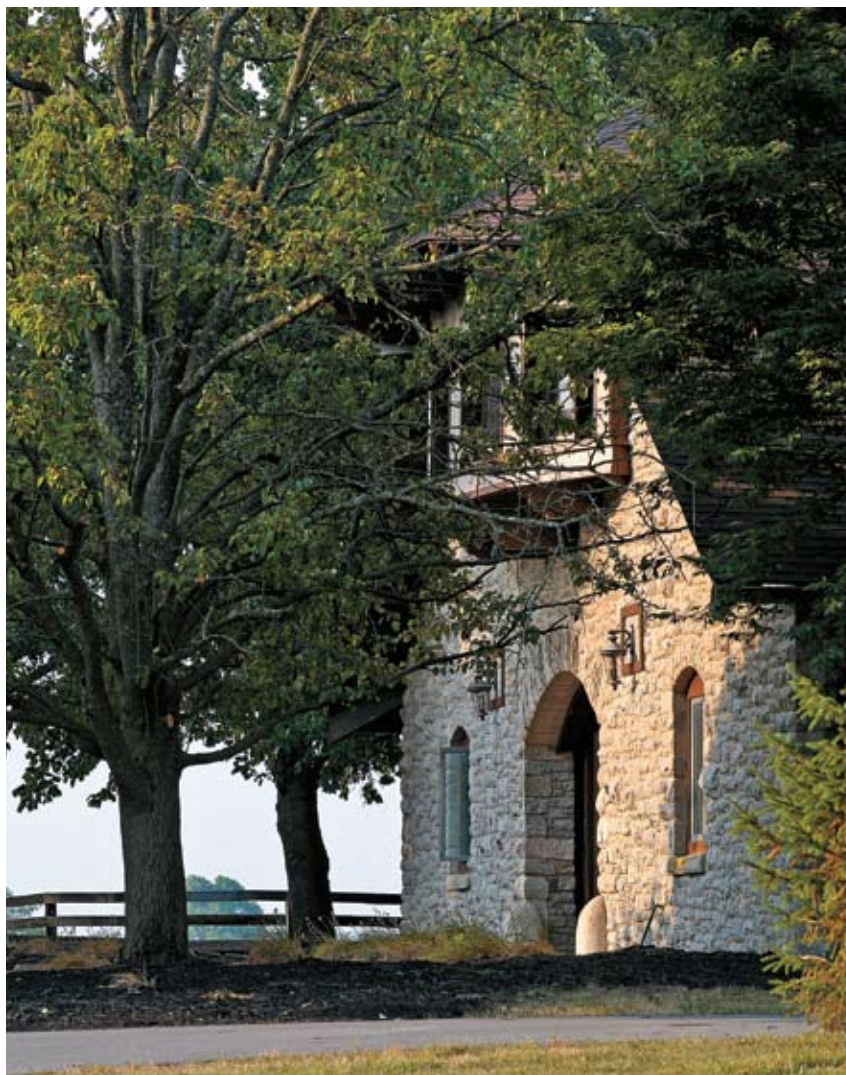
breeder (Kirkpatrick passed away in December 2011). “I was a huge lookie loo, but this farm just caught my eye. The barns are fantastic, and the house was made by the Clay family in 1820 — I’m also a bit of a history buff.”

The farm is indeed a historic place. Christened “Escondida” at the turn of the century, it was once nearly lost. But looking at the provenance of the house, it would seem Fipke, of all people, was fated to find it.

### Kentucky Hideaway

Escondida is Spanish for “hideaway.” Its 217 acres are nestled on the deeply wooded eponymous road on the highest perch in Bourbon County. The main house is 10,500 square feet, making it one of the largest homes in the Federal style in Central Kentucky. Built by Gen. Green Clay (cousin of Sen. Henry Clay), the house, it is presumed, was a wedding gift for the general’s son Sidney Payne Clay. Sidney died young, at 33, and is buried on Escondida. His grave can be found along one of the shaded trails where Fipke’s farm manager, Elke Krohn, now gallops young Thoroughbreds readying for the track. After Sidney’s death the property passed to his son and remained in the Clay family until 1896.

Since the early 20th century, various ten-



Fipke is putting his own touches on the main house, a fine example of Federal architecture built in 1820 by Gen. Green Clay. Above, fine stonework characterizes the oldest barn on the farm.

ants have lived at Escondida, but it eventually fell into ruin. “Many early Kentucky houses went through periods where families inherited them who didn’t have the money to keep them up,” noted Jane Allen Offutt, an area Realtor who was a close associate of Kirkpatrick’s. “They went through periods of neglect. Then someone comes along and hires the right architect to restore them. This is one of those houses.” In 1972 it Kentuckians Jim and Nancy Graves came along to restore Escondida with the help of Lexington architect Robert McMeekin. When they bought it, “There were hogs in the living room,” said Allen Offutt. “There were cows in the kitchen.”

In the late 1980s Escondida changed hands again, this time to luxury boat maker C.N. Ray. Like Fipke, Ray was an adventurer with a great love for breeding racehorses. Ray added two more barns and a second house, all in keeping with the 19th-century aesthetic. At this time Escondida was more than 400 acres, and Ray changed its name to Evergreen. In 2001, a few years before his death, Ray split the farm and sold the



Fipke celebrates homebred Perfect Shirl's victory in the 2011 Breeders' Cup Filly & Mare Turf.

217 acres now owned by Fipke to Jennie Turner Garlington, the daughter of media mogul Ted Turner and a journalist who owns and shows Saddlebreds. (The other half, owned by Ann Smith, is now called Leatherwood.) Turner Garlington adored Escondida, but its seclusion made it difficult to raise her young children.

Fipke moved in last August. And because more stall space was needed for his operation, he also bought a second farm, the Lobo Farm, an additional 130 acres just a short drive down Escondida Road. And "I may not be stopping," he said.

Fipke has even restored the farm's historic identity, once again dubbing it Escondida. Not for history's sake, as you might think, but as a memorial to his friend Hugo Dummett, a fellow geologist who died in a car crash earlier this year. Not only did Dummett have

a pivotal role in unearthing Ekati, he was also renowned for discovering one of the world's largest open-pit copper mines, located in Chile. Its name, strangely enough, is also Escondida.

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**— John Phillips,  
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### **Solid Foundation**

Fipke bought his first racehorse "by accident." On a Sunday afternoon horseback ride with two of his six children, they passed a band of yearlings. "I spotted this filly that I just loved," Fipke recalled. "She was gorgeous. I ended up buying her for \$16,000." Her name was Boldest Spirit. One of her foals, Travelling Spirit, became Fipke's first stakes winner and a champion 2-year-old in Canada. (Fipke, by the way, still rides, and Travelling Spirit was, for many years, his mount. "I like to ride racehorses," Fipke noted, "I like to make

them go as fast as they can go.”)

Some years later Fipke longed for a mare by Triple Crown winner Secretariat (“like everybody else,” he laughed). He found her in 1994 at a Keeneland fall sale in foal to Dixieland Band. Her name was Ball Chairman. Not only did Fipke score with the Dixieland Band offspring (Dimontina was multiple stakes-placed in Canada), but Ball Chairman’s breeding to Sadler’s Wells, then a leading sire in Ireland, resulted in Perfect Soul, who earned more than \$1.5 million and was the 2003 Sovereign Award winner as champion turf horse.

With Ball Chairman (now 24 and living in Ireland) as the grande dame in his collection, Fipke has been building a significant broodmare band ever since. Many are now at Escondida. This summer Canadian champion older female Impossible Time, daughter of Perfect Soul’s full brother Not Possible, could be seen grazing with her colt by Speightstown. In another paddock was Bourbon Belle, dam of Queen’s Plate winner Not Bourbon. She has a pretty filly by Perfect Soul. Lemons Forever, winner of the 2006 Kentucky Oaks, was there too, nuzzling her baby by Unbridled’s Song. “He’s collected a really eclectic group,” said farm manager Krohn. “For Chuck, the [breeding] foundation is female driven; that’s where he focuses. He matches female families, and his mating methods are very intricate.” The result, she believes, is a stronger horse. “People like Chuck are going to be responsible for getting the soundness back into this breed. The pedigrees are sounder pedigrees.”

Ask Fipke about digging for diamonds and he will talk of indicator minerals, spectrometers, trace elements, and kimberlitic rock. Ask him about breeding horses and the conversation sounds similar: mean dosage, theories of distance aptitude, standard Werk nicks. But for all the method, breeding horses for Fipke appears to come down to a more essential element: love.

“He’s a scientist, and he approaches breeding from the scientific point of view, but he just

loves his horses,” said Darby Dan owner John Phillips, who has worked with Fipke for more than two decades. “You see him smile in a winner’s circle more than any place.” (According to trainer Attfield this makes it “a job to get a win picture taken because he’s always kissing the horses!”) To some, Fipke’s

devotion to the sport and affection for the breed are signaling a return to a golden era. “Take Perfect Shirl,” said Phillips. “He bred her and raced her in the classic tradition of sportsman of ages gone by, and he takes tremendous pride in that.”

And there are those who believe that Fipke’s impact locally could be significant. “For the industry to have an owner-breeder like Chuck will mean that someone other than foreign interests will be trying to preserve the strength, stamina, and depth of pedigree that has made the American breed popular the world over,” says Tom Thornbury, a longtime friend who is now Keeneland’s associate director of sales.

While his breeding operation will be full tilt in Kentucky (he also has horses in Canada and in Ireland), Fipke himself may only be an occasional visitor as busi-

ness and family commitments will keep him in British Columbia — at least for now. Meanwhile, he’s putting his own touches on the house — painting, decorating, repairing fence lines, and exploring the present and past of Escondida. “There are slaves quarters in the basement,” said Krohn. “And there’s a rumor that an underground tunnel connects it to the foaling barn. We haven’t yet, but we’ll find it,” she laughed. It’s not easy keeping rare things hidden from Chuck Fipke. 🐾

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Fipke’s investment in Central Kentucky will benefit the industry.