

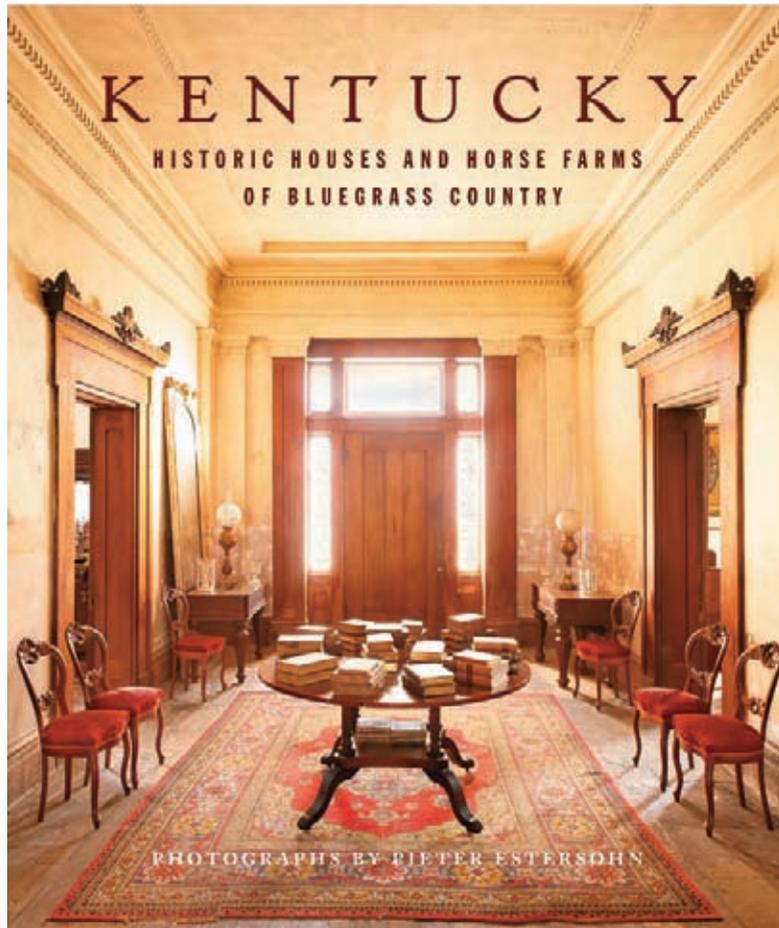


“SPECTACULAR COUNTRY”

WELL-KNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER
CAPTURES BLUEGRASS
TREASURES IN NEW BOOK

By Debra Gibson Isaacs

Pieter Estersohn pays homage to the region in *Kentucky: Historic Houses and Horse Farms of Bluegrass Country*.



Pieter Estersohn has photographed famous people, striking homes, and glamorous destinations on assignment for publications such as *Architectural Digest* and *Elle Home*. Renowned for his sense of composition and eye for detail, he is the go-to photographer for A-list editors and advertisers. He also has contributed photographs to 22 books, most of them specializing in interiors.

Estersohn showcases Central Kentucky with the release of his 23rd book — a sophisticated fine photography excursion into some Bluegrass treasures aptly called *Kentucky: Historic Houses and Horse Farms of Bluegrass Country* (The Monacelli Press).

“The book was born out of me spending a lot of time in Lexington and growing to love the region during the last 15 years,” Estersohn said. “One day my close friend Antony Beck (owner of Gainesway Farm), said, ‘You should do a book.’” After a little research Estersohn realized the architectural beauties he had come to love had not received the national

attention he thought they deserved and decided to rectify that.

The resulting 256-page book, to be released in late May, includes an in-depth look at 15 Bluegrass gems, including Gainesway Farm, Ashland, Ward Hall, and Waveland, as well as lesser-known Elley Villa, the January House, and Pope Villa. The book is an eclectic blend of public and private places, architecture and horse farms, the fully decorated and the might-need-some-attention.

Each subject receives a full chapter with ample text about the site’s history and culture, written by Michele Keith. Masterful photographs allow readers to see everything from the smallest details in silverware to the normally unseen panoramic views revealed through aerial photographs. In all, there are 150 color photographs. “This is a special and unique American region,” Estersohn said. “I love the history. I love that it was part of Virginia and was English. The whole history of how horse breeding and racing came to the region is fascinating as is the reference to Lexington being the ‘Athens of the West.’”

“Of course, I also appreciate architectural history. There are extraordinary pieces of architecture not seen on a national level, really special pieces of architecture in spectacular country.”

How Estersohn came to photograph Kentucky’s iconic horse farms and grand homes could be viewed in many ways — as a mirror of the photographer’s extraordinary career, as a reminder of how distinctive this region is, and as a treasure itself.

The mirror of a trained eye

In many ways the book’s mix of refinement and surprise reflects the photographer himself.

Estersohn, 53, was born in New York City but also grew up in California and Paris. Art and culture formed his life from an early age. The museum-filled cities introduced him to myriad vistas and cultures. Estersohn’s mother, Betty, a documentary filmmaker and painter, was also a linguist and taught him French beginning at age 6. Pieter’s father, Carl, was a pilot who showed his son the world, including England, where for two

years the youngster visited English country houses every weekend.

Wherever he called home, Estersohn was a self-described bibliophile. "I didn't have tons of toys," Estersohn recalled, "but I had an account at a book store, where I could go in and get anything I wanted, even a \$50 book."

At age 10, Estersohn purchased a book by Diane Arbus. "I spent hours looking at the photographs," he said. "This was 1975, the beginning of photography as an art form and collectible."

In high school Estersohn started collecting photographs. His first was by fashion photographer Irving Penn.

Even so, Estersohn did not want to be a photographer — yet.

"There were 10,000 other photographers in New York City," he said. "That was completely intimidating to me. But my parents encouraged me to do what excited me. They said you get longevity out of a career if you are curious and excited. That is a lesson I intend to pass on to my son, Elio."

Estersohn completed high school in California and chose New York's Sarah Lawrence College, studying economics and art history, which he considered the two sides of himself. Then fortune smiled.

"When I was 19 and a college sophomore, I went to work for Andy Warhol for two years," Estersohn recalled, "and found myself interviewing legends such as Louise Dahl-Wolfe and Alfred Eisenstaedt."

Estersohn was also eating lunch with the big names of the day. Warhol's studio, The Factory, was known as a gathering place for intellectuals, playwrights, street people, Hollywood celebrities, wealthy patrons, and even drag queens. "This was the 1980s, the time of Studio 54," Estersohn recalled. "There was a cultural confluence of society, wealth, and talent that has never been duplicated again."

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Clockwise from above, photographs in the book include images of Gainesway Farm's formal garden; the Iroquois Hunt Club; Waveland; Shaker Village; and Ward Hall.

High brow mingled with low brow."

Those two years taught Estersohn an important lesson.

"After meeting all these different people, I realized that we are all the same. Never again would I be intimidated by anybody. That is a very powerful position to come from in life. Being exposed to a lot of people and cultures is also a powerful place to go from. I have all these great stories of really great quirky people. I still love the fact that this was part of my experience."

Estersohn finished college at the Sorbonne and the Ecole du Louvre in Paris and then returned to New York City. One thing led to another for the young man, who now wanted to be a photographer.

"I went from fashion into interiors into travel photography," he said. "It all just dovetailed. My love for interiors and fashion took me to a lot of fabulous places, and it just seemed natural to photograph the locations as well."

Architecture, however, remained one of Estersohn's greatest interests. He has



renovated and decorated two homes, including an 1839 Greek Revival in Dutchess County, New York. In his time off Estersohn finds and restores period furniture.

Worthy of national attention

Estersohn had no problem finding plenty of material for his book. Choosing which to include in his book, however, proved daunting. "I wanted the book to have an encompassing experience of the region," he said. "I wanted a lot of history there. I wanted different stages of renovation. I'm not afraid of a little patina."

Estersohn spent a year photographing the book and another producing it. Along the way he developed favorite

subjects, one of which is Iroquois Hunt Club. "I could have shot a whole book on Iroquois," he said. "It is so photogenic and was a very special experience."

Another favorite is Ward Hall, the renowned antebellum Greek Revival mansion in Georgetown: "majestic and extraordinary mid 19th-century architecture furnished with some wonderful things. It has a poetry to me."

And then there is Lexington's January House, now the home of antique dealer John Wilkerson. "When you look up eccentric in the dictionary, it should have pictures of that house," Estersohn said jokingly.

Estersohn couldn't leave out Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill. "It has been documented on the national level, but

K spotlight on
PIETER ESTERSOHN

Shaker Village is so important and added a nice rhythm. It has an extraordinary history and is such a great example of minimalism.”

Each place was interesting in its own way, according to the photographer.

“I think there is something for everybody,” he said, “and I think people have their own aesthetics and will gravitate to different things.”

Estersohn had only one bad experience during the project, the day after doing his aerial photography. “I had broken my hand playing baseball with my son,” he said.

“I had a hard time holding onto the

camera and shooting with the door off the helicopter. I developed a bad muscle spasm from trying to hang out of the helicopter and wound up in the University of Kentucky Hospital the next day.”

The day after that, though, Estersohn was shooting the historic mansion Liberty Hall in Frankfort.

More than regional appeal

“I believe the book has nationwide appeal,” Estersohn said. “There are regions of the country that hold the poetic attention of readers, and I think the Bluegrass region is one of those. The region merits more attention on this level, and the

book fills that gap.”

Perhaps Gay Reading, owner of Greentree Antiques and Tea Room, said it best in his introduction to the book:

“I do believe that Pieter Estersohn’s images of the Bluegrass Country should first of all be considered as a collection of photographs of very high artistic merit. Here we see Estersohn as a connoisseur of light and form ...But the subjects are not mundane; there is a good reason for their likenesses to be taken. By considering houses and farms together, Estersohn is acknowledging what makes the Bluegrass exceptional, the land itself.” **KM**

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