

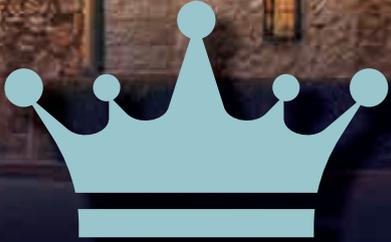
Central Kentucky's
landmark castle
wows guests
with sumptuous
lodgings, delicious
cuisine, and
memorable events



Dr. Dan Bramer,
one of the Kentucky
Castle's owners,
and daughter Isabella
participate in the
Father/Daughter
Princess Ball.






*Royal
Treatment*

BY PATTI NICKELL
PHOTOS BY LEE THOMAS



The Kentucky Castle remains a Central Kentucky landmark while fulfilling its potential as a luxury destination.

*I*t was a scene straight out of a fairy tale: beautiful princesses from throughout the realm — in their most fashionable gowns and tiaras — gliding across the burnished ballroom floor in the arms of handsome princes.

From tall ceilings, crystal chandeliers cast a rosy glow as partygoers danced to their hearts' content. What made the scene even more enchanting was that these princesses were

pint-sized and the princes not suitors, but proud fathers.

One of those princesses, 10-year-old Isabella, is the daughter of Lexington anesthesiologist Daniel Bramer, an owner of the Kentucky Castle where the glittering Father/Daughter Princess Ball was being held.

While the Kentucky Castle does indeed look as if it could be the home of royalty, it is a combination luxury hotel/restaurant, which has been getting rave reviews for its architecture and décor as well as for its generous serving of Kentucky hospitality.

The turreted castle, just west of Keeneland Race Course and straddling the Fayette/Woodford County line, is arguably the Bluegrass' most iconic structure. Rising



From left, owners Ryan Dawson, Matthew Dawson, Dan Bramer, Jody Elliott, and Brian Adkins

from rolling hills and surrounded by scenic farmland, it has been a source of awe and wonder as well as mirth and ridicule since construction first began in 1969. Locals watched in fascination as a pile of stones gradually began to take shape. Equally fascinated were visitors who, catching sight of it as they left Lexington on Versailles Road, were dumbstruck as to what this odd structure might be.

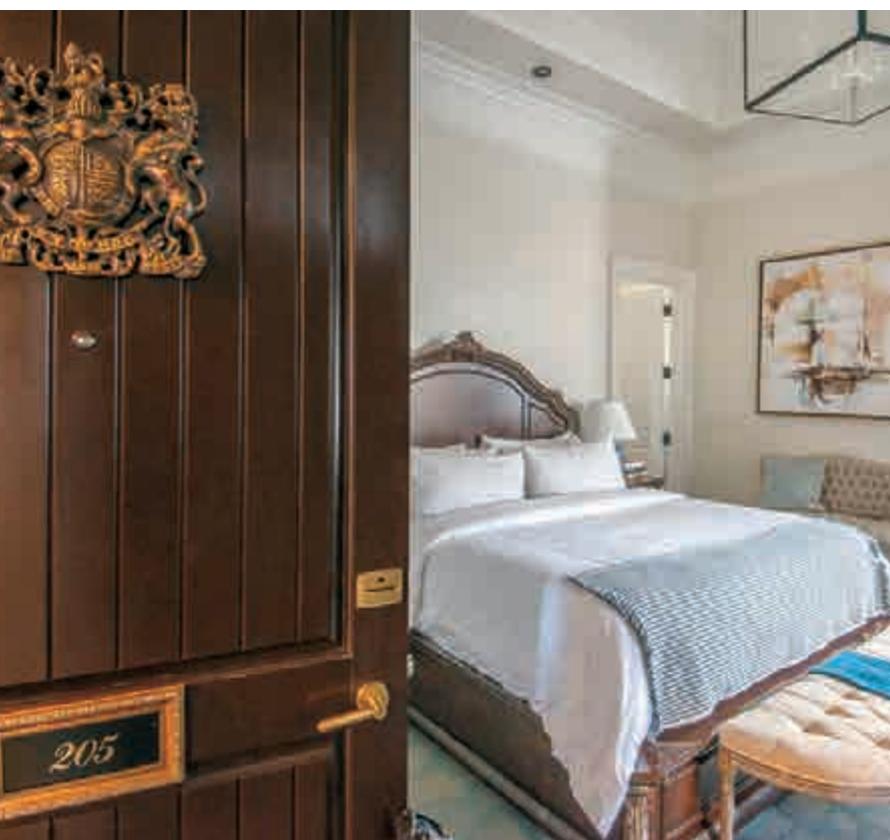
They could be forgiven their confusion as the stones themselves seemed in search of an identity, destined for an uncertain future. What began as a testament to enduring love had metamorphosed into a sad shell that sat empty for three decades.

When it finally did reopen in 2003, it struggled to find its identity, and only with the most recent incarnation has the Kentucky Castle come full circle, proving what love (and an infusion of millions of dollars) can do.





In addition to the purchase price, the owners spent some \$2 million to redecorate the castle's public rooms and guest quarters. Among many special events, the castle serves as a venue for weddings, as the wedding dress on display here attests.



The Kentucky Castle contains 13 stylishly appointed rooms and suites.

Kentucky's Taj Mahal

In 1969 Rex Martin Sr., a Lexington contractor, began building the castle as a labor of love for his wife, Caroline. She had become enamored of medieval castles during the couple's European honeymoon. Her doting bridegroom, eager to please her, took a page from the 17th-century Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, who had commissioned a white marble palace in Agra, India, to house the tomb of his beloved wife, Mumtaz, and to serve as a testament to their love.

But while Shah Jahan lost his wife to death, Martin lost his to divorce. Without a queen to inspire him, Martin's interest waned, and he abandoned the project. The unfinished castle sat vacant for 30 years.

The castle got its second act in 2003 when Miami lawyer and Lexington native Tom Post purchased it for \$1.8 million, intending to use it as a vacation home. Its troubles weren't over, however; during restoration the following year, a fire burned the castle to the ground.

Post persevered and in 2008 opened the building — not as a second home but as CastlePost, a luxury hotel and special



Chandeliers and frescoes adorn the ceiling of the main hall.

events venue. Far from being a place where magic happened, CastlePost struggled from the outset. Potential guests were put off by the steep room prices (\$3,000 per night), more characteristic of five-star English and Irish castle hotels than a Kentucky pretender.

Likewise, the restaurant never took off. Originally located in the current ballroom, it was impressive with its chandeliers and marble fireplace, but diners were less enthralled with fake flower arrangements and tables that looked as if they had been hastily assembled for a bingo game.

Intermittent special events and fundraisers drew curious local groups and kept the castle doors open, but even those events gradually became fewer and fewer.

All that has changed with the current owners, who along with Bramer include University of Kentucky emergency room physicians Brian Adkins and Matthew Dawson; Dawson's brother Ryan, an interior decorator and events planner; and Jody Elliott, a marketing and IT professional.

In addition to the \$8.7 million purchase price, the owners have shelled out nearly \$2 million to redecorate, and that figure will escalate as ambitious new projects are finalized.



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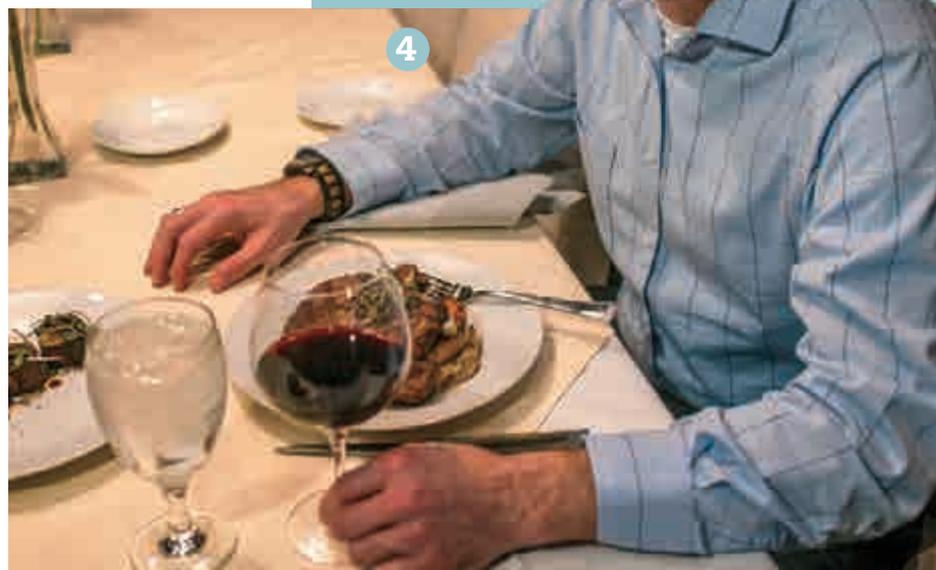
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1. A charcuterie plate tempts the appetite.

2. Beef filet is presented with rainbow chard and sweet potato and kohlrabi gratin.

3. Greens for the salad come from the castle's garden.

4. R.J. Bilinovic is the restaurant's managing partner.



4



The chef's garden includes 20 raised beds that produce vegetables and flowers.



Lisa Goodman prepares a candied apple old-fashioned.

“Buying a castle was definitely a risk for small-town Kentucky guys,” said Matthew Dawson.

Dawson says that buying the castle wasn't their original intent.

“We wanted to organize an international medical conference here in Lexington,” he continued, “but people told us it couldn't be done — that we needed a bigger geographical draw.

“We knew how enchanting the state can be with its horses, hospitality, and bourbon, so we continued in our quest,” he said.

They approached CastlePost management about holding the conference at the location as it provided such a unique setting. Their gamble paid off as the conference proved an overwhelming success.

Shortly afterward the men decided it

was time for a second gamble and began their efforts to persuade Post to sell. In 2017 their dream became a reality.

A castle fit for any crusader

Close to majestic Thoroughbred horse farms and picturesque bourbon distilleries, the 55-acre Kentucky Castle complex is part luxury hotel, part gourmet restaurant, and part special events venue.

As a hotel, it has already received design raves from no less a style arbiter than *Architectural Digest* magazine, which cited it as one of America's 100 best.

The 13 lavishly appointed rooms range from kings, with vaulted ceilings, crown molding, and oversized whirlpool tubs to suites with expansive private terraces to four two-story turreted chalets located at the outermost corners. Despite the sumptuousness of the accommodations, room rates begin at an affordable \$265.

As a gourmet restaurant, Castle Farms has as its goal to provide locally produced and sustainable meals in a sophisticated setting. Located off the main lobby in a secluded alcove and featuring such touches as gold branch chandeliers with natural cut crystals, the restaurant offers an elegant backdrop for a regal dining experience.

But despite the lavish décor of the intimate space, the food is the big draw.

“Of course, we wanted to start with in-

credibly delicious food,” explained Matthew Dawson, “but we also wanted to provide an experience that would reconnect people to that food.”

Toward that end, the owners brought on board Jason Walls to serve as executive chef. Walls also owns a Frankfort farm and is committed to overseeing a total farm-to-table experience. Working in partnership with Locust Trace AgriScience Center high school to train the next generation of farmers, Walls has initiated some innovative on-site projects.

He started with the chef’s garden, where 20 raised beds offer a mix of vegetables and flowers. Walls and his team are able to collect mint, basil, lettuce, and tomatoes to help create a true farm-to-table feel.

After the garden came the greenhouse, a walled glass tent surrounded by plants that brings the feel of the outdoors inside.

Other projects were soon underway.

The Castle apiary has 10 beehives, home to some 100,000 bees busily pollinating the farm and producing honey for use, both in the restaurant and as sou-



Events such as the interactive Murder Myster Dinner Theater series are popular draws.

venirs for guests who want to take a taste of Kentucky Castle home with them.

There’s a chicken coop, where free-range chickens daily lay eggs for the table.

A portion of the Kentucky Castle’s

small forest has been given over to a mushroom garden of inoculated logs producing shiitake, golden oyster, and other varieties.

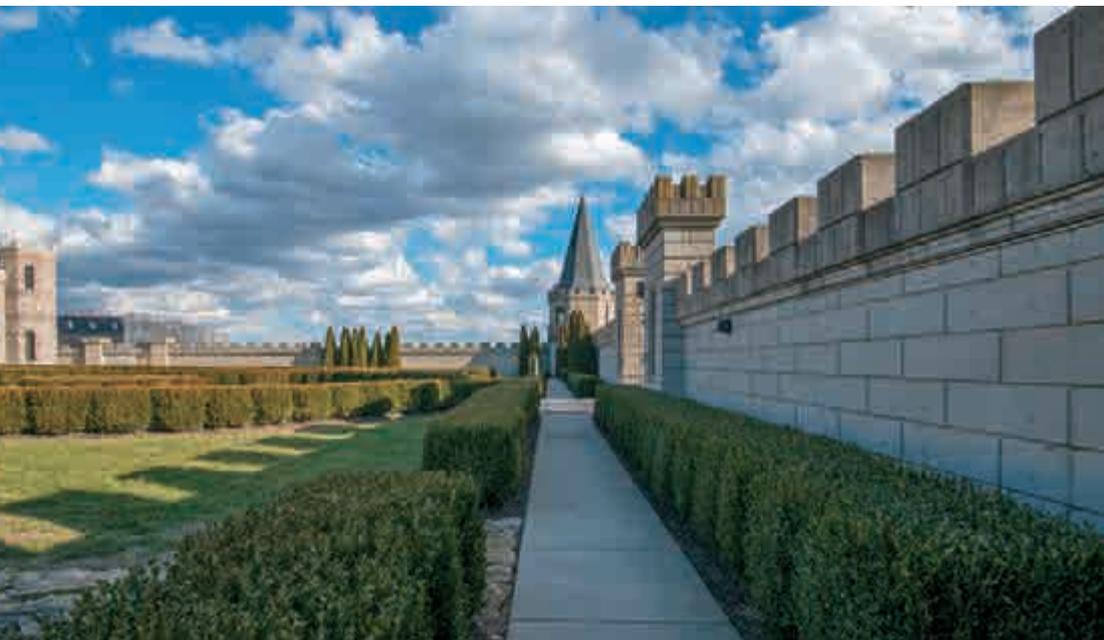
Even more innovative is the truffle orchard, where varieties such as black Périgord that can sell for up

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The Kentucky Castle's team plans more projects for the grounds, including fruit and nut orchards and a large pond to support aquaculture for the restaurant.

to \$2,000 per pound are cultivated for the restaurant.

Walls said few know Kentucky has the perfect climate for producing these highly prized European truffles and that their gardeners are taking advantage of newly developed technology to grow fungi more flavorful than those shipped across the Atlantic.

If passers-by notice a splash of purple mixing with the bluegrass in the spring, it will be the lavender fields. Fittingly, lavender is the flower of royalty, and the beds will attract bees from the apiary, thus providing a distinctive lavender flavor to their honey.

Ambitious as these projects are, Walls isn't through yet.

"We plan to construct a large pond in the front of the property to support aquaculture for the restaurant," he said. "We will have water fowl such as duck and raise native paddlefish in addition to other species of fish."

Other plans call for fruit and nut orchards and a "flerd" — a cross between a flock and a herd. Motorists can expect to see cattle, sheep, and goats in several paddocks on the Kentucky Castle's southeast side.

Finally, as a special events venue overseen by Christie Eckerline, the chief oper-

ating officer, the Castle has proved successful enough that Super Bowl-winning Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Carson Wentz chose the roof terrace as the spot to propose to his girlfriend, Kentucky native Maddie Oberg.

That was strictly a private affair, but those who want to experience the Castle in a more public setting have plenty of opportunities, said Eckerline.



Year-round events

The aforementioned father/daughter dance provided an enchanting evening, but there are events guaranteed to appeal to a wide range of interests.

If those interests run more to the macabre, consider the Kentucky Castle's interactive Murder Mystery Dinner Theater series. Presented by Murder and Merriment, the most recent production, "The Deadly Valentine," proved a campy classic.

The murder came courtesy of country music star Blake Kirby, found strangled



"Buying a castle definitely was a risk for small-town Kentucky guys."

— MATTHEW DAWSON



in his hotel bed the morning after his latest ditty had won Song of the Year at the Grammys. The merriment ensued when Detective Columbus arrived on the scene to investigate, ably assisted by dinner guests vying for a free night's stay.

The Kentucky Castle offers a year-round roster of events that range from salsa dancing classes to the Troubadour Concert Series on the roof (April through October) to the popular Bourbon University conducted by bourbon-steward-in-residence Tim Knittel.

One of the most unique offerings is the Superhero Training Day, where Wonder Woman and Spiderman give children a chance to create their own superhero name and mask, learn some superhero skills, and enjoy a power snack.

"Whether you want to do yoga with a goat or attend a concert on our rooftop, we have something for everyone," said Eckerline.

Asked why he thinks he and his partners can succeed where others had not, Dawson said the difference might be that "they [previous owners] loved the castle and enjoyed Kentucky. We love Kentucky and enjoy the castle.

"Our guests didn't need just another hotel or restaurant," he continued. "What they needed was a space to create memories and experiences that will bring them closer together.

"We think that the Castle has given them that." **KM**