

Crabtree's Kittle House Restaurant and Inn

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Supporting Farmers, Elegantly Serving Diners, Daily Bringing Joy

By ML Ball

Photographed by Karen Pearson

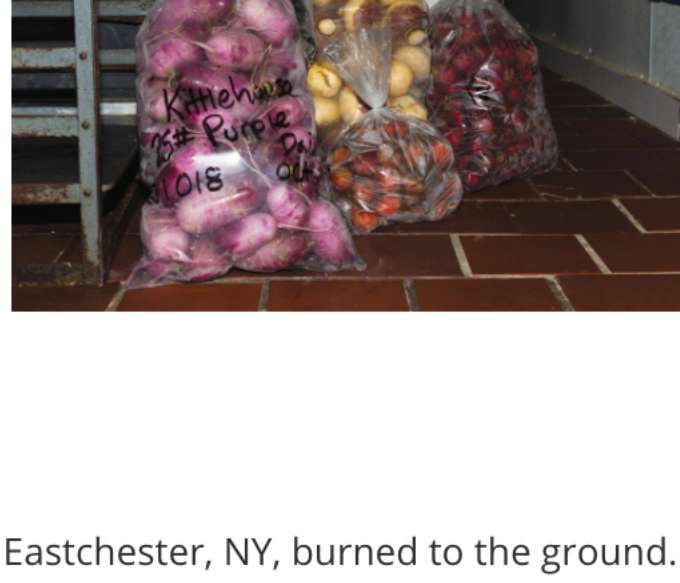
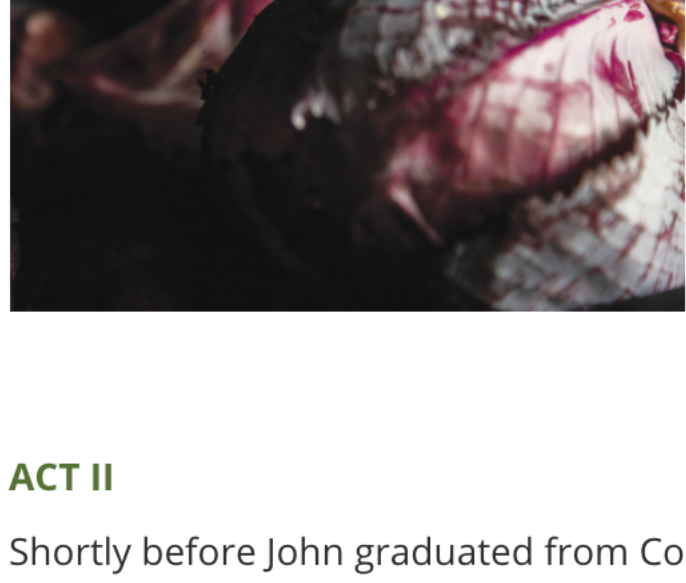
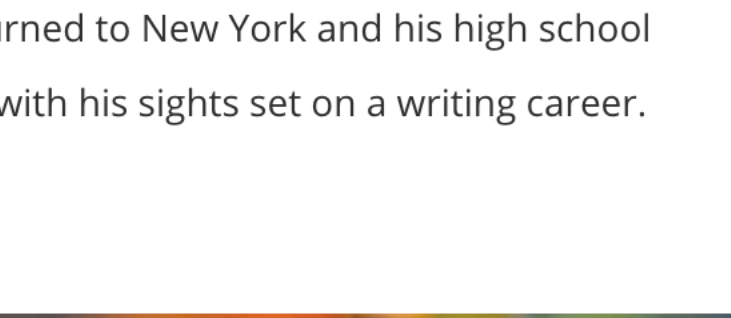
SOME PEOPLE'S LIVES READ like a play. In the case of John Crabtree, owner and general manager of Crabtree's Kittle House Restaurant and Inn in Chappaqua, NY, his really does. His undergraduate degree was in English literature and writing, his thesis was on playwriting, and his plans were to write the Great American Play. However, as it often does, life intervened.

ACT I

Growing up in Yonkers in the mid-1960s, John was an only boy with six sisters (two older and four younger). This meant "it was always ladies first," he said recently. "I have four daughters, so I'm surrounded by women. That's my life."

Once he reached his teens, John's grandparents insisted that he get away from the girls and spend some time with boys, steering him to Fordham Preparatory School, a Jesuit, all-male high school in the Bronx. This was followed by undergraduate studies at Columbia University, which included a semester in Oxford, England, and numerous hitchhiking adventures throughout Europe, along with a crashed car in Italy. He then returned to New York and his high school sweetheart (whom he would later marry), graduating from Columbia in 1978 with his sights set on a writing career.

Then, his plans changed. Or, more accurately, were changed for him.



ACT II

Shortly before John graduated from Columbia, his father's popular restaurant in Eastchester, NY, burned to the ground. After some amount of time had passed and his father still hadn't rebuilt, John offered to help him get it going again, at the same time that he was pursuing his master's degree in public administration, also from Columbia.

"Once we re-opened it, the place took off like gangbusters," John said. "I told my father, 'Okay, I'm done, goodbye.' And he said to me, 'Before you go, I found this place up in Chappaqua that's falling apart. It used to be famous back in the '50s, but we can get it for a song. Just give me two years, max. We'll fix it up, sell it and split the profits. This way, you'll have something to live on while you're doing your writing.' I thought about it and said, 'Okay, I can do two years.'"

That was 37 years ago. Needless to say, he's still there.

Once John and his father decided to buy the fixer-upper known as the Kittle House, which dates back to 1790, they soon realized they had their work cut out for them. "It was leaking everywhere, the electric didn't work and the downstairs was flooded. We had to strip it, paint it, totally redo it," John recalled.

While his father was renovating the Kittle House, John was running the rebuilt restaurant in Eastchester. Once the Kittle House was fully operational, a man came along who was interested in buying it. When he and John's father met at the Eastchester restaurant to seal the deal, "the place was booming," said John. "The man said, 'I don't want that place, I want this place.' So without talking to me, my father sold it to him, and just like that, I was out of a job."

ACT III

After the surprise twist he didn't see coming, John went to work full time at the Kittle House, now renamed Crabtree's Kittle House Restaurant and Inn. "Then I got married and we had a baby," he said. "One thing led to another, and after a couple years I said, 'I guess I'm not going anywhere for a while.'"

Realizing that short term had now become long term, John took a long look at the downstairs garages that were originally the stables when the place was a barn, housing the work horses for the surrounding orchards. He and his wife loved wine, and an idea began to percolate.

"My wife and I [had] started collecting wine years before, even during college," John said. "So I built a wall down in the basement and started talking to wine purveyors. I wanted to create a really good wine list, about 100 wines or so, and I told them to bring me their best wines. My staff and I tasted them and chose the top 50 out of the 500 wines we sampled. Over the years, we kept going and now have over 5,000 selections on our list."

John's wine cellar is now one of the biggest in the world, winning multiple awards. "People literally come from all over the world to taste our perfectly stored wines, many of which you can't find anywhere else," John stated. "One reason people love our wine cellar is that the perfect storage keeps the oldest wines fresh and vibrant."

At the same time the Kittle House was gaining international acclaim for its wine cellar, it was also becoming known in the surrounding area for using organic, locally grown produce and meats.

"We've been buying organic since the '80s, way before it was a thing, before farm-to-table," John explained. "It just kind of happened here. Foragers and farmers who were growing stuff in their yards would come to the back door and say, 'Would you like these tomatoes, would you like these things that I grew?' And from the very beginning, I said, 'Whatever it is, we'll take it, we'll work with it.' The chefs loved it, loved working with everything the farmers brought. And it just kind of started that way."

Pretty soon, John's restaurant got a reputation among the local growers. "They all knew if you wanted to sell something, go to the Kittle House, they'll buy whatever you take. So we decided to develop it that way," he said.

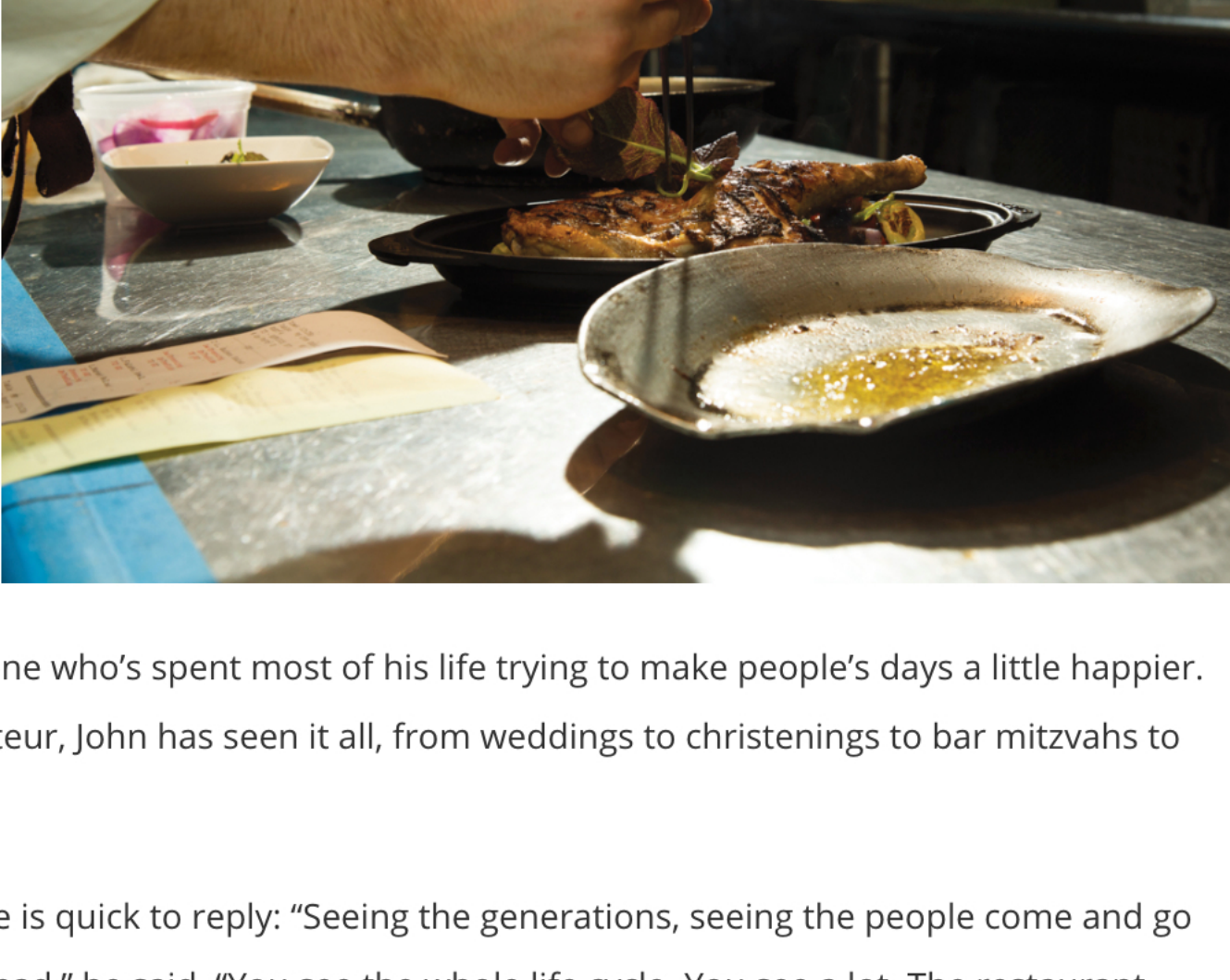
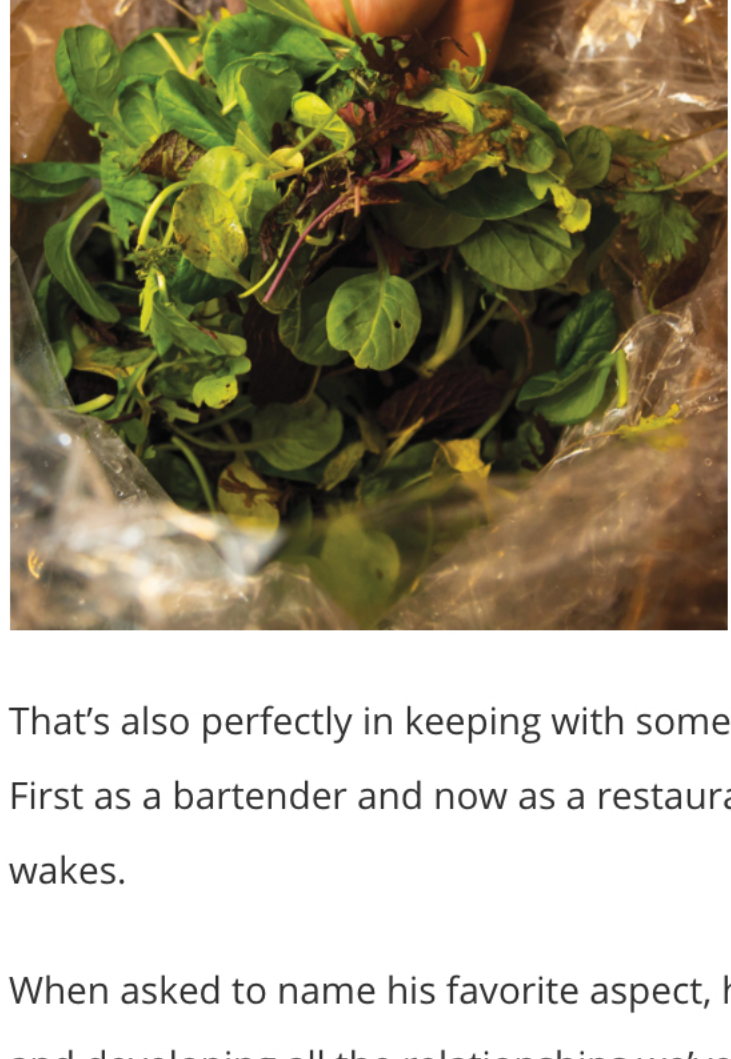
Looking back, the Kittle House was truly ahead of its time, but in the ensuing years, the world has caught up. "Everything's gone organic now," John acknowledged. "It's become a huge thing in the wine world, too. Years ago, we started looking for organic wines and organic winemakers, and all of a sudden, we realized there were people who had been doing it for a long time, so we focused on those people. Now we look for biodynamic, organic and sustainable wines. They're all around the world at this point, more in France than anywhere else."

According to John, another dramatic change in the restaurant business has been that now, people want to know where their food is coming from and how it is raised. Again, the Kittle House was ahead of its time.

"As early as 1991," John said, "we put a little blurb at the bottom of our menu that read, 'We use organically grown and locally raised products whenever available.' We didn't do it to be pioneering, we just did it. It was an old farm, so we liked supporting all the farmers."

For those local farmers, that support made all the difference. "They'd come to us and say, 'Listen, it's really hard to make a living at this, but if I grow these crops next year, will you buy them?'" John said. "And we'd say yes; we'd commit to it. So they started planning their plantings with us. We'd tell them what we needed, what we'd like to have in our kitchens, and they'd plant those things. And we'd buy all of it. Once they had a market, it wasn't a huge gamble for them to grow specialized, organic kinds of things. Now we buy from 37 different farms."

That's what it means to be sustainable.



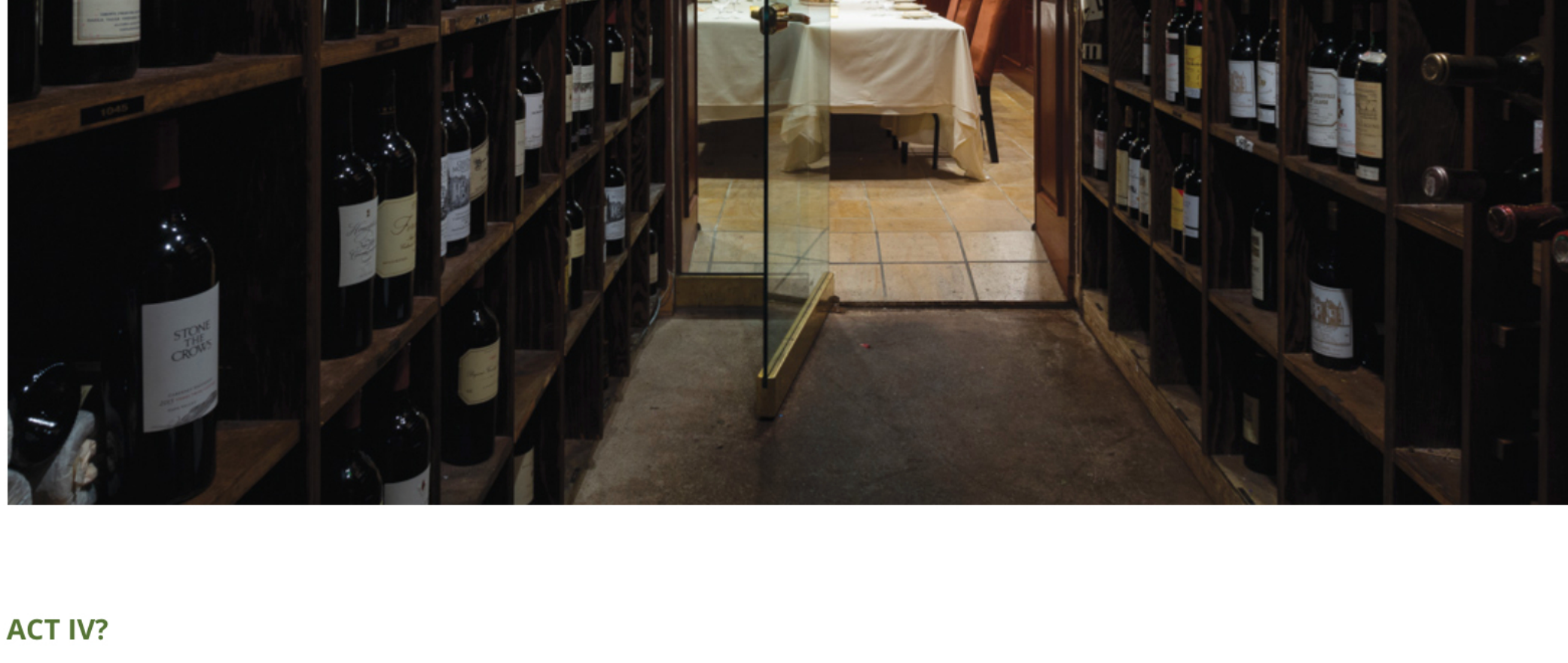
That's also perfectly in keeping with someone who's spent most of his life trying to make people's days a little happier. First as a bartender and now as a restaurateur, John has seen it all, from weddings to christenings to bar mitzvahs to wakes.

When asked to name his favorite aspect, he is quick to reply: "Seeing the generations, seeing the people come and go and developing all the relationships we've had," he said. "You see the whole life cycle. You see a lot. The restaurant business is not a job, it's your life. It's got its ups and downs, its heartbreaks and its joys. It can be very emotional."

Maybe that's why, seven days a week, people come to Crabtree's Kittle House Restaurant and Inn empty, in many ways, and go away filled.

"It's not just food—it's theater," John said. "People come in sad, or lonely, or whatever, and you talk to them and lift their spirits. We also have an inn upstairs with 14 rooms. People come stay here for weeks at a time, seasonally, coming back year after year. We have staff who've been here 30, 32 years. It's different than most restaurants."

Yes, indeed it is.



ACT IV?

And what now lies ahead for John Crabtree? Maybe one day he will retire from running the Kittle House and write that play, or that novel. Hopefully, though, if the satisfied smiles on his customers' faces are any indication, that won't be anytime soon.

To learn more about Crabtree's Kittle House Restaurant and Inn, its hours, events and history, and to make reservations, visit www.kittlehouse.com.

