

West Tisbury: A Rural Retreat on Martha's Vineyard

The carnival clown poked fun at my glasses and suggested that my strongest muscle is the one I use to control the computer mouse.

Goading patrons is his job: pay five dollars and you get three balls to pitch at a target which, when hit, launches the clown into a dunk tank. The more he gets under your skin, the more you want to knock the clown off his chair. I left humiliated and ten dollars poorer.

That was three summers ago. A year later, I obtained sweet revenge when I dispatched the clown with a laser accurate second shot. I decided to quit while I was ahead; last year, on my third visit to the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Fair, I spoke with my one-time nemesis instead of chucking balls at him.

"If you play the game, I assume you know what to expect," says Tom the clown about his sharp verbal jabs. A resident of rural Maine during the off-season, Tom is a twelve-year veteran of the carnival circuit.

He makes it a point to insult only paying customers. "I don't give it away," he says. Carnival clowning is tough work – Tom must maintain a nonstop patter of snappy insults, and can get dunked well over a hundred times on a busy summer day.

"Fairs are fairs," says Tom, but notes of the Martha's Vineyard version, "It's an interesting collection of people from all over the world." And they're brighter than most; "They get the jokes," he says.

The Fair is pretty much mandatory for locals, and is a big draw for visitors, whether they are on the Vineyard for the day, or are spending the summer.

"For a place as small as it is, they take it pretty seriously," says Tommy Johns, 42, a Kentucky native working at Smoke 'n Bones restaurant for the season.

Dunking the clown, shooting baskets to win a stuffed Homer Simpson, and losing your lunch on a ride are just a small part of the fair experience. At the heart of the Ag Fair are displays on farm life, and contests judging critters ranging from chickens to alpacas to bulls.

There are also competitions and demonstrations that pay homage to the area's rural past including a woodsman competition, a draft horse pulling contest, and the women's skillet throw.

Bob Woodruff, 71, is a conservationist, environmental consultant and gentleman farmer who has lived on the Vineyard for almost 40 years. A long-time member of the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society, for the last several years he has brought his team of oxen to the fair, using them to clear logs felled in the tree chopping contest.

"Oxen were the tractors on the Island and in New England before horses became common in the 1860s," says Woodruff, who also notes that the powerful beasts were instrumental in

constructing many of the stone walls found on the Vineyard.

"Agricultural societies popped up in an effort to promote perfection in agriculture," says Woodruff of the Martha's Vineyard Agricultural Society, which was established in 1859 and sponsors the fair. Traditionally, it was at Ag Soc fairs where particularly splendid cattle, as well as new types of grain and breeds of apples were displayed.

The current incarnation of the Vineyard Ag Fair blends old and new: in the morning you can watch goats being judged, and in the afternoon take in a hip hop demonstration. At night there are concerts, and naturally there's plenty to eat throughout the day.

The fair's substantial main hall has art, crafts, and clothing for sale. This is not the original hall; the fair outgrew that building, now known as "The Grange," and located a mile and a quarter up the road in the village of West Tisbury.

The "new" Ag Hall originally hails from New Hampshire. In 1994, volunteers from the Agricultural Society traveled there, took the building apart, and then hauled it back to the Vineyard where it was reassembled.

West Tisbury and the Village

West Tisbury comprises a good chunk of the western portion of Martha's Vineyard, and includes the port town of Vineyard Haven. As one moves west on the Island, the Vineyard's "urban" areas, namely Vineyard Haven, aggressively preppy Edgartown, and party central Oak Bluffs give way to large areas of protected land, rolling fields and quiet beaches.

Keep going west, and you hit the cliffs of Gay Head, otherwise known as Aquinnah. This being Martha's Vineyard, there are, of course, vacation homes, but West Tisbury retains a pastoral quality and includes several farms.

While West Tisbury is sizeable, the *village* of West Tisbury is little more than an intersection. Located a few minutes west of the Ag Fair site, it retains the features of a Colonial New England town with its church (whose congregation dates to 1673), general store, town hall, library, and multipurpose Grange Hall.

Alley's General Store is nearly 150 years old and maintains a funky bohemian air. Run by the Martha's Vineyard Preservation Trust, Alley's sells hardware, souvenirs, and food, as well as renting DVDs.

The Grange Hall, the Ag Fair's former home, was constructed in 1859. On different days of the week during the summer it hosts an artisan festival, an antiques show, and a farmer's market.

The artisan festival is a juried affair – there are no cheap t-shirts or shlocky knick-knacks dragged in from off-Island. "What you see are the locals," says printmaker and poet Daniel Waters who lives in nearby Christiantown, where he maintains a workshop. "Knowing this show will happen fuels artists creatively throughout the winter," says Waters, who produces colorful and striking Linoleum prints.

West Tisbury was once dominated by farmers, but now is heavy on vacationers and creative types. Many of these artists are hands-on craftspeople, throwbacks to a simpler do-it-yourself agricultural era.

One of the more substantial enterprises in this vein is [VMartha's Vineyard Glassworks Gallery and Studio](#) at 683 State Road, a few miles east of the village of West Tisbury. The gallery has glass blowing demonstrations, as well as work for sale.

Another popular locale is the [Field Gallery](#), which is in the village of West Tisbury and boasts an extensive outdoor collection of whimsical sculptures by Tom Maley. The inside of the gallery features rotating exhibitions of contemporary photography, painting and sculpture by local and nationally known artists.

Of course, Tom the clown is an artist in his own right. It's just that his work -- which could be described as an interactive performance piece -- is on display at a fairgrounds, not a gallery. Regardless, both Tom and his more high brow artistic brethren are essential to West Tisbury, a decidedly mellow slice of the Vineyard.

Further information:

Comprehensive sites including accommodations, restaurants, and attractions:

[Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce](#)

[Martha's Vineyard Online](#)

Getting on to the Vineyard from "off island":

[Steamship Authority](#)

Bus transportation on the Vineyard:

[VineyardTransit](#)

Additional Resources:

[First Congregational Church United Church of Christ](#), West Tisbury

[Guide to Vineyard Attractions](#)

[Martha's Vineyard Times](#)

[Vineyard Gazette](#)

[The Vineyard Artisans Festival](#)

[Town of West Tisbury](#)

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