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# *Living*

## An Eco-resort... Okie Style

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# An eco-resort.. Okie style

What would you do with 380 acres of valuable lakefront property? The Bracken family of Wagoner decided the best way to keep their land was to share their land



By Chelsey Simpson

Photo by Adam Miller

**S**am Bracken's official title is co-owner and executive chef, but his wife calls him the family's "Visionary CEO."

"Sam likes to say that he dragged us all into this," says Lisa Bracken, "but I just feel like we are along for a crazy, wild ride."

The family's ride began several years ago when Sam's parents, Lake Region Electric members Barth and Linda Bracken, told the family that they wanted to find something better to do with 380 acres of property they owned next to the shores of beautiful Ft. Gibson Lake near Wagoner. And by "better" they didn't just mean more productive—they wanted to make sure the land stayed in their family, and they wanted to be better stewards of the environment.

The Canebrake, an environmentally conscious, adults-only resort with well-appointed guest cottages, a fantastic restaurant and on-site activities, is what they came up with. While the whole family contributed to the idea and continues to help make

it a reality, it was Sam's baby from the start.

"Because we've had a lot of friends and family out here as guests over the years, and it's such a special place, we thought it would be nice to share it with the public," Sam says. "There's a lack of places like this in our part of the country, where adults can relax in an environment where you can do as little or as much as you'd like."

Even though Sam and Lisa spent most of the last 20 years living in Colorado, Lisa says Sam never stopped talking about "the ranch in Oklahoma."

"It was Sam's dream to do this for a long time," she says.

## Dream big

The "visionary" aspect of Sam's unofficial title comes into play when you realize just how big this dream really is.

In 2005, Lisa started offering "Okie Yoga" classes, which she taught in a large barn originally designed

Lisa Bracken practices yoga in her Yoga Barn, which has cork flooring and recycled denim insulation.

for parking tractors. While the locals might have raised an eyebrow or two at first, the Brackens knew it was all part of their master plan.

By 2006, they had completed construction on a state-of-the-art yoga facility, which they still refer to affectionately as the "Yoga Barn," despite the fact that it now sports amenities such as cork flooring and recycled denim insulation.

The Canebrake's restaurant opened in June 2007 and began offering "local ingredients with international flavor" in a part of Oklahoma where catfish and hush puppies proudly reign.

In January, they opened one of the most important aspects of any resort: the guest cabins. Nestled in the woods behind the main building, the accommodations strike the perfect balance between privacy, natural beauty and pampering.

But that's not all The Canebrake offers. Other activities on the property include bird watching, fishing ponds, five miles of trails for hiking or bike riding, a ropes course, an exercise area, a boutique, and, most recently, an "endless pool" for visitors who want to get in their laps, but aren't crazy about lake water.

Future plans include a housing development on adjacent acreage and a spa and sauna where pampering treatments will be available.

Their improvements and additions won't only benefit the visitors who stay at The Canebrake, they will also serve the community as a whole. With more than 30 employees, they are one of the biggest employers in their county.

## A filtering system

With so much development in the works it might be hard to believe that the family is devoted to good stewardship, but the idea of sustainability is woven into everything they do.

"You can walk lightly on the earth and not be condemned to a life of eating seaweed," is how Lisa describes the guiding principle behind what they are trying to offer their guests.

The name "Canebrake" comes from an indigenous bamboo that the Native Americans used to make flutes and baskets. Because it grew in the water, it acted as a filtering system, making the water downstream more pure.

Lisa says she still gets goose bumps when she thinks about the moment they first came up with the name.

"That's what we want to be," she says, "a filtering system for guests to leave cleaner, cleared and refreshed."

With that vision in mind, the family has made very conscious decisions to ensure that their facilities, the food they serve and the items they sell in their boutique are as non-toxic and energy efficient as possible.

The main building, for example, is a renovated horse barn with clay walls that never have to be painted and insulation that is 90 percent recycled. Outside of the main building, only NoVOC paints were used, which are less toxic than regular paint.

Thirty-three water wells on the property provide geothermal heating and cooling, although some traditional units are also used.

In the guest rooms, solar water heaters supplement traditional models to cut down on the amount of electricity consumed. And, last but not least, low-energy light bulbs are used in every possible socket on the property.

Sam says he knows that the idea of an “eco-resort” might be new to many Oklahomans, but he is more than happy to be a trailblazer for the hospitality industry, which has traditionally been very wasteful.

“One of the wonderful things about Oklahoma is that us Okies are a little behind the fray,” he says. “This isn’t the East or West Coast, and we like it that way. However, these business philosophies are becoming more of the norm, and we felt the timing was right to show this part of the country that you can run an ecologically friendly hospitality business.”

### A family affair

All of the Brackens’ ideas about sustainability and service come together in the restaurant, which is truly Sam’s domain.

“We are primarily interested right now in finding local products,” Sam says. “The less truck time on the road, the better. We are also interested in seasons. If it isn’t in season, we really aren’t into it.”

In addition to their local-food focus (their bison meat comes from just 20 miles away), 60 to 70 percent of their produce is organic, and all the fish they serve is responsibly harvested as close to Oklahoma as possible. At the beginning of every shift during the summer months, they send someone down to their own garden to pick the herbs, greens and other foods they will be using for that meal. It doesn’t get any fresher than that.

Sam says it isn’t just a matter of doing “what’s right” by the environment, it is also about taste and appreciating all things in their own season.

“You can get great, true, ripe, sweet, juicy tomatoes all year long, but you are going to have to find the right store and be realistic that in January they



Sam Bracken is the culinary master behind The Canebrake’s kitchen. He tries to use as many local and organic ingredients as possible.

have traveled a long way to get to your table, and if you look at the amount of resources that have been consumed, it just isn’t worth it,” he says. “It is better to eat winter vegetables and anticipate the tomato.”

What artistry Sam brings to the kitchen, Lisa brings to the Yoga Barn. Her devotion to her practice is almost ironic considering that just a few years ago she was something of a yoga skeptic.

“When we came out here, I was really not that into yoga,” she says.

She tried one class, then never went back. After a back injury, however, she decided to give it another try. She became more and more interested and even went on to get a master’s in kinesiology and become a certified yoga instructor through the Arkansas Yoga Center’s VariYoga program.

With the help of several other instructors, The Canebrake offers yoga classes seven days a week for beginners and expert yogis alike.

Lisa and Sam aren’t the only Brackens to put

The resort’s guest rooms are all unique thanks to the decorating skills of Linda Bracken. The restaurant’s kitchen is open to the dining area, and has a long bar that is often used to host cooking demonstrations and wine tastings.



their talents to use at The Canebrake. Linda, Sam’s mother, decorated the main building and every guest room herself, even donating artwork from her personal collection. Barth, the family patriarch, handles government relations and grounds work.

“He’s the mover and the shaker,” Sam says.

Sam’s brother Wally is the operation’s financial guru, handling all the numbers and keeping things running. His wife, Laura, teaches some Pilates classes and helped set up the boutique.

Together, the family hopes to fill a niche in the tourism market that no one else in Oklahoma is pursuing right now.

“We don’t want to be a dude ranch or golf course community because those things are being filled really well in Oklahoma,” Sam says. “There are a lot of great places for kids and families, but I don’t believe there is anything that has all of those things in one place for adults.”

The visionary aspect of Sam’s nature, which has served him so well at The Canebrake, extends to the rest of Oklahoma as well.

“Oklahoma needs to become a travel spot,” he says. “I’m an Okie—I know where we are—I get it. But Oklahoma has a ton to offer, and it is ready—it’s ready for people to drive three or four hours to come to a destination here.”

Of course, Sam and the rest of the Brackens would love to see The Canebrake be that destination, and they are well on their way to making it happen.

Visit The Canebrake online at [www.thecanebrake.com](http://www.thecanebrake.com) or reach them by phone at 918-485-1810. The next event they will be hosting is a scotch and cigar tasting, which will include a five-course meal, on May 20. Call to make reservations. **01**

