

Celebrating SWEET

A Wyoming
sporting paradise

by *Christiana Roussel*



GRASS



The main lodge offers luxurious accommodations and breathtaking views of the ranch's diverse landscape.



DASHUR PHOTOGRAPHY; INSET: COURTESY OF SWEETGRASS AT THUNDERBASIN



DESCENDING FROM THE CLOUDS and touching down at the Gillette, Wyoming, airport, you can practically smell the Ponderosa-pine and sage-studded prairies that Sweetgrass at Thunderbasin calls home. From there you're just a 45-minute drive from the ranch, where regenerative farming practices thrive alongside some of the finest bird hunting in the West. Truly an epic experience awaits lucky guests.

Located at the edge of the Black Hills and the Thunder Basin National Grassland, the Sweetgrass property borders the grassland on three sides. The ranch's 6,000 acres boast a diversity of flora and fauna—its wet bottomlands, open prairies and timbered hillsides home to a variety of upland birds as well as deer, elk and pronghorns.

Purchased in 2020 by Deirdre Wildman and her husband, Rick Steiner, the ranch is the culmination of a lifetime of dreams the couple shares. Deirdre's skillset includes more than two decades of culinary, farming, hospitality and event-management experience, while Rick is a retired US Army Special Forces officer and former aerospace executive who has a passion for upland bird and big-game hunting.

According to Rick: "Finding Sweetgrass was a decade-long endeavor to secure the ultimate hunting ranch for me, my wife and our family. Having searched in Colorado, New Mexico, Kansas, Nebraska and Montana, we found our ranch in the Black Hills of Wyoming, and its landscape was diverse and ideal for the ultimate wingshooting experience. We decided to turn our rural getaway into an upland hunting passion project, so that we could create an amazing space for our friends to visit and enjoy the outdoors."

It was at Sweetgrass that I recently joined a group of ladies for a "Women, Wine and Wings" weekend. Hailing from such distant states as Oregon, Texas and South Carolina, the coterie shared an appreciation for the type of shooting and high-end experiences that make Sweetgrass at Thunderbasin an ideal destination. We took advantage of all the ranch had to offer, and I quickly discovered that Sweetgrass is more than just a destination; it is a sanctuary where passions for hunting, conservation and the sporting lifestyle converge.

A SPORTING ADVENTURE LIKE NO OTHER

When Rick and Deirdre purchased the ranch, their goal was to create a world-class sporting destination combining the traditions of upland hunting and European-style shooting with the raw splendor of the American West. The ranch's vast terrain is ideal for organizing high-bird Continental-style shoots that are as challenging as they

◀ Sweetgrass offers a variety of terrain and cover—and lots of birds.

▼ Owners Rick Steiner and Deirdre Wildman at home on the ranch.

▶ Hot-barreled action on one of the lodge's driven-style courses.

are thrilling. In the hunting area known as Duck Creek Breaks, the guides tell guests, “Let the dogs do the work,” as they walk through cottonwoods and tall grasses in search of pheasants. The 300 acres of the Mae Mae Grassland provide the ideal setting for chukar as well as sharp-tailed grouse (hunnable in season). And quick, challenging shots are the order of the day in The Forest, where birds take advantage of the cover provided by the tree-lined Black Hills. The terrain is breathtaking, and as Deirdre notes: “On a clear day you can see all the way to the Bighorn Mountains!”

When guests ask, “How many birds will I get?” Rick slyly replies, “How well do you shoot?” With strong native bird populations to which are added tens of thousands annually, Sweetgrass has hosted experienced groups that have taken more than 1,000 birds in a three-day hunt. (As mentioned, sharptails are available in season, with a daily limit of three and bag limit of nine.)

For the three days of my visit, our group enjoyed mornings chasing pheasants, chukar and Hungarian partridge behind a bevy of well-trained pointing and flushing dogs. Divided into smaller groups, we traversed acres of the property—from high-desert sage prairies to cottonwood-lined creek bottoms to Ponderosa-pine forests.

Field lunches took place under custom canvas tents on rustic tables set with elegant linens, heavy silverware and pheasant-festooned plates. The on-site chef would present each course as guests regaled one another with stories from



the morning hunts. Think beetroot salad with a soft-boiled quail egg and field greens, smoked ratatouille guinea hen *en cloche* and bananas Foster upside-down cake for dessert. Bellies full, we would load up in the wagon to take on the afternoon shoot.

Sweetgrass at Thunderbasin features eight driven-style shooting courses where pheasants sail overhead and rain down as fast as you can reload. Handling that hot gun, you appreciate why Europeans employ loaders on their driven shoots. But the independent spirit of the American West reigns here, and shooters handle their own loading. You become a quick study in breaking open your gun and stuffing in shells as quickly as possible, so as not to miss—or at least not miss seeing—a bird. As is custom, shooters rotate pegs, to test their skills from different angles and approaches.

SPORTING CLAYS: PRACTICING IN STYLE

Sweetgrass's 10-station sporting clays course was designed to challenge shooters from novice to expert. With the Thunderbasin landscape as the backdrop, skills are tested on targets that mimic everything from crossing pheasants to springing teal to zipping grouse. The variety offered is a great way to warm up for a day afield or on the driven course.

According to Rick: “One of our first projects on the ranch



was to design a sporting clays course. Having been fortunate to shoot some of the best courses in the country, we wanted the course to excite those new to the sport as well as challenge guests with a competitive spirit. The unique topography allowed our partners from Promatic to use the hills and terrain to formulate the course, which ultimately created a one-of-a-kind sporting clays experience that our guests want to shoot again and again.”

To that end, I recommend engaging one of the lodge’s expert instructors to improve your performance either on the sporting clays course or the challenging 5 Stand setup.

LUXURIOUS LODGING

As you might expect, no detail has been overlooked at Sweetgrass, including where you lay your head at night. The ranch features three four-bedroom cabins and two three-bedroom cabins with full kitchens, living rooms and porches with the most spectacular views. The 7,800-square-foot lodge is an especially coveted space for guests who crave a bit more luxury. Once a private home, the lodge boasts an expansive master bedroom with a soaking tub, sauna, steam shower and walk-in closet. Two additional king suites with private baths are in a separate wing. Curated Western artifacts and an original art collection complement the 1880s Wild West Bar, cozy fireplace, gourmet kitchen, movie theater, gym, massage room and breathtaking views.

FINE DINING IN THE HEART OF WYOMING

At Sweetgrass, the sporting adventures are matched by the culinary experiences. The ranch is renowned for its commitment to fine dining, offering a gourmet menu that blends classic Western cuisine with contemporary influences.

Breakfast, lunch and dinner all feature local ingredients—from the honey in the tea to the gamebirds served at lunch to the bison prime rib cooked to perfection. Deirdre is passionate about not only the food itself, but also the manner in which each ingredient comes to her kitchen. She happily offers a tour of the farm to guests, proudly showing them the ducks, rabbits, hens, bees, mushrooms and countless vegetables—all raised on-site. There is an unwavering diligence to this regenerative aspect of Sweetgrass that you can taste in every bite that comes out of her kitchen.

“I’ve spent decades working in food and beverage,” Deirdre said. “At the ranch, I’m not restricted by what’s available to buy commercially. If I want to design a menu with beautiful heirloom beets in a half-dozen colors, I can grow them. If I want fennel pollen for an hors d’oeuvre, I can produce it. I love designing a menu from what is coming out of my farm and garden seasonally. I plan menus a year in advance of service, so I have time to not only source seed and livestock, if needed, but also to take the months necessary to propagate, transplant, grow or raise the ingredients to fulfill the menu’s requirements.”

Sweetgrass is a place where memories are made and traditions are honored.

Meals can be served in a variety of locations on the property—from the Lodge, with its 1800s-era whiskey bar and pond view; to the Rendezvous, with its 25-foot hand-carved bar and open-air patio overlooking custom firepits and the culinary garden; to the Covey Dining Room and Wine Cellar; to the Wild West Chuckwagon, overlooking the ranch’s stunning topography. If Deirdre can dream it, she will make it happen.

REGENERATIVE FARMING: CONSERVATION AT THE CORE

Beyond the sporting opportunities and luxurious accommodations, Sweetgrass is deeply committed to sustainable land management and conservation. Under Deirdre’s leadership, the ranch has adopted regenerative farming and ranching practices that not only support the health of the

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Meals are served in a variety of locations, including the Wild West Chuckwagon, overlooking the ranch’s stunning topography.





The author with the rewards of being on a hot peg during a Continental-style shoot.

how the weather impacted their growth. I've seen much prosperity in between failures along the way. I'm constantly learning, trying new things; and for me, there's no greater satisfaction than seeing the joy on someone's face trying an heirloom tomato that tastes better than any tomato they've ever had. To be able to tell the story of our livestock and show where they were born, where they were raised, how they were pastured, what they were fed and how they fit into our ecosystem—eventually ending up on the plate.”

Duck Creek Farm is the name she's given to the farming aspect of Sweetgrass. From the Duck Creek Coop comes the smaller livestock: egg-laying chickens and ducks, roasters, as well as rabbits. The Duck Creek Apiary is home to the ranch's bee population, which thrives on the ranch's wildflowers. The Duck Creek Orangery is the greenhouse where Deirdre starts seeds she's collected on her travels and where citrus trees weather the harsh colder temperatures of winter. Duck Creek Farm boasts an impressive lineup of produce not found elsewhere in the region, including dozens of varieties of peppers, tomatoes, squash, mushrooms, corn, beans, beets and greens. If Deirdre wants it on a menu, she most likely will raise it at the farm. “Fresh cuisine, organic, natural, free from all herbicides, pesticides and man-made chemicals not only tastes better, but makes you feel better,” she said. “We serve multi-course meals here at the ranch, and our guests comment frequently that although very full at the end of a meal, they don't

land but also ensure the long-term viability of the wildlife populations that call it home.

Deirdre's vision for Sweetgrass is one that balances the pursuit of sporting excellence with a profound respect for the environment. The ranch's regenerative approach focuses on restoring soil health, improving water retention and promoting biodiversity. By rotating grazing cattle in a way that mimics the natural movements of wild herds, Sweetgrass is able to improve the vitality of the land while reducing its environmental impact. These practices not only support healthier gamebird populations but also enhance the beauty and productivity of the landscape. According to Deirdre: “There's truly nothing more fulfilling or flavorful than a plant or animal you've raised from seed or birth. I know every day of the life cycle of my garden plants and the genetics of my livestock. When they were propagated, what they were fed, how they were watered,

feel bad, just very satiated—and maybe a little giddy from the wine.”

DEIRDRE WILDMAN: THE VISION BEHIND SWEETGRASS

At the heart of Sweetgrass is Deirdre Wildman, a passionate advocate for both sporting traditions and environmental stewardship. Her background in ranching and conservation has informed her approach to managing Thunderbasin Ranch, and her dedication to preserving the natural beauty of Wyoming is evident in every aspect of the Sweetgrass experience. “Equally as important as the cuisine the farm produces is the impact in the way of soil and plant health, which equates to cover for the gamebirds in the fields,” she said. “The ‘native’ population is growing every year, because we have abundant food

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and habitat resources for the birds year-round.” Additional conservation efforts include a long-term project focused on the propagation of sage grouse on the ranch. Deirdre added: “The coveys of baby chukar in the spring and the juvenile rooster pheasants parading around are payment enough for all the efforts.”

Under her leadership, Sweetgrass has become more than just a hunting destination; it’s a living testament to the idea that luxury, sport and sustainability can coexist. Deirdre’s vision for the ranch is one that honors the land, the wildlife and the people who work it, creating a sense of connection and purpose that resonates with everyone who visits.

“We have a tremendous team working tirelessly together to make the guest experience exceptional. From our Chef de Cuisine, Nik, who brings to life the menu and ingredients on the plate; to our encyclopedic-minded barista and customer-service guru, Josh; and our creative mixologist and whiskey expert, Phil. Every position has been curated and each person hand-selected for their expertise and placed on the team based on their passions and their commitment to our vision. Nothing happens on the ranch without a covey of people to help, and it simply couldn’t happen without them.”

Deirdre’s hands-on approach to managing Sweetgrass is evident in everything from the ranch’s carefully planned shoots to its regenerative farming practices. She is frequently seen engaging with guests, sharing her knowledge of the land and her passion for conservation. Her leadership has fostered a culture of excellence and respect at Sweetgrass, ensuring that every guest leaves with a deeper appreciation for both the sporting life and the environment that supports it.

**THE SWEETGRASS EXPERIENCE:
A CELEBRATION OF TRADITION
AND NATURE**

For those seeking the ultimate sporting getaway, Sweetgrass at Thunderbasin offers an experience that is as immer-

sive as it is luxurious. From the thrill of a challenging high-bird shoot to the satisfaction of a walk-up upland hunt, every aspect of the ranch is designed to celebrate the beauty and tradition of the sporting life.

But beyond the excitement of the hunt, Sweetgrass offers something more profound: a connection to the land, the wildlife and the traditions that have defined the sporting world for generations. Whether it’s the quiet thrill of watching a bird dog work through the grass, the satisfaction of a well-placed shot or the camaraderie of sharing stories around the dinner table, Sweetgrass is a place where memories are made and traditions are honored.

Sweetgrass stands as a shining example of how the sporting life can be lived with both passion and responsibility. It’s a place where the past and the future come together, where luxury and sustainability go hand in hand, and where the love of the outdoors is celebrated in every moment.

For the sportsman looking for an unforgettable adventure in one of the most beautiful corners of America, Sweetgrass at Thunderbasin is a destination like no other. Here, amid the rolling hills and endless skies of Wyoming, you’ll find not just a place to hunt, but also a place to reconnect—with nature, with tradition and with yourself. ✦

For more information on Sweetgrass at Thunderbasin, visit sweetgrass thunderbasin.com.

Christiana Roussel is a Birmingham-based editor and award-winning food, travel and lifestyle writer whose work has appeared in *Garden & Gun*, *Covey Rise*, *Good Grit*, *Sporting Classics*, *Bourbon+*, *Veranda*, *Flower Magazine*, *Birmingham Home & Garden* and several other regional publications. She is a proud member of the Birmingham chapter of Les Dames d’Escoffier as well as the Industry Advisory Board of Auburn University’s Horst Schultze School of Hospitality Management.