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Catching the view of Dixville Notch.
Photo by Eric Snyder.

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Luxury Times Five

The Lake Estate on Winnisquam sees diamonds and stars in its future

BY MIKE COTE / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE KLEMENTOVICH
 RENDERINGS COURTESY OF THE LAKE ESTATE ON WINNISQUAM

Dan Dagesse is betting \$90 million his new luxury resort in Tilton will become a New England destination for generations to come.

The Colebrook native arrived at The Lake Estate on Winnisquam by way of The Balsams. Starting as a teenager, Dagesse worked several years at the Dixville Notch resort washing dishes, making salads, operating the elevator, whatever they asked to him to do.

“Waiter. Maitre D’. Elevator operator. Doorman. I’ve done it all. I kind of fell in love with the property, and I was hurt when the Balsams shut down,” Dagesse says during a Zoom call.

Years later, after amassing a fortune operating automotive dealerships in several states, Dagesse bought the North Country property with Colebrook contractor Dan Hebert for \$2.3 million in 2011 and planned to revive it. But escalating costs and other factors led both him and Hebert to sell their stakes to developer Les Otten.

That ended Dagesse’s interest in the Balsams, but not for developing a grand resort in New Hampshire. Actually, Dagesse was considering building a hotel on the Tilton site, now home to The Lake Estate on Winnisquam, when he connected with Ed Rocco, a long-time hotel executive who convinced



Top right: The lobby lounge and other public spaces at The Lake Estate are designed to create the intimate setting of private lake estates of the Lakes Region of New Hampshire.

Above: Ed Rocco, general manager, and Patti Rocco, estate manager, are veterans of the hospitality industry.



him that a luxury resort would be a better use of the 36-acre property.

Rocco, who signed on as Winnisquam’s general manager, is a part-owner of the resort with his wife, Patti, a fellow hospitality veteran who will serve as estate manager. The Roccos recently relocated from Massachusetts to the Lakes Region, where Patti grew up.

“I want them to have skin in the game. They’re great people,” says Dagesse, who is bankrolling most of the project himself.

He recruited Hebert’s company to be the lead contractor. More than a dozen New Hampshire companies are working on the project.

When it officially begins greeting guests in September, The Lake Estate on Winnisquam will strive to become New Hampshire’s first Forbes Five-Star and/or AAA Five-Diamond rated luxury property.



The 114-room luxury resort, which includes 18 suites, was designed by Samyn-D'Elia Architects of Holderness, and is modeled after grand private lake estates.

Amenities include multiple dining rooms, a wedding and events center, a 5,000-square-foot spa, two private beaches, four pickleball courts and a tennis court, an apple orchard and a flower garden.

The 150,000-square-foot resort features room and suite doors made of solid wood that cost about \$2,500 each. During construction, paper signs posted on them listed their prices, warning workers to be careful not to scratch them.

Those doors underscore the upscale traveler the resort is targeting: People who expect 10 to 12-foot ceilings, and spacious rooms, which range from 450 feet to 1,100 square feet.



The pool area overlooking the lake, under construction in April, includes a “bourbon room” in a boathouse by the shore.



The resort's shoreline along Lake Winnisquam includes a dock with four slips. The Lake Estate's owners wanted to limit the number of boats congregating there.



More than 70% of the rooms and suites at The Lake Estate face Lake Winnisquam, and many include private balconies.



The Estate Ballroom, designed for weddings and other functions, can accommodate up to 220 guests.



During a tour of The Lake Estate in April, construction was under way on its grand public spaces.



Dan Dagesse invested nearly \$90 million on the project.

Rates range seasonally from \$399 to \$1,900 for a two-bedroom suite (in high season) per room, per night based on double occupancy. In addition to the room rate, there is a \$45 daily resort fee plus the 8.5% New Hampshire rooms and meals tax.

Dagesse, who co-founded the Nucar family of 30 auto dealerships with one of his sons, blames himself for many of the

expensive touches that have been driving up costs for a project he originally thought was going to cost \$40 million.

“OK, I said I don’t want any debt, so I’ll agree to it. They get going and then they show me this and they show me that,” Dagesse says. “And I’m saying, ‘Oh geez, I don’t want that. I want solid doors that are, you know, 2.5 inches thick.’ I don’t want the cheap glue on doors.”

Diamonds and stars

The path to the coveted five-star and five-diamond designations includes exacting specifications. Those theft-proof wooden hangars with steel rings? Patti Rocco ordered replacements after a housekeeper who used to work at the Cliff House, a luxury resort in Cape Neddick, Maine, told her that only free-standing hangars would make the cut.

(The Cliff House secured a four-star rating

from Forbes for the first time in 2023 and has been a four-diamond AAA property since 2001, still a star and a diamond shy of the zenith.)

High-end fixtures are the standard, even for garbage cans.

“Our designer keeps coming up with these beautiful baskets for under the vanity and these leather-bound trash barrels and stuff,” Patti Rocco says during a tour of the property in late April as the sound of machinery interrupted conversation.

Construction vehicles were scattered across parking lots that soon will be filled with guest vehicles and rental cars. While the exterior of the resort looked nearly complete, there was still much to do to complete the finishing work inside.

“We have 175 people in the building right now. We have 37 finish carpenters,” Ed Rocco says. “And when you see all the millwork in here, you’re going to understand why we have 13 miles of crown molding in the hotel. We have something like 68 vertical columns in the hotel. We’ll probably put a little recipe book at the end of what it took to build it.”

The marathon to build the Winnisquam from scratch is a “retirement” gig for the Roccos. Ed Rocco had a long career with Marriott and most recently was working for the Boston Marriott Long Wharf as general manager. He had been looking for an exit plan and was getting tired of driving to Boston every Monday.

“This journey actually started about five years ago. I said to Patti, ‘I still have a lot of fuel in the tank, but I don’t want to go to Boston,’” he says during a talk in a construction trailer at the work site.

They were looking for an existing business to buy or property to build a new one when their Realtor connected the Roccos with Dan Dagesse and his wife, Elaine. The couples soon learned were they were neighbors on Lake Winnepesaukee in Gilford.

“We didn’t know them. They didn’t know us. And we’ve been on the phone with them three times a week ever since. And I said to myself, ‘Boy, you can’t make this stuff up,’” Ed Rocco says.

The couples learned they had a lot of shared interests — including wanting to build “something of really beautiful quality.”

The Degasses also own homes in Florida and outside Washington, D.C.



Chris Viaud, who owns Greenleaf in Milford and Pavilion in Wolfeboro, will lead culinary operations.

“These are beautiful estates. And what he and Elaine typically do is they’ll bring an interior decorator in and they redesign,” Ed Rocco says.

When they started talking about The Lake Estate, the caliber of resort they were envisioning was at the level of Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton and St. Regis.

“Patty and I started traveling. We started staying at Ritz-Carltons, and we went to Europe and stayed in some beautiful places,” Ed says.

The resort, which stretches out over 37 acres, replaces three dozen rustic cabins that were still commanding pricey summer rentals at the former Anchorage at the Lake, even with leaky roofs, in large part due to the families that would return every summer.

The Lake Estate aims to build on that legacy, albeit in high style. Before even contracting with a marketing agency, the resort hired Fuel Hospitality, a strategic branding company based in Milwaukee that works with independent hotels and restaurants.

“They flew out a few times. They met with some historians from Tilton, and they put a 38-page style guide together for us,” Ed Rocco says. “That really became our bible, and it’s still our bible. Within that, there are four distinct colors that are colors unique to us.”

Dining at the resort also aspires to be

unique, thanks to “Top Chef” alumnus Chris Viaud, who will serve as the resort’s director of culinary arts chef, overseeing its restaurants, in-room dining, wedding and banquet business, and public events.

Viaud, who operates Greenleaf in Milford and Pavilion in Wolfeboro, is known for championing local ingredients.

“I definitely always like to focus on new American cuisine,” Viaud says during a visit to The Lake Estate. “That allows me the flexibility to take my inspiration from traveling and food that I like to eat, incorporating local ingredients and presenting them in a way that’s exhilarating and exciting and unique.”

What’s in season locally helps to dictate what’s on the menu, he says.

“We definitely love to source from the local farms around and help to really tell their story on a plate.”

Viaud will lead a team of four chefs, plus line cooks, prep cooks and bakers. The pastry chef is his wife, Emily.

“She runs her own company as well. Over the course of the years, she’s worked side by side with me within my restaurants,” Viaud says. “So it’s kind of just the next big venture for us together as a couple, and as professionals in the industry.”

It seems couples are a big theme at The Lake Estate on Winnisquam. **NH**