



At Home on the Chesapeake Bay

DC chef Robert Wiedmaier and friends
retreat to southern Maryland
to catch and cook up the big one

By David Hagedorn
Photography by Scott Suchman



IT'S LITTLE AFTER 9:00 ON A COOL THURSDAY night in early November, and Chef Robert Wiedmaier has fishing on his mind. He leaves his restaurant, one of ten he owns in the Washington, DC, area, climbs into his pickup truck and hightails it south, making the sixty-two-mile trek to Rousby Hall, the twenty-acre country home he and his wife, Polly, own on the Chesapeake Bay.

He plans to meet his buddy, fellow chef and restaurateur David Guas. The two of them will get up early the next morning and head out on Wiedmaier's boat to catch rockfish: the striped bass that's the pride and joy of the Chesapeake.

"I try to come down here two or three times a week to decompress, even if it's just overnight," says Wiedmaier. "If the fishing is really good, I may stay four days straight."

He has all the ambition and drive you'd expect in a successful restaurateur, but as much as he loves his work, the Harley-driving, rock'n'roll-loving, deal-making businessman has his eye on slowing things down. He wants to live the good life hanging out on Chesapeake Bay with Polly, their two teenage boys Marcel and Beck, and friends.



BORN IN GERMANY TO A BELGIAN FATHER AND CALIFORNIAN mother, Wiedmaier grew up in Belgium, went to hotelier school in the Netherlands, and came to the US in 1986 for a job as a saucier at the Morrison House in Alexandria, Virginia. From there he worked his way up through the ranks, eventually landing a chef job at Aquarelle in the Watergate Hotel, following in the footsteps of the late, great Jean-Louis Palladin. His first restaurant, Marcel's, opened in 1999. Now he and Polly oversee the RW Restaurant Group, which includes Brasserie Beck, several Mussel Bars, and Villain & Saint.

The Wiedmaiers fell in love with the Chesapeake ten years ago when Robert, an avid outdoorsman, bought a boat and docked it near Annapolis. They loved going out on the Bay so much, they began a five-year search for a house. What they chose met important criteria: It's not too far from the restaurants or their Kensington, Maryland home north of the capital, and you can get there without crossing the often-congested Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

Rousby Hall, on the western shore of Bay, consists of two adjacent properties dating back to one seventeenth-century estate. The Wiedmaiers bought the Customs House on four acres of land in 2011. The house, now a sprawling series of Georgian-revival additions, was initially a one-room structure where the Rousby family, agents of King Charles I, collected taxes for the crown on maritime goods entering the Patuxent River.

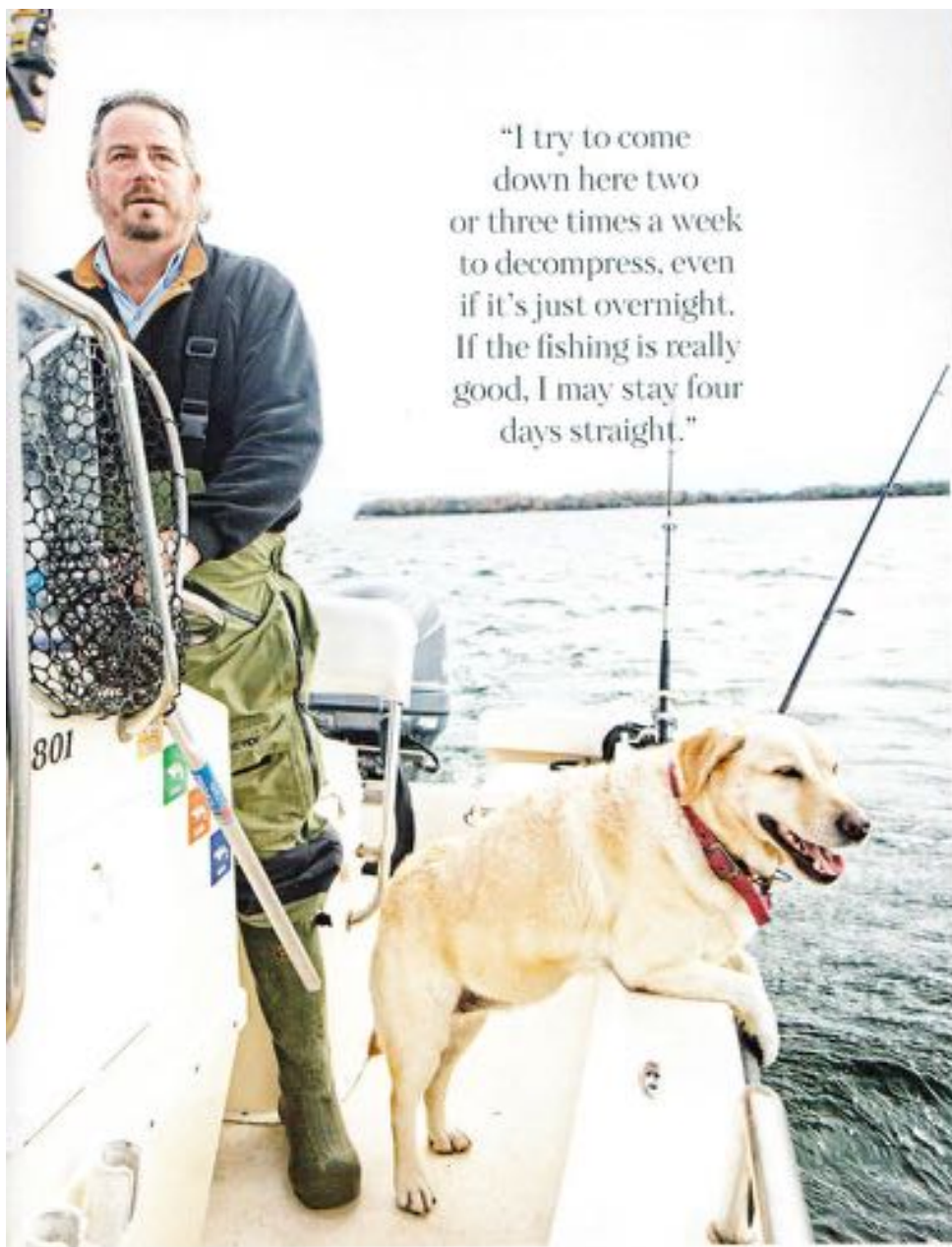
John Rousby III, the last named Rousby heir who died in 1751, rests in a pergola-covered grave in the garden.

The land suits Wiedmaier's future plans well. "I want to plant lots of peach and apple trees, build greenhouses for herbs and micro greens and

tomatoes, cultivate honeybees, raise quail, and use all those things in the restaurants," he says. "Do you know how many quail eggs we go through at Marcel's and Brasserie Beck?"

During the summer, Rousby Hall is a center of activity. On a typical day, guests sleep in, go for a run, kayak on the calm morning water, or sit on one of two docks watching sailboats go by. Then it's time for a hearty breakfast, usually prepared by Wiedmaier and whatever other chefs happen to be on hand. If everyone's lucky, Polly will make her Aunt Lila's pancakes, light and airy from egg whites.





"I try to come down here two or three times a week to decompress, even if it's just overnight. If the fishing is really good, I may stay four days straight."



CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: WIEDMAIER (LEFT) AND GUAS HEAD TO THE BOAT FOR AN AFTERNOON OF FISHING; WIEDMAIER AND STELLA TAKE TO THE WATER; ROCKFISH FOR DINNER; RELAXING COMES EASY AT THE WATERFRONT HOME

Things get noisier when Wiedmaier takes the boys and their friends out waterskiing, wakeboarding, or tubing behind the motorboat. During the day, folks lounge by the pool, go antique shopping, or hang out on the beach in front of the house. Polly, never one to sit idly, is usually tending to a landscaping project on the property.

"We have everything here," she says. "Beautiful old pear trees, boxwoods everywhere, Japanese maples, magnolia trees, very old lilac bushes, lots of purple irises in the spring, many holly trees. There's always something to maintain, whether it's putting in a new slate path or pulling up old beds."

In the afternoon, Robert sometimes takes guests out in the boat, perhaps to Solomon's Island for ice cream or to Stoney's on Broomes Island for crab cakes. (Although the best crab

cakes in Maryland, he declares, are to be had up the road at a dive bar in Lusby called the Bucket List.)

Truth be told though, Wiedmaier would rather be fishing on the Bay. When Guas shows up late on that November night, the two compare their stressful days, sip on bourbon, and smoke cigars before hitting the hay. By mid-morning the following day, they and Wiedmaier's 7-year-old yellow English Labrador retriever, Stella, are out on the water.

A look of sheer contentment comes across Wiedmaier's face. "I've been out all over the middle Bay area, catching bluefish, mackerel, striped bass. I'll run four lines by myself, two if it's rough," he says. "There is so much to explore here."

By the time the guys return to Rousby, Wiedmaier's favorite lunch is ready: grilled brie,

sage, and pear sandwiches and a hearty soup of shredded chicken, Northern beans, and green mole served with lime wedges, sour cream, cilantro, and avocado. He and Guas return to the dock afterwards to gut, descale, and fillet their rockfish haul.

Later that night, the two chefs hit the Rousby Hall kitchen and whip up a dinner that includes macaroni and cheese, manchego cheese gratin with chorizo and fried eggs, and brussels sprouts with bacon. The star of the table, lit with hurricane lamps, is the freshly caught rockfish sautéed with lemon, garlic, and thyme.

Over dinner, conversation turns to fall activities. Thanksgiving dinner at Rousby Hall has become a family tradition for the Wiedmaiers, with about twenty family members and friends attending. That's Canadian geese season too, so Wiedmaier and Guas make plans to do some hunting on the grounds.

At the end of the meal, everybody raises a glass to the fishermen and their delicious bounty. "Maybe when I retire I'll buy a charter boat, take people out, and then show them how to fillet and cook the fish they just caught," Wiedmaier suggests. Glasses clink and wine is drunk. Why not, everybody concurs. Why not?



TOP LEFT: WIEDMAIER COOKS UP HIS FRESH CATCH;
BOTTOM LEFT: MANCHEGO GRATIN WITH CHORIZO AND
FRIED EGGS; RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: DINNER IS
SERVED: ROUSBY HALL MACARONI AND CHEESE, CARAMELIZED
BRUSSELS SPROUTS, A CRUSTY LOAF, AND GRILLED ROCKFISH.
RECIPES ON PAGE 96.

