

# The New York Times

## Just Don't Call It the Poconos

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN, Published: December 22, 2006

A YOUNG man in a crisp beige uniform asks if I'd like the waterfall turned on. I nod, and in seconds a cascade is falling over my shoulders into a crescent-shaped soaking tub. From there, a second waterfall descends into another tub, which overlooks a swimming pool, which opens onto another soaking tub — this one outdoors, beneath a canopy of trees.

This is the Poconos, and I'm surrounded by small pools. Not one of them is heart shaped.

Northeastern Pennsylvania, long known for honeymoon motels, is sprouting chic new destinations. They include the Fauchère, a hotel in Milford restored with a rich mix of 19th- and 21st-century amenities, and the Lodge at Woodloch, a richly appointed destination spa in Hawley.

Prices are high. At Woodloch, the rooms start at \$450 a night per person — in the off-season. The owners, John Lopis and Ginny Michel Lopis, trained at the Canyon Ranch in Tucson and other world-class spas before going out on their own. Thirty miles away, at the Fauchère, rooms start at \$275. The hotel's owner, Sean Strub, said

his business model is the Inn at Little Washington, the fabled foodie destination in rural Virginia.

But neither the Canyon Ranch nor Little Washington is in the Poconos, a region best known for affordable family vacations. That's why both Mr. Strub and the Lopises are determined to avoid the word Poconos in their marketing.

"We prefer 'Pocono Mountains' to the nickname 'Poconos,'" Mr. Lopis said.

Mr. Strub avoids the P-word altogether, having personally renamed the area around his hotel the Delaware River Highlands. After all, Mr. Strub said, "You get who you market to."

Mr. Strub, who has flown friends in from Manhattan on a borrowed helicopter, wants to reach out to the most discriminating travelers. But somewhat gallingly to Mr. Strub, he doesn't have complete control over how the Fauchère, and Milford, are marketed. He is required to pay 3 cents of every dollar in room fees to the Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau, which promotes four counties

of eastern Pennsylvania, one of which is Pike County, which includes Milford.

Most of that area — the other counties are Monroe, Wayne and Carbon — is a lot less upscale than the Fauchère and Woodloch. The region already has a giant water park, and it will soon get another, at the Camelback Ski Resort. And this week the State Gaming Control Board approved the installation of 5,000 slot machines at Mount Airy Lodge in Monroe County.

Moreover, Mr. Strub said, lumping Milford with the rest of the Poconos "makes people think we're farther than we are." In fact, his establishment is less than 75 miles from New York; the trip takes only 90 minutes, even without a helicopter.



**The Hotel Fauchère was opened by Louis Fauchère in 1852.**

Chris Ramirez for The New York Times



### One of Hotel Fauchère's guestrooms with a porch balcony.

Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

IN contrast to Monroe County to the south, with its water parks and large family resorts, Pike County is largely rural, thanks to state and federal parkland and private enclaves like the Blooming Grove Hunting and Fishing Club, with more than 20,000 acres. Driving the narrow roads from the Fauchère to Hawley, at the other end of the county, I saw lots of waterfalls and brooks but not a single subdivision.

Mr. Strub said he would like to see the county stay unspoiled, and that means, among other things, getting out from under the Poconos “brand name.”

So Mr. Strub founded the Pike County Visitors Bureau, as a challenge to the Pocono Mountains Vacation Bureau. His David, he said, has only \$10,000 to spend each year, compared with Goliath's \$7 million. But it also has his powers of persuasion.

“Pike County was never called the Poconos until fairly recently and some of the old-timers resented it when they started calling it the Poconos,” Mr. Strub said. “I’ve got an entire shelf of northeast Pennsylvania history books, a number of which address this.”

Now Mr. Strub is considering running for county commissioner, which would give him leverage over the vacation bureau.

Robert Uguccioni, the executive director of the bureau, said: “We represent 2,400 square miles, and we can’t make everybody happy. But we have a lot of members in

Pike County who want to continue being part of the Poconos product.”

Complicating matters, John Kiesendahl, an officer of the bureau, is also an owner of the Lodge at Woodloch. That puts the Lopises in the middle of the dispute, though you’d never know while visiting their spectacularly quiet destination.

To avoid the room rate at Woodloch, I chose a daily spa package that included an afternoon’s use of the facilities, a massage and dinner for a relatively affordable \$300. After a surprisingly demanding water aerobics class, I was escorted to a large underground complex of treatment rooms for a massage, which began with

my choice of “massage butters”: relaxing, revitalizing or warming. Then I was led to the Whisper Lounge, a retreat with a crackling fire and a selection of Mighty Leaf teas.

My only quibble with the place was that the men’s locker room, with leather wing chairs and inlaid wood tables, looks so much like a living room that I felt uncomfortable taking my clothes off.

The guests I encountered said they were amazed at the level of service. Maria McLaughlin of Franklin Lakes, N.J., who described herself as a seasoned spagoer and who was celebrating a friend’s 40th birthday at Woodloch, said the last spa she had been to, Canyon Ranch at the Venetian in Las Vegas, “was nice, but didn’t even compare to Woodloch.”

Thirty miles closer to Manhattan, the hotel opened by Louis Fauchère in 1852 has been brought back to life by Mr. Strub. An Iowa native and a longtime Manhattan businessman, he was given a diagnosis of AIDS in 1985. Since then, he has devoted much of his time to AIDS activism. In 1994 he founded Poz, a magazine for people living with H.I.V. or AIDS, which he sold in 2004.

In the mid-1990’s, he began spending weekends at Milford, which has a rich history and superb buildings by such architects as Calvert Vaux and Richard Morris Hunt. One example, the Fauchère, an Italianate hotel long known for its distinctive red-and-white-striped awnings, had closed in 1976 and parts of the building had deteriorated.





**In Bar Louis, photos by the Hilton Brothers hang over the walls of anigre wood. Among the offerings on the menu from the chef Michael Glatz is a sushi pizza.**

Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

Mr. Strub bought the building in 2001, and he and a business partner, Dick Snyder, oversaw the restoration of the public spaces. Thousands of pieces of old wood were numbered, removed, refinished and reinstalled, all under the supervision of historic preservation experts.

He also helped design 16 luxurious guest rooms, complete with feather beds and Frette linens. The bathrooms, which mix Italian marble and Pennsylvania bluestone, are startlingly beautiful.

Other parts of the hotel are boldly contemporary. In Bar Louis, photos by the Hilton Brothers (the Manhattan artists Christopher Makos and Paul Solberg) hang over the walls of anigre wood.

Among the offerings on the menu from the chef Michael Glatz (formerly of the Inn on the Blue Horizon in Vieques, P.R.) is a sushi pizza — a crust of sushi rice, refrigerated, then coated in tempura batter and flash-fried, finally topped with cubes of raw tuna and tobikko (\$15).

At the same time he was restoring the Fauchère, Mr. Strub was taking on several civic projects in an attempt to help the town, where, he said, “Many worthy businesses were languishing.”

Besides starting the visitors bureau, he founded Milford Magazine, helped launch yearly film and music festivals and raised money for the Milford Enhancement

Committee. “We’ve spent over \$3 million ripping up blacktop, putting in old bluestone sidewalks and installing Colonial-style pedestrian lighting,” he said.

Unlike Mr. Strub, who is a newcomer to the hotel business, Woodloch’s owners, the Lopises, have been running spas for more than two decades. But this is their first time as owners. The lodge cost \$37 million, or nearly \$640,000 a room, to build. If the spa itself is nirvana, the 58 guest rooms are ordinary, and the restaurant still has a few kinks to work out.

Still, after an hour of massage and a visit to the Whisper Lodge, an overnight stay may seem downright affordable. In fact, after the Fauchère opened, Mr. Strub sent his stressed-out chef,

Mr. Glatz, to Woodloch for a few days of spa treatments.

It was a vacation for Mr. Glatz, as well as an act of diplomacy by Mr. Strub, who is counting on support from the Woodloch’s owners for his Pike County Visitors Bureau, with its focus on nature and history rather than water slides and slot machines.

As Mr. Strub put it, “We need to be marketing the things we treasure.”

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**VISITOR INFORMATION**

The Lodge at Woodloch, 109 River Birch Lane, Hawley, Pa.; (866) 953-8500; [www.thelodgeatwoodloch.com](http://www.thelodgeatwoodloch.com). As of January, rates start at \$450 a person based on double occupancy (including three meals and a spa treatment and classes).

Hotel Fauchère, 401 Broad Street, Milford, Pa.; (570) 409-1212; [www.fauchere.com](http://www.fauchere.com). Rooms from \$275.