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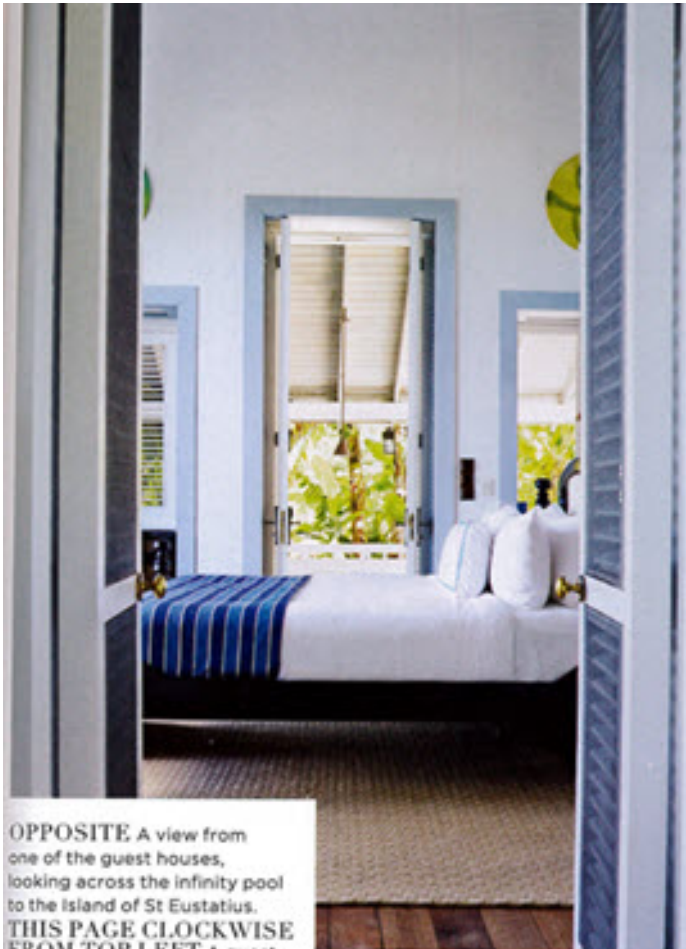
HOUSE  
& GARDEN

# Sugar & spice

Comprised of a series of buildings with a vernacular feel, *BELLE MONT FARM* on St Kitts was designed by *BILL BENSLEY* to reflect the heritage of the Caribbean island

Text Emily Tobin | Photographs Ngoc Minh Ngo





**OPPOSITE.** A view from one of the guest houses, looking across the infinity pool to the Island of St Eustatius. **THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** A guest-house bedroom. A view from the main pool. The Lookout - the light-filled reception area. Chef Christophe Letard in The Kitchen restaurant





**THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** A mango tree overlooks a guest-house terrace. The Kitchen evokes the look of a sugar factory. An outdoor bathroom has views of the ocean. Interior design was inspired by the Caribbean's colonial past. **OPPOSITE FROM TOP** Home-grown ingredients are used in spa treatments. Farm worker Yahsonn Tafari holds a box of produce from the farm. The Kitchen terrace overlooks Mount Liamuiga



In the early Forties, Arthur Leaman, who would go on to work at *US House & Garden*, took an ill-fated Caribbean cruise. The freighter he was travelling on broke down and the ship's occupants were left stranded on St Kitts. The story goes that Leaman stayed for several weeks and swiftly fell in love with the island and its people. Two decades later, he returned to set up The Golden Lemon – a grandly decorated inn perched on a tiny fleck of charcoal-coloured beach. Leaman is credited with changing the face of tourism in St Kitts, attracting a glamorous cast of characters who enjoyed 'doing nothing – or everything with style'.

Today the island thrives on tourism and in December last year the doors opened to Belle Mont Farm, a collection of 44 guest houses (with another 40 to come), six villas and seven farmhouses nestled in the foothills of Mount Liamuiga. This is the first chapter in Trinidadian businessman Val Kempadoo's impressive Kittitian Hill project – a \$400-million venture in sustainable luxury. The Village – a celebration of Caribbean culture – will follow shortly, and with a fresh lick of paint, Arthur Leaman's The Golden Lemon will reopen in 2016.

Belle Mont Farm is set in 400 acres of organic farmland. There are fields of vetiver and lemon grass, pineapples surround the pool, and West Indian cherries, pumpkins and pomegranates grow in the nurseries. This is a working farm, which happens to house a hotel.

The estate track weaves its way through the organic golf course, up, up, up, 1,000 feet above sea level – overhanging trees obscure the route, and so much the better, as on arrival the views astound. The Dutch island of St Eustatius lies ahead, flanked by Saba and St Barths.

Designed by Bill Bensley, a master of hotel architecture and exotic landscape design, Belle Mont Farm reflects its surroundings at every turn: vast windows abound, almost every property has its own infinity pool and if you're staying in a guest house, you bathe under the stars. 'My guiding force in everything we build on site is the natural landscape,' explains Bill.

Belle Mont Farm consists of a series of buildings, all built from scratch and heavily influenced by the traditional Kittitian vernacular – particularly the chattel houses that populate the island. Terraces surround the clapboard guest houses,

which in turn are encircled by palms and banana trees; the occasional thud marks the descent of a falling mango. Steep, pitched roofs are shingled and designed to withstand hurricanes and the pretty grey-and-white palette is accented with the occasional wash of pale blue paint.

The interiors are colonial and refined, with custom-made Carib-style furniture, louvred doors, roll-top baths, and bright botanical paintings by local artist Kate Spencer. A traditional aesthetic is teamed with state-of-the-art technology – every room is kitted out with an iPad packed with films and a projector screen. It is an impressive piece of stagecraft that most of the furniture and fabrics were made in Asia.

Until the Nineties, sugar was the island's main commodity – former plantation houses and ramshackle windmills still pepper the landscape. The restaurant and bar affect this refinery look with girder-like pillars and sheet-metal flooring. Bill's design for the bar emulates a sugar-mill stack, a handsome grey tower that soars skywards. 'It's such a striking form from afar and it shouts St Kitts,' he says. The Mill is decked out with vintage radios, strings of rotund light bulbs and Bieznais chairs. In keeping with Val's sustainable vision, all of the stone is mined on site and all of the builders are local Kittitians.

The Kitchen, as the restaurant is called, is capacious with lofty ceilings and stone colonnades inspired by the Brimstone Hill Fortress. The look here is idiosyncratic – Bill and his team scoured eBay for vintage radios, mid-century desk lamps, trunks and gramophones.

The decoration may be lighthearted, but the food certainly takes itself seriously. Chef Christophe Letard is charged with creating sustainable cuisine prepared using fresh ingredients from the farm or the ever-fruitful ocean. The menu changes daily and is bursting with indigenous ingredients such as moringa, soursop, cassava and dasheen.

'The reason people travel is to find something different,' declares Bill. And he's certainly achieved a luxurious otherness at Belle Mont Farm. Relaxed and comfortable with dashes of eccentricity, the hotel delights in Kittitian culture and demands that its guests do the same □

*Belle Mont Farm: 00-1-85 58 46 39 51; [www.bellemontfarm.com](http://www.bellemontfarm.com). A double room costs £550 a night, B&B, based on two sharing*

hotel

