



## YOU'RE INVITED

A GARDEN PARTY: AGARDENPARTYLLC.COM | A MILKHOUSE PARTY: AMILKHOUSEPARTY.COM

A Garden Party Florist, a wedding and event floral studio, is located 45 minutes from Philadelphia and a one-hour drive to several popular Atlantic coast venues. But sisters Dawn Clark and Mary Coombs, who founded the business in Elmer, New Jersey, 13 years ago, contend they're "kind of in the middle of nowhere."

As with the famous line, "if you build it, they will come," the women have discovered that offering a country event space filled with charm has been the best new-business move they've made. "That one-hour radius to major markets has been a beautiful thing," Mary says.

A Milkhouse Party, their four-year-old endeavor, resides in a dairy building once run by their late grandfather, Leon M. Tice. Together the tank

room, small office and milking parlor add up to a 2,000-square-foot venue that plays host to groups as large as 45. They call the space "a refuge to collaborate, create and celebrate."

Long shuttered and relegated for storage, the dairy structure and the surrounding 93-acre farm moved into Mary's hands in 2012 after she and her husband purchased the property. "It hadn't been a running dairy operation since the 1990s," she says. "We took about a year to clean it out. While doing so, I noticed that the light inside was really nice. At first, Dawn and I thought it could be a place to store props, but then we realized it would be perfect for the DIY wedding parties we hosted."

They self-funded the renovations, wanting to do so without borrowing capital. "We wanted to take it

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back to the bare bones," Mary says. "Now our family treasures decorate the tile walls and the concrete floors - and people love it." Retro lighting, cafe seating and chalkboard signage lend a playful style to the space. Climate control allows for year-round use, with A Milkhouse Party hosting 60 private events in 2019, including baby showers, birthdays, anniversaries and workshops.

A Milkhouse Party is also a destination for Dawn and Mary's farm-to-table events. The milking parlor's quirky configuration allows for long tables that accommodate 18 people on two elevated sides and nine guests in the center. Cafe lights and multicolored glass chandeliers hang from the ceiling, adding a festive vibe to the space once home to dairy cows.

Mary and Dawn's annual dinner celebrates summer's bounty with food and flowers.

"Having this event allows me to play up the space the way I dreamt about it from day one, full of flowers, full of color," Mary explains. "The kind of party I like to host and attend has music in the garden and also some kind of hands-on activity. Of course, our 'craft' is a build-your-own-bouquet bar with locally-grown flowers. It's just a great experience to share that with people."

Ties to farmland are important to both the sisters, who point out that A Milkhouse Party is the first business in their state to receive a special use permit for operating a non-farm business on preserved farmland. "We're restoring the farmland like it should be," Mary adds. "The property looks nice; we've planted flowers. Basically, we're two farm girls. It's nice go to the fancy ballrooms of Philadelphia, but I wanted a place where we could bring our family."



Grove Photography