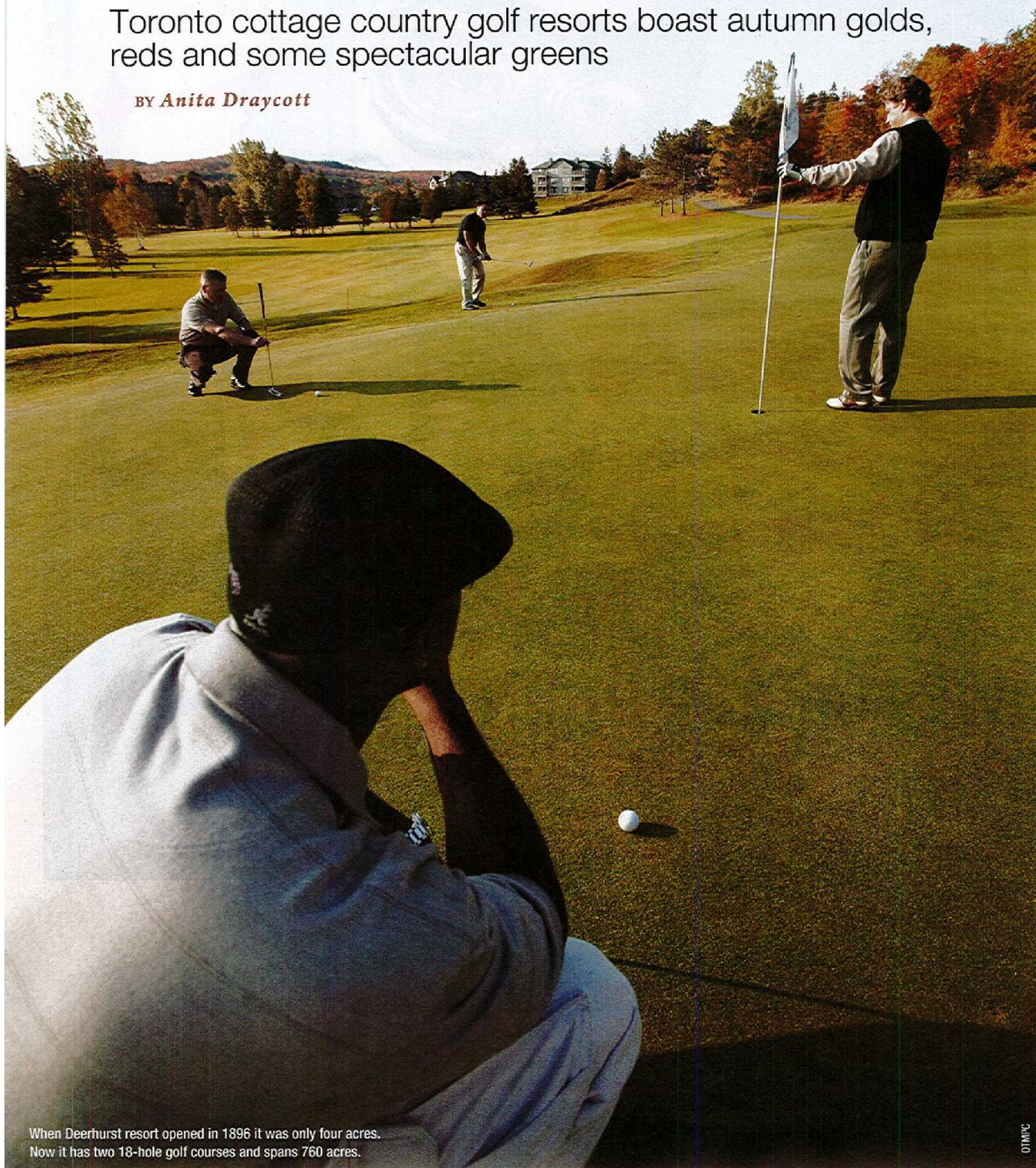


Ontario's fall

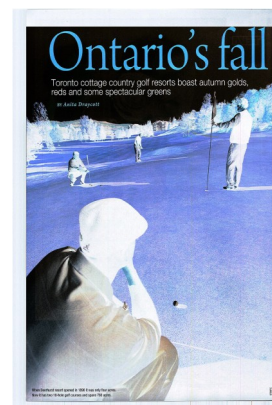
Toronto cottage country golf resorts boast autumn golds, reds and some spectacular greens

BY Anita Draycott



When Deerhurst resort opened in 1896 it was only four acres.
Now it has two 18-hole golf courses and spans 760 acres.

OTMPC



finest

There are plenty of fine golf resorts in Ontario, but some of them stand out above the rest. Hockley Valley, Deerhurst and The Briars all offer something different, and a stay at each of them is memorable and unique. Each has a fascinating history

and some fabulous "one and only" experiences—from fairways that will wow you to mouth-watering dishes to spa nirvana. Better yet, all three resorts here are about an hour from Toronto, and look their best when the leaves change colours: all good reasons to pack your clubs and hit cottage country for the weekend.

THE BRIARS

The Briars (tel: 800-465-2376; www.briars.ca), a welcoming resort on Lake Simcoe, has been run by the generations of the Sibbald family. The Briars Golf Club came to be when, circa 1920, Jack Sibbald found a stash of papers written in Chinese under a window seat in the front room of the Sibbald homestead. They turned out to be stock certificates worth about \$100,000, which allowed the family to hire acclaimed architect Stanley Thompson to build the course.

SIGNATURE HOLES

The first nine holes opened in 1922. In 1971, Thompson's disciple and apprentice Robbie Robinson created the back nine. In the years following, architect Doug Carrick, who apprenticed for Robinson and his team, made some alterations. Each architect picked up where the previous one left off. The result is seamless with The Briars retaining the traditional style of a Scottish woodlands course. You can take a cart, but it's really a joy to walk the 6300 yards of meticulously manicured fairways and greens.

Two holes vie for signature status. The 14th is a serpentine par-five with a landmark silo on the left of the fairway, a reminder that once upon a time this property was part of the Prest farm. The beauty contest winner goes to the 17th, a scenic par-four that winds down to a green on the Black River.

SIGNATURE DISH

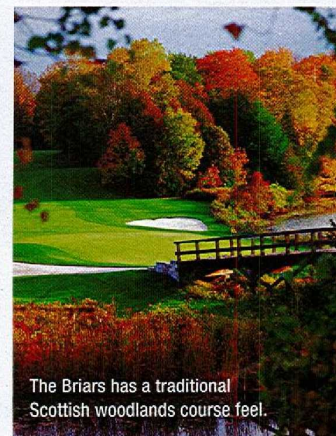
A few years ago Hugh Sibbald and his wife, Sheila, ate their way through Scotland, sampling sticky toffee pudding at various restaurants and pubs. When they returned home they asked executive chef Trevor Ledlie to develop his own version of the dish, creating The Briars' signature dessert, served with vanilla ice cream and butter caramel.

SIGNATURE SPA INDULGENCE

Ready to be spoiled? The Double the Pleasure treatment (\$195) has two massage therapists working in tandem. Imagine one person caressing your face and scalp while the other works on your feet. Heaven at both ends!

ONLY AT THE BRIARS

Take a guided history tour with The Briars' historian and archivist, Diana Rowney, or one of the Sibbalds. You'll discover that the resort has hosted its fair share of Canadian literary icons. Mazo de la Roche wrote part of the *Jalna* series from Birdie Cottage between 1955 and 1961, and Stephen Leacock grew up in the area and was great friends of the Sibbalds. But it was the late great Peter Gzowski, host of the CBC "Morningside" program who put The Briars Golf Club on the literary map. Gzowski was an avid golfer who owned a cottage along the first fairway. What began as an idea to raise money for literacy, that Gzowski penned on a scotch-stained cocktail napkin, became the Peter Gzowski Invitational.



The Briars has a traditional Scottish woodlands course feel.



HOCKLEY VALLEY RESORT

If you haven't visited the **Hockley Valley Resort** (tel: 866-462-5539; hockley.com; fall packages from \$182 per person / night including meals) for a few years, you're in for a big surprise. A recent \$7-million renovation has transformed the resort to reflect the taste of the Adamo family, who have owned it since 1985.

Fortunately the spectacular scenery hasn't changed. The Hockley Valley course is pretty in spring and summer, and absolutely magnificent in autumn, when the trees flaunt their fall foliage. Lo-

cated a few minutes from the town of Orangeville, the area boasts the highest elevation in Southern Ontario and is the source for four major river systems: the Nottawasaga, Credit, Humber and Grand.

SIGNATURE HOLE

Mario Adamo hired renowned Canadian golf course architect Thomas McBroom to orchestrate the challenging 6620-yard roller coaster with nary a flat lie. A river runs down the left side of the signature 17th fairway that's very much in play. Number 10, another par-three, uses all the elements of the natural topography with tees elevated 100 yards above a green carved out of a slope. McBroom's grand finale 18th is a par-four with the Hockley River cutting across the fairway at the 115-yard marker. Your final approach shot is all carry over water to a generous green.

SIGNATURE DISH

Much of the renovation money went towards the planting of a four-acre garden, vineyard and orchard. The garden supplies about 80 percent of the produce used in the kitchen for the resort's three restaurants: Cabin (named for the original dwelling), 1985 (named for the year the Adamos bought the property) and Babbo (meaning papa in Italian), the lobby lounge.

Deerhurst's courses follow the contours of Peninsula Lake and Fairy Lake to create some stunning water hazards.



You can take a cart, but it's a joy to walk The Briars' 6300 yards of meticulously manicured fairways and greens

Mario, originally from Calabria, Italy, spends much of his time learning about winemaking as he intends to produce his own sparkling vino in 2014. At the entrance to Cabin restaurant there's a room for aging cheeses and another for curing Mario's hand-made salumi.

On a recent visit to Cabin, I tried the signature mista board, a selection of regional cheeses, Mario's salumi and prosciutto, preserves, mustards and pickles from the resort's cantina, and freshly baked crostini.

SIGNATURE SPA INDULGENCE

The 8000-square-foot European-inspired spa offers a relaxing atmosphere where guests can linger in the lounge, or out on the balcony overlooking the swimming pool. At the casual Oasis Café you may dine in your bathrobe.

The signature 75-minute Organic Face and Body Ritual (\$145) begins with a full body salt and sugar scrub followed by a massage using buriti oil from Brazilian palm trees. Your therapist determines your skin type and then customizes your facial using organic products, followed by a scalp or foot massage.

ONLY AT HOCKLEY VALLEY

The Hockley Valley Romance package (from \$262 per person) includes your room and a welcome bottle of wine, breakfast, a three-course dinner at Cabin and a spa "Pumpkin Spice" treatment in the couples suite.

DEERHURST

When **Deerhurst** (tel: 855-461-4393; deerhurstresort.com; from \$149 per person/night including breakfast, kids free) opened its doors in 1896 it stood on four acres and the cost for a week's accommodations with three meals per day was \$3.50 per person. Over the subsequent years the resort has undergone considerable growth, now encompassing 760 acres.

SIGNATURE HOLE

The G8 Summit in 2010 may have put the resort on the world map, but the Deerhurst Highlands Golf Course maintains bragging rights as the granddaddy of Muskoka's high-end, championship courses. Built in 1990, it was the brainchild of architects Robert Cupp and the aforementioned McBroom. From the first elevated tee overlooking Fairy Lake the par-72

course takes full advantage of the rugged beauty of the Canadian Shield; it's a bit like stepping into a Group of Seven painting. Bold granite outcroppings and dramatic terrain shifts are epitomized on the signature 10th hole with a sheer granite rock face in play along the length of the fairway. Inevitably, my ever-reliable slice produced an undesirable ricochet.

Except for the open links-style holes four, five and six, the course is a precipitous and muscular romp—not for the faint of heart! To restore your confidence, take a swing at Deerhurst's gentler, shorter Lakeside course, a par-64 that meanders around Peninsula Lake.

SIGNATURE DISH

Care to sample the appetizer that was served to the world leaders at the 2010 G8 Summit? In the resort's Eclipse Restaurant, Milford Bay Smoked Trout is presented three ways and served with savoury ricotta cheesecake, caramelized maple onions and cranberry wine jelly. The main course was a politically-correct loin of Ontario venison with maple-glazed root veggies and a blueberry reduction. Many of the dishes served at Deerhurst's restaurants contain maple syrup from trees tapped near the golf course.

SIGNATURE SPA INDULGENCE

The Shizen Spa offers several signature treatments, including the Oxygen Infusion Facial (from \$165) using pressurized oxygen, hyaluronic acid and specialized serums. For golfers, the Improve Your Back Nine massage (\$195) combines a back exfoliation, massage, warm wrap and leg stretches.

ONLY AT DEERHURST

When the sun goes down the curtain rises at *Decades 2013*. The musical revue has been running since 1981, making it one of Canada's longest-running shows, and once included Shania Twain among its cast members. ■