



# TOWER OF FUN

This Illinois farm built an eye-catching haven for goats

By Celeste Huttes

**O**f the many charms you'll find on the farm of Marcia and David Johnson in rural Windsor, Illinois, one reigns supreme. Where wheat once grew, a whimsical, seemingly misplaced medieval tower rises into the sky.

But you'll find no damsels in distress here. In fact, the snow-white goats who spend their days traversing the tower seem down-

right happy.

"We like to think of it as a folly," says David, drawing on an architectural term for an eye-catching, but less-than-useful structure (though the goats would disagree).

This towering achievement was inspired by a Decanter magazine story featuring photos of Fairview Winery's famous goat tower in South Africa. And so, with spare bricks and more than a little imagination, a passion

project found its footing in Central Illinois.

## Bleat Street

**T**he unique structure makes fanciful form of 5,000 hand-made bricks from North Carolina. Measuring 31 feet tall and 7 feet across, the tower features 276 cantilevered concrete steps that wind their way up toward a copper roof.

Using a goat pictured in the Decanter story for scale, Johnson worked with a local bricklayer to design and build the tower over a three-month period in 1998.

"When we got past the second level, we realized it was out of scale, so we added an extra wrap and became the world's largest goat tower — by accident," says David, a former school principal who went on to launch a successful crop insurance company.

The fact that he lacked goats — and his wife's approval — proved minor hurdles.

"It was already in the works before I found out about it," recalls Marcia. "The one decision I got to make was where they put it. I made sure it was right outside the kitchen window. Every morning, the goats watch for me, and I watch for them."

Led by "Queen Goat" Bella, the happy herd of six Saanen goats spends its days climbing up and down those ▶

**There are 5,000 bricks and 276 concrete steps in this goat tower in Windsor, Illinois.**





**Marcia and David Johnson raise Saanen goats, a Swiss mountain breed.**

winding steps and savoring the view. Six cozy compartments offer relief from the summer heat and warmth in the winter.

“Saanen goats are a Swiss mountain goat that loves to climb. They are very calm and sweet,” says Marcia.

The tower and its occupants never fail to generate double takes (and full stops) among passersby. In fact, this whimsy in Windsor has become a tourist attraction in its own right.

Every year, the Johnsons welcome visitors from around the world – as far away as Costa Rica and Poland. One St. Louis man even chose the tower as the site for an “unfor-goat-able” marriage proposal.

“You don’t build something like this if you don’t want to share it,” notes Marcia, a retired English teacher. “The most common reaction we see is disbelief.”

### **Pieces & Places that Inspire**

**B**ut the extraordinary is ordinary for the Johnsons, who share a love of nature, travel, art – and a penchant for the past.

They modeled their 4,000-square-foot Georgian-style home on the historic houses of Williamsburg, Virginia; while their quaint carriage house has a dop-pelganger in Germany.

Their home is brimming with pieces that have a story to tell: an iron stairway that once led patrons into a small town post office; a 19th-century square grand piano that played hymns from its perch in a church balcony – and the century-old wood that once adorned David’s grandfather’s home.

On the grounds, you’ll find a striking piece of natural history: a one-ton glacial stone, or “erratic.” Up on the chimney, a life-like metal sculpture of nesting storks brings a bit of European folklore (and good luck) to central Illinois.

“Some people think the storks are real and the goats are stuffed,” notes David with a laugh.

“The goats stand very still for long time,” adds Marcia. “A lot of people think they’re statues.”

Along with eye-catching art, you’ll find ear-catching “singing stones” in the yard. Made by an artist in Paris, France, the set of five curved slabs of granite make soothing, wind-chime-like tones when struck.

### **Nurturing Nature**

**W**hile those notable goats steal the show, the Johnsons are committed to making a happy home for wildlife as well.

“We wanted to help the environment, so we dedicated this 93 acres as a wildlife habitat,” says David.

The couple created six ponds, planted 250 trees, and set aside acreage for prairie habitat and wildflowers to attract birds, bees and other pollinators. Recognizing their efforts, the National Wildlife Federation declared the Johnson homestead a Certified Wildlife Habitat.

“I have identified 100 different species



**left: The goat tower is made for climbing. Right: The Johnsons love to add whimsical designs to every element of their acreage. This perch is fit for the birds.**




of birds on this property,” says David, who – perhaps as much as the wildlife – savors the sanctuary they have created.

The couple grows their own organic food and generates enough power to meet all of the farm’s needs, thanks to a large solar installation.

Love for the natural world runs deep on the Johnson farm,

where a simple philosophy has taken root: “You have to take chances in life,” says David. “It’s important to think outside the box and do things that are different.”

Whether preserving the past, protecting the environment – or adding a bit of whimsy to a weary world – on the Johnson farm, the goats aren’t the only ones with a grand view. 

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