



Features

Beauty and bounty

[Print Page](#)


Agricultural scenes are a favorite of photographer Bill Hurst, who owns Tabula Rasa Gallery on Front Street in Baroda with his wife, Greta. John Madill - H-P staff

Baroda couple promotes Southwest Michigan through artwork and agritourism

By DEBRA HAIGHT - H-P Correspondent

Published: Sunday, October 23, 2011 1:06 PM EDT

BARODA - In a few short years, Bill and Greta Hurst have gone from being weekenders coming to Southwest Michigan from Chicago to full-time residents here. In the meantime, they've also become strong promoters of what they like to term "the beauty and bounty" of Southwest Michigan.

Their promotional efforts have taken a number of forms, from the artwork both create and show at their downtown Baroda gallery to their involvement in the development of documentaries highlighting agritourism as well as a promotional brochure showcasing area wineries and farm markets.

"We love it here," Greta said. "It sounds hokey to talk about the beauty of Berrien County and

people pooh-pooh it, but it is one of the most beautiful places on earth."

"One of the people involved with the documentaries said something that has stayed with me," she said. "He said the purpose of the films was "to let people see what we live every day."

They're certainly doing their part to show people the beauty of life here with Tabula Rasa, their downtown Baroda gallery, which features Greta's mosaics and Bill's photographs of the local countryside.

The photographs have especially drawn people's attention. "People's jaws drop when they see the pictures," Greta said. "They think they must be someplace else. They are so in awe of what they see and they walk out with a whole new set of eyes."

While she has been studying and creating mosaics for several years, Bill is a relative newcomer to photography; he took it up as a serious hobby less than two years ago.

"I was introduced to photography in high school but then abandoned it for decades," he said. "Now, I'm taking it seriously."

Greta took an adult education art class in Chicago in 2006 and fell in love with the mosaic medium. She then took more classes at the Chicago Mosaic School and started exploring different methods using vintage windows, fused glass and stained glass.

While some make mosaics with pieces of broken china, she prefers working with glass. She uses both glass and wood as the substrate material for the mosaic piece and sees the grout used to make the mosaic as an important part of the design.

Although they use different mediums, their love of nature is their inspiration for this exhibit. "My art portrays my vision of the natural beauty and character of rural life including pastoral landscapes, vineyards and the earth itself," Greta said.

Bill agreed. He said the message they both want to convey is the same as the title of their show: showing the beauty and bounty of Berrien County. "We live in one of the beautiful counties in the world," he said. "We want to help people appreciate it and see it in a new light and treasure it."

They certainly appreciate what they have found here.

The couple now live on a Baroda-area "farmette" where they grow their own vegetables and raise chickens and grapes. The grapes are of the Chardonnay variety, which are sold to the nearby Hickory Creek Winery and turned into wines sold to high-end restaurants in Chicago.

Meanwhile, Tabula Rasa features an eclectic mix of not only their artwork but artwork from other area artists and locally grown food products.

The gallery is in the building once occupied by Tio's restaurant and before that, the original Bill's Tap. They bought the building late last year and had their grand opening last month.

The couple feel like they've landed in the right place at the right time and fit in well with what others are doing in the village of Baroda. Just as they are reinventing themselves from the life they used to live in Chicago, Baroda has also been reinventing itself in recent years.

The village received two state grants in recent years, one to completely redo the downtown "streetscape" and one that is an "arts build" grant funding a documentary and downtown murals promoting art and agritourism.

"Baroda is becoming an art mecca thanks to the state grant encouraging rural life and art," Greta said. "Baroda used to call itself the tool and die capital of the world, now it's trying to reinvent itself in terms of agritourism."

For their part, their decision to reinvent themselves came a few years ago when they made the decision that Southwest Michigan was not only the place they liked to go to get away from city life, but also the place where they wanted to live and put down roots.

After having a cottage in Union Pier for a few years, they bought land near Galien before finally settling in Baroda four years ago. "It was an evolution," Bill said. "We were the typical second homeowners. We had a cottage in Union Pier and then we bought 40 acres near Galien before coming here."

It's been more of a challenge for Bill, since he grew up in New York City and has lived in Chicago for many years. As Greta pointed out, it's been a big change for her husband.

"It's an interesting juxtaposition for him," she said. "He didn't mow grass until he was 50."

It's also more of a challenge for him in terms of work commitments, which keep him working in Chicago four days a week as a program and project manager working with companies. "I'd like to be able to be here full time," he said. "But it's still great being out here on the weekends and telecommuting one day a week."

On the other hand, it's been a little like going home again for Greta, who grew up on a farm near Merrillville, Ind., before embarking on careers and travels that took her to California and back.

"I've been gravitating back to this," she said. "I feel like all my professional experience in catering and as a paralegal has been preparing me for this venture in farming and agritourism."

Their plans for the future continue doing more of what they're doing now: promoting their artwork and that of others, as well as promoting agritourism with the fruits, vegetables and other products grown here.

"We're still working to see how we can best promote agritourism here," Bill said. "We plan to have get-togethers and speakers here at the gallery and continue with the www.SupportLocalAgriculture.com website."

Both acknowledge that they're still getting used to being in retail business and all that entails, including attracting people to visit and buy items in the gallery. Bill is also branching out to doing other types of photography on consignment and giving lessons in photography and Web development.

Copyright © 2011 - Herald Palladium

[x] Close Window