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Hannah Selleck A Singular Vision

GIVING BACK: BROOKE USA

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Hannah Selleck

A Singular Vision

I had the pleasure of meeting Hannah Selleck during a trip to the 2019 Saut Hermès, where I really got to know the woman beyond the famous name and FEI professional equestrian profile. Selleck is just the woman you would want to spend your girls' horse-show-weekend-away with. She has a sharp sense of humor that keeps you laughing, loves hunting down incredible, hole-in-the-wall restaurants, and is always willing to explore the city by foot and marvel at the sights. Each day, before the night classes, we would wander through the city, walking ten or so miles, all the while chatting about everything from the trivial to the more serious. As I listened to her stories, horse-related and otherwise, it became apparent that Selleck is whip-smart, highly analytical about the world and her role in it, and incredibly hardworking.

Our interview for this article, happening a little over a year after our time in Paris, confirmed the conclusions I had previously drawn about Selleck while on our Paris trip. Connecting over the phone, I thoroughly enjoyed catching up with her and was impressed with how much she had accomplished in the short time since we last spoke. At the time of the interview, Selleck was in Wellington with several horses, and over the course of the call, she shared her recent successes with each of them. She spoke about the future of her business, Descanso Farm, which is currently transitioning from a boutique breeding farm to a boutique sales business. She also gave me great insight into how she manages to keep all the balls in the air (breeding, showing, sales, self-care); insight which is easily summarized in one word: work.

It is late afternoon when we settle into our call, allowing Selleck time to work with her horses earlier in the day. Our call is somewhat delayed as Selleck was unexpectedly hung up with one of the horses at the barn who was being shod; she needed to be there to work with the

farrier on a particular issue. This slight timing glitch highlighted an incredible aspect of Selleck's program at Descanso Farm: she personally oversees every part of running it. When I ask how she does it all, she explains, "I make the time, because I believe that how you do anything is how you do everything. In this sport, there is such a small margin that separates each of the top athletes, every decision is a variable in the equation of success. I want to be the one in control of those variables." This answer, given quite decidedly, is the first of many reminders during our interview that Selleck's success is determined by her willingness to work hard.

Attention to each variable is one of Selleck's hard work super powers, and what it looks like in practice is a great deal of planning, controlling, reviewing, and revising a strategy for the training and care for each horse at Descanso Farm. She decides each horse's nutrition plan, veterinary care, training schedule, show calendar, time-off requirements, and more. Selleck offers some insight into her approach, "I spend the majority of my time with each horse living and breathing

the details, which is especially important given that these are partner athletes that cannot talk. But then, when I enter the ring before a round, I release those details and just go, knowing that I took care of everything else as best I possibly could.” This strategy has served her horses well over the years, and certainly contributed to her success in Wellington this winter.

Good Times in Wellington

As Selleck describes her 2020 Wellington winter circuit, she outlines her successes by first giving credit to her horses. She begins with “Rumple,” a seven-year-old mare that Selleck bred herself for Descanso Farm. Known to the scoreboard as Rumbletazer DE, the mare is an American Warmblood by Flexible that Selleck recently took over riding from Will Simpson. Instead of starting with a list of her impressive victories with Rumple (which included top ribbons in the Seven-Year-Old Jumper division at WEF and a successful FEI debut at the Palm Beach Open), Selleck tells me the story of the how she and the spicy mare came to work so well together. As the interview progresses, I realize that Selleck’s natural inclination to tell a horse’s story, rather than simply recite facts and show results, clearly demonstrates how she is just as excited by the process of the endeavor as she is by the product.

Rumple’s journey became particularly challenging after Selleck sustained a significant injury that required time and rehab to heal. After being cleared to ride, Selleck found she was struggling to work through the fear of riding the young, often wild, chestnut mare. Selleck reflects on the experience, “I have come to understand that there is a fine line between being brave and pushing through fear, and being smart about my limitations and asking for help. I realized, during this time with Rumple, that this was a time for me to use my colleagues as a resource.” Soon after enlisting the help of Michelle Grubb and Ali Wolff, Selleck was back on Rumple and in the ring. “I knew I was going to have to conquer my fear eventually, but I needed to be in the right headspace to do it.” This type of self-work, focused on analytical self-awareness and self-reflection (as opposed to the too-often celebrated grin-and-bear-it attitude toward working through struggles), is another valuable practice that Selleck is committed to applying in her business and her life.

As the conversation transitions from Rumple to “Barla,” the 16-year-old Oldenburg mare that Selleck has owned and ridden for eight years, Selleck’s manner becomes less businesslike and serious, and more similar to that of a mother gushing about her first-born child. And as with Rumple, she starts by telling their story: “In the beginning, Barla was just wild; she and I could barely get around the ring. But she could jump the moon and she was so careful over the fences. I knew this was a horse worth fighting for.” Over the years, Selleck put in an incredible amount of time and effort with Barla, working with Ian Miller on Barla’s ground manners and lunging basics in order to enhance the mare’s rideability. In time, and with Ilan Ferder’s help managing the mare, Selleck’s hard work paid off. She and Barla experienced great success together in the

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show ring, including a 1st place finish in the \$38,000 Canadian Pacific Grand Prix CSI2* at the Los Angeles Masters in 2015.

From Selleck’s story and tone, it is clear that Barla has been a significant horse in her life, and that she has learned a lot from the mare. Selleck also makes a point to gratefully credit Barla with bridging her journey from a junior and young rider to a professional, a notoriously challenging transition for riders to navigate. When Selleck tells me that Barla’s time at WEF this year marked her last season in the show ring, I can feel that retiring the mare from competition was a tough, heartfelt decision for Selleck to make. But Selleck always does what is best for her horses, and, as she succinctly states, “It was her time.” Selleck also explained that although bittersweet, the timing for

Barla’s retirement seemed fitting, as shifting Descanso Farm’s focus from breeding to sales will keep Selleck quite busy.

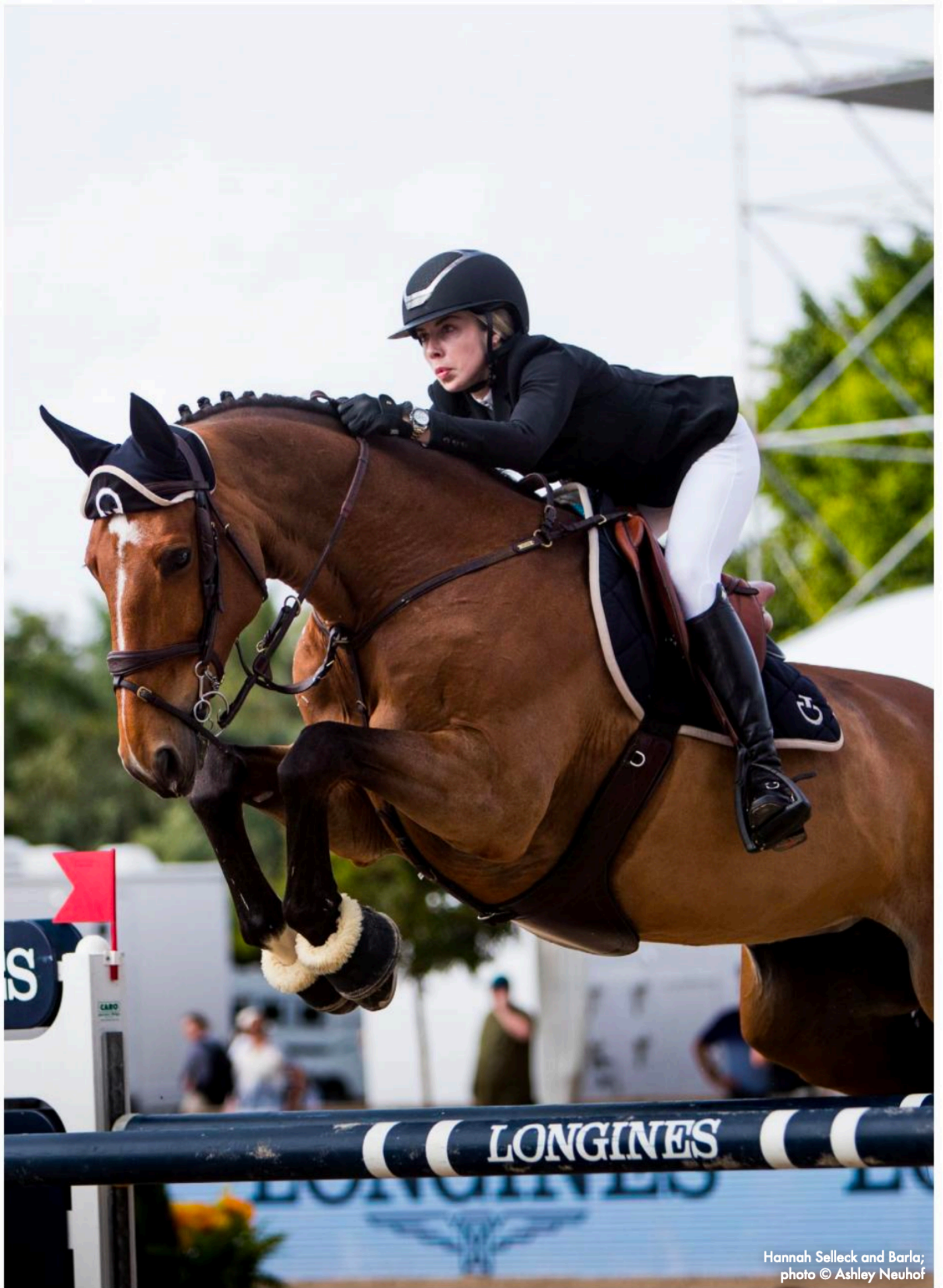
One of the sale horses with her in Wellington is Kasper van het Leliehof, a 10-year-old Belgian Warmblood gelding who has already proven his talent in the arena in their short time together. Selleck begins “Kasper’s” story by explaining how excited she is to have this special horse with her at Wellington. At my request, she takes a moment to detail their wins, which are extensive, including the \$2,500 1.35m Jumpers during week five of WEF, a sixth place finish out of 80 entries in the \$8,000 CSI2* Griffis Residential 1.40m Jumpers during WEF week nine, and closing out their season at the Palm Beach Open with back-to-back clear rounds in the \$10,000 CSI2* Bruins Tour 1.40m Warm Up and the \$10,000 CSI2* Bruins Tour Qualifier with a third place finish out of 76 entries. The list goes on and on, but suffice it to say, he is a real winner – in all senses of the word – and Selleck is thrilled to have him with Descanso Farm until he sells.

Descanso Farm: A Perfect Pivot

Kasper has proven himself a great horse to mark Descanso Farm’s pivot from a boutique breeding program to a boutique sales program. Selleck thoroughly enjoyed her time running the breeding operation for the past ten years, amassing a wealth of knowledge from

Grand Prix rider Soehnke Theymann, as well as Barbara Ellison, the owner of Wild Turkey Farm in Oregon. Selleck is quick to interject that learning from other professionals has always been a key to her success – in the breeding world and otherwise – stating, “Learning from my colleagues makes me better at what I do.” She and Ellison forged a strong friendship that allowed Selleck to learn as she developed her breeding program, and soon her education and hard work yielded talented (and adorable) sport horse foals.

Selleck was drawn to the world of breeding through an earnest understanding of its significance for the sport in the U.S., “It is so important for the U.S. to produce high quality sport horses, and for U.S. riders to be educated in how to start and train young



Hannah Selleck and Barla;
photo © Ashley Neuhof



Fitness as a Priority

As H&S readers learned in Selleck's "Working on Wellness" feature in the Summer 2019 issue, Selleck has an incredibly holistic approach to her health; one that combines the physical, mental, and emotional. She explains that finding and maintaining this balance is especially important on the road, when life is about long days, hotel beds, and restaurant food, all of which tend to disturb her equilibrium. She tries to limit caffeine, eat healthy, and make choices that feel right for her body. But Selleck admits, everything is best in moderation – once in a while, her night ends with room service mac n' cheese and some TV time.

To maintain her physical and mental well-being, Selleck loves to run, go to a spin class, or do HIIT workouts. "Cardio is really important for me. It helps me dissipate any anxiety I am feeling. Even when I am traveling, I will run on the hotel treadmill and visualize my rounds. It is a physical act that brings me mental clarity." When asked if she meditates, Selleck admits, "I try..." But she is quick to laugh and explain that's why they call meditation a "practice" and not a "doing." Based on my observation, as opposed to Selleck's self-admission, laughter (and her great sense of humor) is another self-care practice of hers, a practice that even those around her get to benefit from.



Hannah Selleck and Barla;
photo © Ashley Neuhof

horses. A home-based breeding program is a great way for U.S. riders to be able to afford high-quality, competitive horses that they might not otherwise have access to." Selleck herself is proof of her own beliefs: Rumpel, a Descanso Farm foal all grown up, is winning in the jumper ring.

Selleck admits that balancing an international show jumping career and a breeding program was a challenge, and a few notable riding experiences led her to realize that her heart truly lies in the show ring. In 2016, Selleck competed in Europe, including stops at the Madrid and Valkenswaard Global Champions Tour competitions, and she thoroughly enjoyed competing at that level, as well as traveling throughout Europe. She also spent some time working for Burgundy Farms which yielded quite a bit of time in the saddle, as well as valuable experience working in an equestrian sales program. More recently, Selleck rode and showed Sheikha Melissa AL Fahad's Cuzco QR while Sheikha Melissa was pregnant. It was a rewarding experience because it was Selleck who sourced the gelding. Sheikha Melissa asked Selleck to find a high amateur prospect that she could enjoy riding and competing after having her baby, but until then, could be competitive and exciting to watch with a professional in the open ring. Cuzco QR certainly fit the bill, and Selleck claimed top ten finishes with him on the West Coast FEI 2* circuit. Selleck explains, "Those experiences,

among a few others, made me realize that I really enjoy showing and sales, and that I was ready to spend more of my time riding seasoned show horses."

As a sales business, Descanso Farm will embody and maintain the same high standards it held as a breeding business: boutique, high-caliber, and completely managed by Selleck. She has a European partner that she is working with on the new venture, and the two have developed a sales program that will offer a wide range of exceptional high-end horses perfect for the U.S. amateur and U25 market. Utilizing her conventional equitation and classical riding background, Selleck will manage, train, and show each of the sales horses. At any given time, Descanso Farm will only manage between three and five sales horses, which will allow Selleck to devote the time and attention to each horse that her personal equestrian philosophy requires.

Selleck is beyond excited about this new venture, and the energy she is bringing to this new phase of her life is palpable, even over the phone. "I just love the whole process. It was incredible bringing Kasper to the U.S., settling him in and building a rapport with him. Then, as soon as we clicked, I loved getting him into the show ring, especially the speed class – I really relished that opportunity." Although Selleck loves the horses, it is also very clear that she is a fierce competitor, and this new venture will allow her to gain

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more experience on new and different mounts and in many different venues.

Selleck also explains that this is just the beginning for Descanso Farm’s sales operation, and she has countless ideas about how to expand the business (by partnering with compatible investors) and how to enhance the buying experience for buyers (by offering buyers a beautiful sales barn to visit in California). But really, her main goal? Repeat business. She elaborates, “I believe in each of the horses that I have at Descanso Farm, so I know which type of buyer will be successful on each horse. I want to find each buyer his or her perfect match, so the next time that rider is looking for a horse, I get the opportunity to help them again.” Fortunately, Selleck’s long history as an industry professional, her show experience, and her reputation for honesty all but guarantee that repeat business is inevitable.

Competition and Goals

Selleck’s history as a competitor is a long one, beginning with many accolades as a junior and young rider, programs which she credits with having taught her how to handle pressure, both from trainers and in the show ring. Her junior career also gave her a read on whether she wanted to become a professional, something she was not absolutely certain of at first. In a very relatable story, Selleck described how after graduating from Loyola Marymount University, her family told her she either had to work to be able to afford to ride, or she had to find a way to work as a rider. Selleck tried the former first, but it was not a fit. She explains, “I felt as though I was being taken away from the horses, and I couldn’t do it. I realized that despite the long hours, the physical labor, the travel, I needed to choose a riding career. So, I made the switch and though it hasn’t been easy, it was the perfect choice for me.”

As we begin our discussion about her goals, Selleck offers one of the most refreshing outlooks on goal-setting that I have heard in a long time, and her honesty strikes a chord with me. She begins, “I am cautious with setting goals; I think they can cause burn out.” It is not exactly the response I was expecting, so I ask her to elaborate, which she does, with a story, “As a junior, I was incredibly goal-oriented, and I achieved the vast majority of the goals I set: Reserve Champion in the USEF Hunt Seat Medal Finals, Champion in the USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals, and winning individual and team Gold at the North American Young Riders’ Championship. But in this sport in particular, chance plays a role, and horses go lame or riders sustain injuries. You cannot control all the variables to be completely goal-oriented; goals need to be set as moving targets.”

Selleck shares one experience in particular that shaped this viewpoint. A horse she purchased as a potential Nations Cup™ prospect almost immediately started having health issues. Her budget was invested in that one horse, so finding an alternative mount was not an option. It was a heartbreaking experience, but like so many equestrians, it was just one of many similar stories Selleck could tell. “Comparison can steal your joy,” she goes on, “I had to realize that my journey is my own, my timeline is my own, and both will look different from another equestrian’s. My job is to work hard and to be in a place to be able to accept what comes when it comes. That has been the most successful philosophy for my life.” Certainly wise words, and it is clear that she applies that same philosophy to her approach with her horses and her business, that is: hard work, patience, and a good dose of self-reflection yield the best and biggest rewards.

Giving Back

brookeusa.org

Selleck has been involved with charity work for the majority of her life, and credits the faith-based schools she attended with fueling her desire to make the world a better place. She offers insight, “Show jumping is such a small community, and it can often feel like that arena is your entire world. But it is important for us equestrians to remember that there is a big world around us, and that big world needs a lot of help – and we are in a position to provide it.”

Right now, Selleck is partnered with Brooke USA, an organization that works to improve the welfare of working horses, donkeys and mules, and the people they serve. They do this by helping the animals become (and remain) healthy and happy, which benefits the very poor families who depend on those animals to help them earn a living. To learn more about Brooke USA, see page 76.

Beyond her charity work, Selleck would love to see the show jumping community embrace the intersection of sport and philanthropy. She explains that while she enjoyed riding at charity shows as a junior, real recognition for these causes would be best served by showcasing them at 5★ events. “This,” she explains, “would help to broaden our blinders a bit.”





Despite a more spiritual approach to goal setting, Selleck has her sights set on hitting several career milestones. After taking some time off to completely heal from an injury, Selleck would love to come back to the sport showing consistent results in the FEI 2* and 3* rings, as well as return to the Longines FEI Rankings list. As I encourage her to share just a few heartfelt big, long-term goals, she takes a breath and divulges that she would love to show in the big Derby at Spruce Meadows or Hickstead, and qualify for the World Cup™ Finals. She finishes by saying that her real enjoyment comes from showing the horses she has in whichever arena they can be most successful. With a philosophy like that, it is easy to understand that the horses in Selleck's program are lucky ones.

Barla-Billy Baby

As we begin to wind the interview down, and we shift from serious questions to light conversation, I ask Selleck what Barla's retirement will look like. She laughs lovingly and – of course – explains with a story, "The first year at Blenheim's 3*, Vani Khosla and I were in the ribbons and chatting during the awards ceremony. I was on Barla, and she was on Billy Mexico, her amazing stallion. We complimented each other on the horses, and realized that we should make a Barla-Billy baby! We laughed it off back then, but with Barla retiring, I thought, this is the time to make that happen. So she will be bred to Billy Mexico and Vani and I will get to meet our Barla-Billy baby soon." I too give a loving laugh, secretly glad Selleck is not entirely done with breeding, despite her exciting new ventures, because I too can't wait to see a Barla-Billy baby.

We soon hang up, as Selleck has to run and start the second wave of her busy day: office work. Reflecting on our call, and after the hours spent listening to Selleck's excitement, her innovative ideas, and her determination, I imagine how great it will be to catch up with her a year from now to hear all about how she and Descanso Farm are reaping the benefits of all her hard work. Until then, I plan to use this time spent with Selleck as inspiration for my own life. So, wasting no time, I take out my computer, and get right to work on this article. **HS**

