

A Royal Undertaking

The Countess of Carnarvon talks about Highclere Castle's latest ventures and *Downton Abbey*

Words by Vanessa Pascale



You might recognize Highclere Castle, the home of England's 8th Earl (George) & Countess (Fiona) of Carnarvon, as it's the filming location of the Emmy Award-winning television series and upcoming motion picture, *Downton Abbey*. The royal inhabitants of this grand residence recently embarked on a couple of exciting, new ventures that are sure to garner worldwide acclaim: Highclere Castle Gin and Highclere Castle Cigar, a super-premium cigar blended in the style of elegant cigars from the early 1900s.

I met the royal couple during an exclusive cocktail celebration in New York City this past November. Lord George, who was dressed in a navy blue suit and sky blue tie, and Lady Fiona, who was outfitted in a plum-colored sweater paired with leopard print pants, mingled with guests as they enjoyed light bites, cocktails, and Highclere Castle Cigars. Lady Fiona—who is also a celebrated author and speaker—was in high spirits when she spoke with me about their new businesses, how Highclere Castle became the home of *Downton Abbey*, and more.

What made you both choose to go into the cigar and gin business?

Lady Fiona Carnarvon: We had the idea of developing some spirits with Adam [von Gootkin], and that process has taken some time...It all came together. We tried with some cigars, so it's all things that we grow and things that you can drink or eat. We're a farm, so it's that kind of connection. I think the tradition of smoking a cigar after supper, not all the time, but occasionally, is so elegant, actually going outside the library at Highclere. And it's a tradition from the '30s or the '20s, so it's picking up some of that and taking it forward to today. It's beautifully made and it's had rave reviews, so it's gone down really well.

Now, we've just brought the gin forward and we've been working on it and tasting gin for 9 months. It's looking at the things around Highclere and *Downton* and the international marketing platform it's brought us to see where we can go.

And I write books, and I like writing about food and recipes, what comes from where, what we're putting inside us. And you need to party, and I mean, I know we all have to be good, not have too much of anything, you also need to have conversations and cocktails and meet friends [laughs].

Absolutely! So, what do you think sets your products apart from others?

LFC: I think it's very smooth. We were trying to develop a gin that reminds me of the gin my parents drank. I think that food and drink are all about memories as well; it's going back to that. And then it's what was in the orangery; we've got lemons and limes. I wanted the freshness and crispness and then we use some oats in it to give it some smoothness and some lavenders. So it was what was around us and having fun, 'cause that's what it should be.

Do you smoke cigars as well?

LFC: I don't actually, I quite like the smell, it's very familiar. My pa used to have the odd cigar after dinner. After dinner, he might go outside, have a cigar. It's a familiar smell, which I think is amazing, woodiness and the complexities is lovely.

The cigars are out and now the gin is coming out soon?

LFC: Yes, the cigars have been out and very well-received. We were amazed. We did it! And then the gin was coming along, it's a bigger project. The gin is made in England from botanicals at Highclere, the whole process is. And then you taste it again and you change something and put something back in. Oh my goodness [laughs]. That's been going along. It's fun to see where it goes.



So you've been very involved with the whole process?

LFC: Yes, we are, 'cause it's our home. I think you have to believe in what you're doing. I think I have to believe in what I'm doing. I write a blog, it's very personal, about where we are, take you behind the scenes, and I write books. I want to bring you into my life, all the lives, the predecessors and share them with you. So it's all that as well. It is personal.

What kind of blog do you write?

LFC: I write a blog about Highclere, www.LadyCarnarvon.com and it's read by thousands of people. It takes you behind the scenes, so it's amazing.

That's amazing! How did your home become the home of *Downton Abbey*?

LFC: Well aren't we lucky!? The thing is, again, it's through the idea of home, which is why I wrote a book about home because when George and I took over, I didn't want to look after a museum for our lifetime, I wanted to make sure we could welcome friends. It's called a stately home for a reason, so I started doing the plumbing and stuff like that, and then I could have friends come to stay. Two of those friends were Emma and Julian Fellowes —Julian Fellowes wrote *Downton Abbey*, so he had Highclere in mind when he wrote it 'cause he stayed there. He knew how the dining room worked, where the butler came out from... So it's through good food and good wine.

That's so cool.

LFC: We all work very hard, and we don't have friends over every weekend 'cause they're often working but ya know, Friday nights start with a cocktail, we've all made it through the

week and whatever time people arrive, I don't mind. But you just need a good cocktail, a gin cocktail, champagne cocktail, something 'cause you made it.

You've mentioned the home quite a bit. What one word would you use to describe your home?

LFC: Well, I can't in one because it has 300 rooms, so it's quite splendid. But I think it has a cozy splendor —two words. It's in a good place, Highclere, at the moment, we've gained so much from our own experience, working there. I have young interns, who I do pay and it helps pay for their university. Some of them are 18-19 and our eldest employee is 92, so there's this amazing community of people from different experiences and it's a world apart. So many find there are different reasons for living, not necessarily connected to money, we all need money to live, but it's also about the support through the good times, the bad times, the celebrations, the friendships, the cups of coffee together. That's one of the things I'm kinda focusing on sharing...figuring out what makes a cultural community.

I love that. What sort of books do you write?

LFC: I've written some history books about the First World War and the Second World War; they've both been published here in America by Random House. I've written a big coffee table book at home with Rizzoli. And I am just embarking on my next book, Christmas at the real Downton Abbey, out next September; it's about stories, recipes, and traditions. I think it will be really good fun and it's a time we all make those journeys home at Christmas time, everybody does, so I thought, *OK, let's look at how we do Christmas.* **ML**

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