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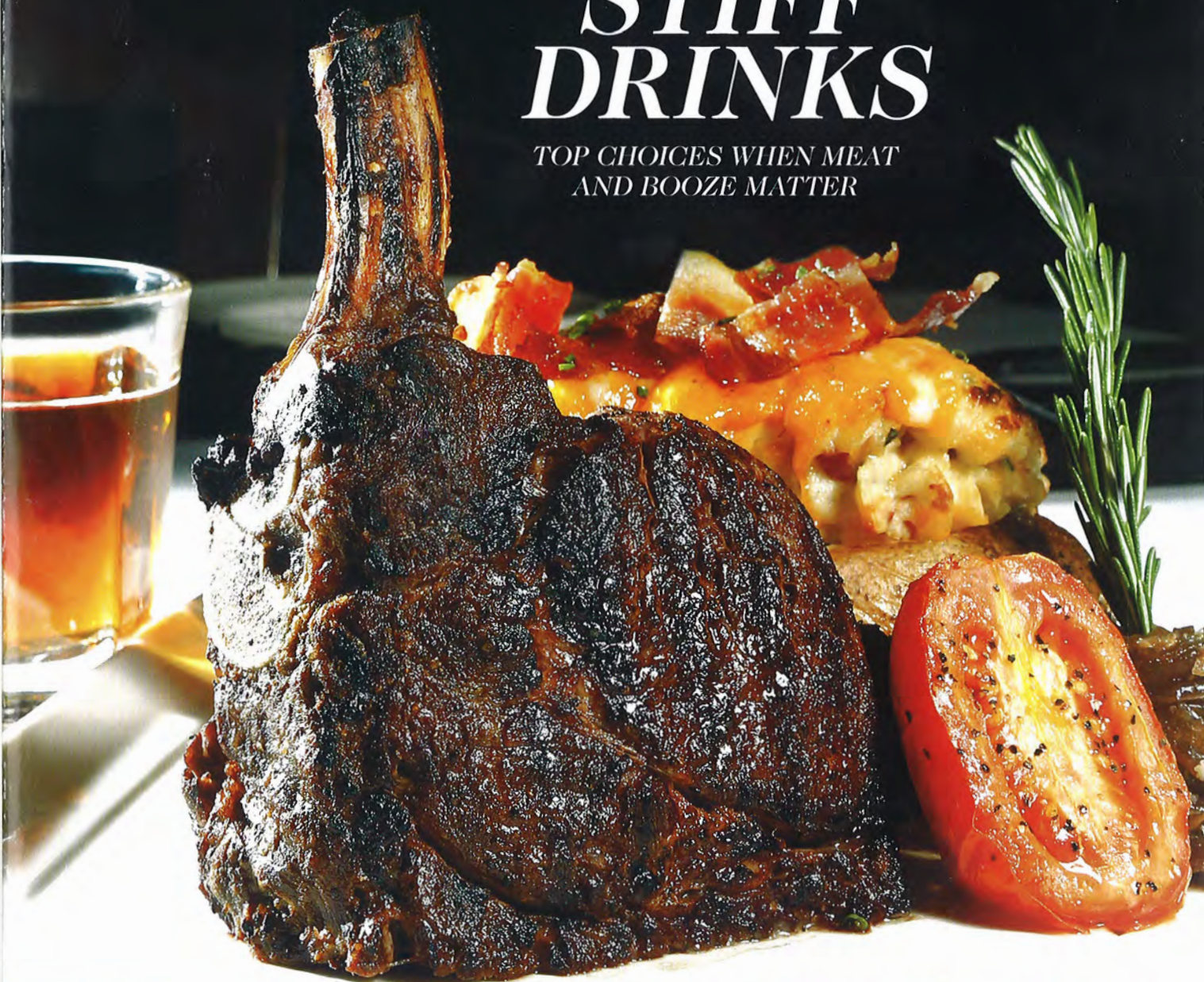
living

"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart. Wishing you happiness!"

—HELEN KELLER

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Building for the Long Haul

With extensive experience in custom home building, the **Orren Pickell Building Group** is equipped to turn your dream home into a reality. BY DAVID SWEET

When Orren Pickell grew up, he said no one—from his parents to his teachers—explained that, if he chose, one day he could go into business for himself. So it was a revelation for him at age 17 to join entrepreneur Tom Keck in Oak Brook as a painting contractor. “It was eye-opening to see how he ran a business,” says Pickell, who eventually put himself through Bradley University in Peoria—where he studied architecture and construction—by working long hours for his own painting business.

That firm has metamorphosed today into Orren Pickell Building Group. The custom-home-building firm in Northfield has notched numerous awards, including the “Best in American Living Award” from the National Association of Home Builders, and at one point employed more than 130. Though the housing downturn nearly knocked him out—an investment group acquired the assets of Orren Pickell Designers & Builders LLC for \$350,000 a few years back, according to *Crain's Chicago Business*, and retained Pickell as president and chief executive officer—he remains a force in high-end homebuilding in the Chicago area.

Though Orren Pickell Building Group is best known for their extraordinary custom homes on the North Shore, the firm also has deep roots in the western suburbs—particularly Hinsdale. When Pickell started his painting business, a lot of his work was in Hinsdale working on some of the old historical homes in the area. Today, he's come full circle building some new and notable homes in Hinsdale.

“What a custom home builder does is design and build people's dreams,” explains Pickell,

who constructed his own dream house in Mettawa during the 1980s along with another later in Lake Geneva. “Real custom is when the client comes to you because they want your abilities.”

Pickell's company has jettisoned any interest in speculative development after a numbing foray. In 2007, near the height of the market, his firm bought the historic Lansdowne estate in Lake Bluff and subdivided its 21 acres. Even after slashing the lot prices by 25 percent in 2010, buyers were scarce. “I lost a ton,” Pickell says. “In the past during a downturn people would buy great land that was stable—land on the shore in a town with great schools. I had never seen quality real estate decline in value. If I hadn't been developing property, I would have been in great shape.”

Today, running a debt-free company that builds homes in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Michigan, Pickell remains busy, especially as business is improving. “My job is to solve problems that will always come up,” he says. His company boasts a 95 percent on-time construction ranking. “There's

design issues. Maybe the cabinetry didn't fit together, though it looks good on drawings. You have to walk through and say, ‘That's not how we planned it.’”

Pickell enjoys designing and trying to figure out how to grow the 22-employee firm, which includes his daughter Lisa as chief operating officer. He starts each day by reading the Bible. “It's very important. It keeps you centered,” he says. “Whatever you believe in, you should focus on it once a day to keep your bearings. It helps me keep peace within myself.”

He also believes in giving back. His company is helping to remodel distressed housing in North Chicago and sell it to people for one-third of their income. “That's been very rewarding,” he says. To relax, Pickell, who once participated in the Mackinac Island Race, enjoys sailing when he can. “Sailing, just like reading the Bible, brings you peace,” he said. “Some people like to golf. I like the water. I always have.” ■

The Orren Pickell Design Showroom is located at 1799 Willow Road in Northfield, and the Orren Pickell Building Group is located at 550 Frontage Road, Suite 3800, in Northfield. For more information, call 1-888-PICKELL, or visit pickellbuilders.com.



“What a custom home builder does is design and build people's dreams.”



A Hinsdale home designed by Orren Pickell