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FINE LIVING IN VENTURA COUNTY

monthly

BUILDING EDEN

Artists, Artisans, and Master Gardeners

BLUE HORIZON:

A crack team collaborated with the homeowner to create this heavenly hilltop perch overlooking the Ojai Valley. See page 44.

SEPTEMBER 2012

HOME+ GARDEN

BAU-BIOLOGIE

How to create a healthy kitchen

BLOOMING MASTERWORKS

Color in the county

FANTASY AND REALITY

From the Matterhorn to Hobson Heights



COLLABORATION COMES HOME

In the Ojai Valley, a team of artists and artisans creates an architectural wonderland.

BY LESLIE A. WESTBROOK PHOTOS BY BRUCE DITCHFIELD

HAVE A FEW FAVORITE HOUSES ON THE PLANET. The Fechin House, in Taos, New Mexico and Shiatsu Rincon, in Carpinteria's Gobernador Canyon, are just two. And by the look of things, I'd probably have to add Hacienda Alegre, a Ventura County hideaway and private residence designed by Ojai architect Marc Whitman, to my short list.

Feeling a connection to a house has a lot to do with balance, or Feng Shui. Few abodes nurture an all-encompassing sense of wellbeing, beauty, and calm. Hacienda Alegre provides this in photographs alone. Imagine the real thing, with the smell of California sage in the air, wood burning fireplaces (there are nine!) aglow, and an extended family that includes eleven grandchildren playing in the pool or gathered together for a meal in one of the outdoor rooms.

The home was a labor of love, with many contributors, and the owner prides herself on knowing the hands, hearts, and souls of all who helped create the 7,500-square-foot "Happy Estate."

Choosing an architect was easy. Marc Whitman not only had the sensibility, he was a longtime family friend. "Marc is like a son to me. He was the very best person I could have ever worked with during this process," says the owner/builder, who prefers to remain anonymous.

Soaring, cathedral ceilings and natural materials lure the visitor up to the second story in the house, which sits on four acres. Alcoves and curving walks beckon. An open, welcoming kitchen and dining area invites the promise of sharing a meal, a glass of wine, and lively conversation around the table. An olive grove of 400 trees produces fresh oil, and there's a pool, a spa, rose gardens, and plenty of places to explore on the property, which boasts views of Lake Casitas, the coastal range, and the Topa Topa mountains.

The owner purchased the property in the mid-1990s but didn't quite know what to do with it—until a trip to Acapulco, Mexico, where she was invited to an inspirational home in Las Brisas. She spent two hours making notes about the indoor-out-

Location: Ojai Valley

Architect: Marc Whitman, Whitman Architectural Design, Ojai; whitman-architect.com, 805.646.8485

Art Glass: Architectural Art Glass, Ventura; 805.644.3819

Doors and windows: Portofino (formerly Southwest) Fine Doors and Windows, Santa Barbara; portofinodoors.com, 805.966.4263

Roof: Redland Clay Tile; redland-claytile.com, 800.354.5983

Antiques: Michael Haskell Antiques, Montecito; michael-haskell.com, 805.565.1121

Woodwork: Gary Bulla, Architectural Woodworks, Santa Paula; garybullawood.com, 805.933.1366

Building Supervisor: Tom Hall

Painting and stain: Patrick Slavin

door living space, and brought those ideas back to the Ojai Valley to incorporate into her own home.

Fortunately, she wasn't in a hurry. The house was five years in planning and took almost three to build. "I've lived in Ojai for 53 years; my heart is in this valley," she notes, adding that after all of the plans and engineering were complete, she chose not to create interior elevations. "When the house is up and framed", she told her team of workers and artisans, "we will figure it out."

And what a team it was. The project grew very organically. Tom Hall built the house with the owner/builder, aided by artisans that ranged from coppersmiths and carpenters to fine plasterers, viga carvers, and artisan tile-setters.

Interior elements were a labor of love as well. There are powerful bronze sculptures by George Carlson and Mexican folk art from Oaxaca purchased directly from the artisans. Architectural elements and fine antiques were culled from Michael Haskell Antiques in Montecito, and the dealer was a huge inspiration, finding items such as the 170-year-old entry gates from Peru that he knew would be perfect for the house, as well as a unique chandelier.

Shopping trips (often combined with business) to places like Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and the East Coast, as well as jaunts around California, added more elements (from furnishings to tiles, fountains and hand-carved doors) for the house. Wrought iron lights were custom made, as were hand-carved doors from Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Cathedral ceilings and a flood of natural light lend the interior space a welcoming airiness, particularly in the morning and evening.





The kitchen is open, the rooms are warm, and the home's design takes advantage of 300-degree views showcasing Lake Casitas, the coastal range, and the Topa Topa mountains.

"Every single person who worked on this house had something to say about it and added value," says the owner. "Every Friday I'd come home, Tom (the contractor) would buy beer and all the laborers and craftsmen would sit around the living room. The outdoor fireplace was black with soot before we ever finished the house!"

The copper hood in the kitchen happened rather fortuitously, she explains: "One of the guys building the copper gutters on the house saw I had a photo from Mike Haskell's house and he said, 'I can do that, no problem.' And he did. If

you let people be creative, they will be ... I am really proud of my house, but it wasn't me ... I had influence, but it was so much more." In fact, the laborers chose the name Hacienda Alegre.

"She was a great facilitator—letting ideas flow and being really open-minded to people's ideas. A lot of owners are stuck on their own idea and don't let people participate like she did," says Marc Whitman, adding with a laugh, "The owner has great taste and continues to support artists. She's a patron, only she has parties with artists now instead of builders." ■