



SAN FRANCISCO DESIGNERS JOHN WHEATMAN AND PETER GILLIAM IDENTIFY THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN INDOORS AND OUT FOR ONE NAPA VALLEY HOME—AND THEN BLUR IT BEYOND RECOGNITION

When George and Elsa Vare first saw the Napa Valley property they would eventually buy, it was hardly the serene Wine Country refuge of their fantasies. Ambling down the long driveway, they passed a dead car, a leaky boat, and an appliance graveyard before two menacing, well-muscled Doberman pinschers appeared, charging toward them. Shaken but not deterred, the Vares entered the main house, which, they discovered, had been cited with 157 code violations when the owners tried to remodel it.

“It took a fair amount of vision to see the potential,” Elsa says. “But we saw these beautiful oak trees and redwoods, and we thought we could make this place something special.”

The existing house—with its nonsensical floor plan and low, claustrophobic ceilings—was beyond rescue. So the Vares decided to raze it and start from scratch. While brainstorming plans for their new home with San Francisco designers John Wheatman and Peter Gilliam, the couple confirmed they wanted the property’s natural surroundings to inform the design. “I’ve seen houses that are meant to be statements in and of themselves, and they seem to ignore their habitat,” Elsa says. “We wanted the house not to intrude on the natural beauty, but to sink into it.”

Wheatman and Gilliam worked with Napa Valley-based custom builders Grassi Construction to craft a home that blended into its surrounding woodland. The initial concept was two square houses—one for the family and the other for guests—connected by



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an arbor. That concept eventually morphed into a single structure, with an airy great room making the connection instead. Rather than walling off rooms, there are giant barn doors. “Flexibility was key,” Wheatman says. “All the doors open—like sliding walls—so you can have 120 people for a dinner party from one end of the house to the other.” That was essential for the Vares, who have many gatherings and host special events related to their roles in the community—George is a leading Napa vintner and Elsa is president of the board of the Napa Valley Opera House. The Vares love that they can configure the space however they like. “In the wintertime, we often keep the pocket doors closed because it creates a feeling of intimacy in the great room when it’s just the two of us,” Elsa says.

All of the private rooms are off the main space and, in line with the Vares’ original vision, the guest bedrooms are self-sufficient, each with its own fridge and coffee machine. “That’s

come in handy because we have one grandchild who always awakens at obscene hours of the morning,” Elsa jokes.

In nearly every room, large picture windows reveal the lush landscape beyond, visually blurring the boundary between indoors and out. To enhance the effect, Wheatman and Gilliam also installed strategically placed mirrors in the great room to cleverly reflect the outdoors back in. “I love the sense of space and openness,” says George. “It’s a very comfortable place to live in.”

The designers created a calm interior by using muted natural tones throughout and incorporating beautiful objects into the design. An elaborate Chinese temple door, for example, closes off a storage area. The kitchen—situated around an antique French bakers table—is the ideal place to prepare a Wine Country meal. The stainless steel vent over the stove was custom-made to blend into the space, and Gilliam hung Greek fishing lanterns over the table to fully illuminate the room.



Windows between the kitchen cabinets and counter reveal the Vares' pinot grigio vineyard, formerly a horse pasture. A longtime winemaker, George acquired Geyser Peak in 1972 and launched Luna Vineyards in 1996, building it to its current success. The Vares have been traveling to Italy's Friuli region for 10 years to study Italian winemaking, and George has even duplicated Friuli varietals such as Ribolla Gialla here.

After "flunking retirement," as Elsa says, George launched Vare Vineyards, whose first vintages promptly made the coveted wine list at The French Laundry. Says French Laundry wine director Paul Roberts "We tasted the original releases when they were still in barrel, and I was so enamored with them that I bought all of certain cuvées right away." So a must-have in the Vares' new home was the intimate underground wine cellar,



which Wheatman and Gilliam finished off with an unexpected flourish—a wooden ceiling of concentric rectangles.

All around the home, landscape architect Steve Arns made magic, covering outbuildings with creeping foliage to give them a hedgelike appearance. Off the master bedroom, a sculptural outdoor shower is tucked among Japanese maples and redwoods. Out front, the swimming pool's terracing blends into the natural area beyond, where Arns interspersed plantings with 100 tons of large boulders, which he hoisted in with a crane. "Now the landscaping is mature and, in the winter, the boulders just come alive with wonderful mosses and lichen," Elsa says. "Steve was able to clearly see how it would all come together, which is an incredible gift."

In fact, the couple loves to take it all in while sitting around their outdoor fireplace, under a little arbor covered in grapevines. As George says, "We're 10 minutes from downtown Napa, but we could be a million miles from anywhere."