

THIS PAGE FROM LEFT The owners initially fell in love with the surrounding landscape and tranquil views. The traditional stone exterior of the house belies its stylish, modern interior. OPPOSITE The hall has the feel of an art gallery, heightened by the careful placement of pieces such as the sculpture by Australian artist Camie Lyons, which sits on a table by Warren Platner, bought at Coexistence

WINE *and* SONG

Intended in its new guise for partying and relaxing, this cavernous former wine warehouse in the Languedoc has been transformed as an airy, luxurious holiday retreat

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BOTH PAGES FROM LEFT The kitchen, designed with two parallel islands, combines sunny saffron-coloured units and honed-basalt worktops with industrial-style details such as the metal stools, from Viaduct, and the Siemens extractor. An informal dining area abuts the kitchen. The walls throughout have been treated with *enduit à la chaux*, a traditional lime render, which gives a textured, chalky finish



Falling in love rarely goes to plan. We imagine all we've ever desired is a pair of blue eyes and a fall of sandy blond hair, then suddenly we find nothing will do but a hazel-eyed brunette. The same is often true of houses – as the owners of this former winery in the South of France discovered.

'We'd been looking for a country cottage in England. Then, one day, we were in the South of France driving down a back route. We saw this view and that was it.' Fortunately for the couple, that heart-stopping outlook of hills and sunlight was accompanied by the neglected ruins of a vast wine warehouse and 120 acres of Languedoc farmland. They didn't hesitate in substituting the verdant Devon landscape for something considerably more rugged and challenging.

Today, some 10 years later, their holiday retreat is anything but a rose-clad cottage. The rangy remains of the winery have been resurrected as an expansive country house, combining the stone solidity of a Mediterranean *mas* with the space and light of something considerably more up to date. Getting to this polished point, however, has been almost as steep a climb as the surrounding hillsides. It wasn't until the owners had waved goodbye to their third architect that they finally contacted their long-term friend, interior designer Samantha Todhunter, who has helped them transform a featureless shell into a comfortable, modern home.

Samantha, who began her career working on glossy magazines, has the fresh perspective that the couple were hoping for. At the beginning of the project, however, her French was rusty. 'I now know all the terms for pipes and plumbing,' she laughs.

But it wasn't just a new vocabulary she acquired – she also took on the mood of the countryside. A large crescent sweep of southern France, Languedoc – overrun, in turn, by the Greeks, the Romans and the Crusaders – has a dramatic history. Today, it is one of the country's richest wine-producing regions with a rocky, fertile landscape bleached and intensified by a hazy summer heat.

'I absolutely didn't want to do that traditional, twee, South-of-France look with blue shutters and lots of chintz,' says Samantha. 'The building used to contain wine, stored in huge concrete tanks, and I felt we needed to retain a sense of its industrial past while reflecting the surrounding landscape.'

By the time she took charge, the layout and structure were already in place. The tattered roof had been painstakingly rebuilt by skilled German craftsmen and the warehouse beneath it had been redefined as living space. Samantha decided to spice up the mix with steel-framed windows and a new staircase – a shell-like spiral of concrete – to give it 'a more organic feel'.

The house is arranged over two floors. Upstairs, five bedrooms and bathrooms encircle a central well; below, an expanse of open-plan living

'The building used to contain wine, so I wanted to retain a sense of its industrial past while reflecting the surrounding landscape'





OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The sitting-room sofas were custom-made by George Smith and covered in a herringbone linen by Bruno Triplet, while the armchairs are covered in a green-and-white linen by Raoul Textiles; the coffee tables are from Tyson. Upstairs, the bedrooms and bathrooms encircle a central well. The wooden horse on the landing was bought at a local antiques market. THIS PAGE Samantha Todhunter replaced the wooden staircase with a cast concrete spiral; the Buddha statue at its foot was bought in Phuket, Thailand

BOTH PAGES FROM LEFT The large main bedroom, decorated in chocolate brown and baby blue, has a free-standing bath from which the bather can enjoy far-reaching views of the countryside. The armchairs are covered in 'La Fiorentina' linen by David Hicks, from Lee Jofa. The entertaining space extends on to the pool terrace, where a pergola shades a sofa and chairs from Unopiù



space provides an impossible-to-crowd area for entertaining. 'In the summer, we'll often have 15 to lunch, followed by 20 to dinner,' says the owner.

Many of the couple's dinner guests also stay at the house, so the design of the bedrooms was a priority. To give each a distinctive mood, Samantha used a high-fashion colour spectrum ranging from chocolate brown and baby blue to Schiaparelli pink and acid green. 'I wanted the colours to be strong – you had to understand immediately you were entering a "green room", for example – but not overpowering.'

Each large bedroom is intended to provide guests with a welcoming retreat from the hectic social whirl. 'I imagined everyone going up to their own space between five and eight, before coming down to dinner,' says the owner. 'In fact, they usually sit round the pool drinking rosé.'

Food and drink are central to this sun-filled lifestyle and the kitchen, with its honed-basalt work surfaces and saffron-coloured units, was designed as the centre of operations. 'I wanted a kitchen where I never needed to turn my back,' says the owner, and Samantha found the solution to this vexing conundrum by creating two sleek, parallel islands.

The keynote of the house is the intense bond between inside and out. The new windows provide abundant glimpses of the thyme-clothed hills, while the materials used indoors rarely depart from those found in nature. The ground floor is decked in a soothingly cool, creamy Pierre de Bourgogne limestone, the upstairs in aged grey oak, while the walls have been

treated with *enduit à la chaux*, a traditional rough, polished lime render, which gives them a chalky, textured finish.

Throughout the house touches of sophisticated luxury – luminous silks, sumptuous marble and coppery nickel – ensure that hosts and guests alike never forget they're being spoilt.

Samantha set the visual bar high and though the owners were occasionally tempted to compromise, they had to admit that 'good enough' is, in fact, rarely good enough. 'Samantha had the knack of showing us something and when we said we couldn't afford it, she'd show us something else. We always ended up back at the original.' Very quickly, they came to trust her uncompromising standards. 'When the hand-cut stone for the floor arrived on pallets, the slabs turned out to be bright orange; Samantha instantly flew to Lyons, then drove for five hours to the quarry to watch them cut another batch.'

Needless to say, they also gave her full authority over the garden. 'Before, you'd see every colour under the sun, but she was quite strict about everything being white and lavender. Now, we ring her up and tease her, saying, "Oh, my God, there's a pink begonia.'" Indeed, while a pink begonia may be all very well in Devon, it wouldn't do in Carcassonne. The couple, however, are certainly not complaining. 'We have to pinch ourselves when we're here. We can't believe it' □

Samantha Todhunter: ?

Contact details: ?

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