

OCTOBER 2009

# House Beautiful

the  
**KITCHEN**  
of the  
**YEAR**

## 50

*ideas for  
your kitchen  
from  
the Barefoot  
Contessa!*

## ROOMS

YOU'LL NEVER  
GET TIRED OF



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CHRISTINE PITTEL:

Where are we?  
Positano? Capri?  
Lake Como?

MICHAEL S. SMITH:

We're in Laguna Beach, California, but the house has the feeling of all those other places. The architect, Bob White, did a wonderful job of creating this Italianate character in a way that's eccentric and interesting. His design has the simplicity and solidity of an old agrarian building. I wanted to keep that simplicity. >>

Other designers could have looked at the living room walls, made of Santa Barbara sandstone, and thought castle, grand. Michael S. Smith thought primitive, pure. Sofas are slipcovered in Avigdor's Chan in Cream; the simple lines echo the shape of the 17th-century Chinese coffee table from Charles Jacobsen. Two Italian Baroque armchairs, covered in Morgan Velvet by Michael S. Smith for Jasper, have strong bones, like the house. Floor lamps by Alison Berger. Negresco chandelier by Hélène Aumont. Apple rush matting by Stark.

**I like the way the house tumbles down the hill. And details like those small square windows in the living room make it look like a ruin you've restored. How did you make that huge room feel so calm?**

Quiet colors. Thick apple matting. Slipcovered sofas. There was already so much drama in the stone it was sort of like, enough. You don't need to overdo it. I wanted to make it very plain and comfortable, to have that sense of what a real European house would look like. People tend to do Italian with a capital 'I'—velvet and tassels and cherubs and all that gilded stuff. But we're on a hill overlooking the ocean, and I don't want to get in the way of all the natural beauty outside.

**Somehow, even with the old beams and the old stone, it doesn't feel like a fantasy. It's not too dressed up.**

Tuscan or wine-country Italian is basically the Santa Fe style of our era. Everybody loves it, but you don't want to take it so far that it ends up looking like an amusement park. People who live in real historic houses will bring in all sorts of things that are personal to them, whether they fit the period or not. Contemporary things add contrast and take a room in another direction. You need some elements that are not so heavy.

**Like that chandelier with the bubbly blue balls?**

Isn't that great? It's classical and witty and is a nod to the ocean—it reminds me of the floats on fishing nets. And the floor lamps are like little earrings by the sofas. Those lamps are by Alison Berger, who takes contemporary glass and gives it another connotation. I look at them and think of pre-Renaissance alchemy, the romance of early science. They give the room a kind of balance, so it doesn't feel too sweet.

**Actually, I think the whole place feels strong and masculine.**

That's because it was a man's dream house, which doesn't normally happen. The client, Donald Clurman, loved the villas he had seen on the Amalfi coast and commissioned

Bob White to design one for him. The two of them went to Europe way before I started and bought a lot of stuff—all this strong, handsome furniture that worked out very well, flooring, fireplaces, and about 30 different types of reclaimed stone. This could have been such a dude house, with all that rock. I



wanted to give it pattern and dimension, so a woman could be comfortable here, too.

**The colors in the family room—indigo blue and rust—feel very grounded, as if you'd taken them from right outside the window.**

I think it's a palette that really works, and you'll see those same colors from room to room. For me, it's like water and earth—very organic. The blue stripe on the sofa is a copy of an African textile I bought long ago. It's woven, not printed, which gives it a certain kind of patina and depth. It has integrity. There's something magical about ethnic fabrics for me. They're like a beautiful antique

mirror. You never get tired of it. And this is such a great blue. In a house with so much stone and wood, it cools things off.

**I'm looking at the arrangement of pillows. What's the secret behind the mix?**

There is no formula, no rule. I just put things together until it looks right and feels good.

I like down pillows. Squashy, not stiff, because if they're super overstuffed they don't feel lived in. Also, it's very hard on the textile and puts it under stress. I'm not interested in creating life preservers.

**The master bedroom looks dark and airy and restful. What is that amazing bed?**

It's a reproduction of a British Colonial bed with Regency overtones, made in Sri Lanka out of old wood. It has a sense of grandeur and ceremony, but then I've tempered it with all those earthy textiles so it doesn't get too ducal. A lot of the fabrics in this house are Indonesian or Thai, but they could even be early Roman in a way. There's a kind of universal aesthetic that runs through all these textiles, which is why they work so well in all these different situations. It's like an integrally colored plaster wall. What culture is that? Is it Italian, Japanese, Indian? It's universal, and those iconic elements give a sense of authenticity to the house.

**The kitchen has a nice simplicity. No upper cabinets, just open shelves.**

The kitchen is open to the living room, so it had to have the same historic sensibility and hefty proportions.

Bob designed the island with the big turned legs, and the thick marble apron on the sink by the window. The idea is that it's a modernized Italian farmhouse kitchen, but very simple and elegant. There are no signs with painted ribbons holding up the name of the house. It may be a romantic vision, but what makes it work is a sense of restraint. I grew up 15 miles from here, and I know what it's like on those misty gray days at the beach. These rooms have a lightness that suits summer as well as the warmth you want in winter. You'll always be comfortable here.

PRODUCED BY ROBERT RUFINO



ABOVE: Traditional and modern blend in the kitchen. Venetian-style windows let in light while preserving privacy. Stools by Paul Ferrante. Word Pendants by Alison Berger. OPPOSITE: The island, inset with a Waterworks copper sink and faucet, was inspired by an Edwin Lutyens design. Carrara marble countertops contrast with factory-style steel casement windows. Sixty-inch Château range by La Cornue. Antique Dalle de Bourgogne stone floor from Exquisite Surfaces.