



# A Home to be Discovered

Story by Jack Smith  
Photos by Geoffrey Gross Photography

## CHADDS FORD ARCHITECT JOHN MILNER CREATES A PROVENCAL DREAM HOUSE ON THE PICKERING CREEK

IT IS THE STUFF OF PICTURE POST CARDS, WITH FIELDSTONE walls the color of autumn straw, baked clay tiles spiking the silhouette of its roofs, and a columned loggia with fountain and spy holes opening to an enclosed courtyard. There's a warmth about this home—in Provence, they call it *chateau*—but it's no less appealing when this element takes shape along the Chester County countryside.

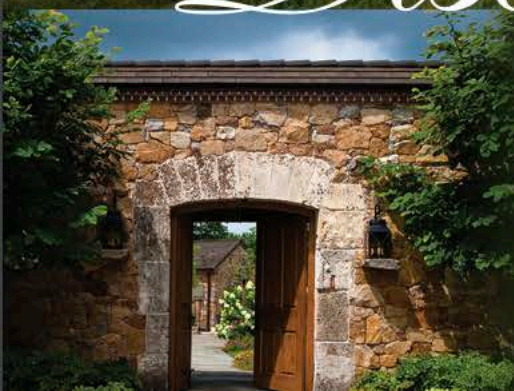
It didn't happen by accident, says architect John Milner, the person the home's owners commissioned to make their dream of a Provencal country home come true. "We wanted to evoke the feel of a French farm house with outbuildings and guest house, an agrarian compound that has evolved over time to accommodate large family gatherings," says the architect.

### ROOM FOR LARGE FAMILIES

As the lady of the house explains, the capacious farmhouse style suited her family's needs and tastes. "Both my husband and I are from large families—he's from a blended family of eight children and I'm one of five, with all of them within an hour of us."

So the Chester County couple were used to large spaces. The home where she and her husband had raised their own three children was a 250-year-old converted stone bank barn along the Pickering Creek outside Phoenixville.

"Our living room was 25 feet by 50 feet with a 27-foot ceiling. Not only was it a wonderful place to raise a family, it allowed us the space to gather the large families together for numerous celebrations and holidays. It was not uncommon for our tables to be set for 40 to 50 people. We always swore that we would not move unless an amazing piece of land became available," she says.







#### A SPECIAL PROPERTY

"Amazing" described the property that came onto the market in 2005. It was a 40-acre spread of land on an open, rolling hillside in the northwestern quadrant of Chester County, just a stone's throw from Routes 202, 29 and 30. What made this property even more special was that all three of their children fondly remembered spending summer days playing in the Pickering Creek Valley.

After acquiring the property the couple began the process of interviewing architects, including Milner. What they had in mind, they told him, was a stone home, at least five bedrooms, with a European feel, like those they'd seen in southern France. There should be numerous outdoor gathering spots, arches, courtyards and intimate spaces.

Later she would think back on that first meeting with Milner and laugh. Had she been interviewing him? Or was it the other way around? The fact was, Milner wasn't just a world-class architect whose works included some of this region's most prestigious structures, he was also selective about the kinds of projects he undertook.

#### THE RIGHT ARCHITECT

On a recent evening Milner sits in his office—a place chock-a-block with remnants of farm implements and decorative pieces—and recalls the time a famed sports figure approached the architect to create a home for him.

What he wanted, said the celebrity athlete, was a house so spectacular people would drive 50 miles out of their way just to see it. With that in mind Milner drew up a list of ten other architects who'd be delighted to create such a home. It just wasn't Milner's style.

"There are lots of architects who'd be happy to design that kind of place. It's a common mistake," says Milner. "It's like placing a house on top of a hill, to create a sense of grandeur. As Edgar Allen Poe said—grandeur for its own sake fatigues and depresses."

It would be far more rewarding, he felt, to create a home with a bit of mystery to it. "The understanding of the house should evolve as you move from space to space. You don't want to experience a place all at once; rather, it should gradually reveal itself, giving it a sense of discovery," Milner says.

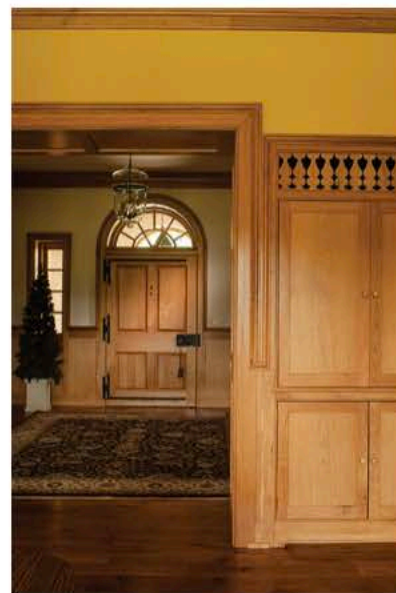
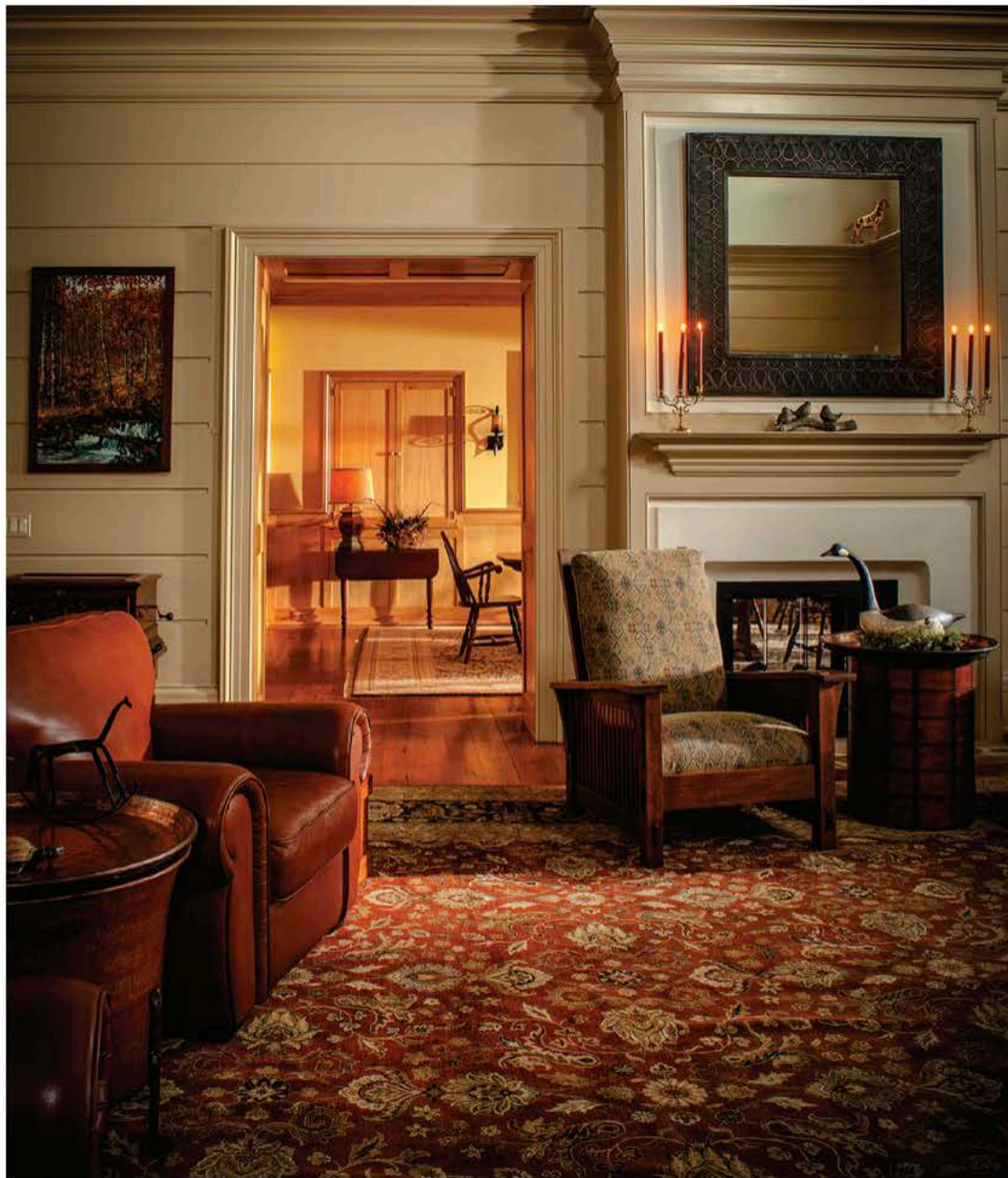
The first step in creating the Provence house was deciding how to situate it on the land. "There should be a reason for the placement of a house. People sometimes forget that the largest windows should face south for maximum sunlight, while the smallest should face north for protection from the wind," he continues.

#### DECISIONS FROM THE GROUND UP

While Milner was occupied with blueprints for the house, his clients were busy with other details. Having lived in an old barn, they'd undertaken numerous renovation projects, but this was the first home they'd ever built from the ground up.

The lengthy process of building permits and open space conservation issues allowed them the time to focus on the details of each and every room. The couple's wish lists were identical: large kitchen with lots of counter space, large outdoor porch with a fireplace, infinity-edge pool, lots of reclaimed wood, brick and beams, high ceilings, and so on.





Ultimately he took charge of the electrical details, HVAC, generators, security system and audiovisual components, while she handled most of the details that involved tile, paint, decorating and plants. Ground for the new house was first broken in March of 2006 and the house was completed in December of 2008.

Typical of Milner's work, the house emanates a sense of discovery. "There is a tree line on the land but instead of placing the house in front of the trees, I placed it behind, to create the effect of it being veiled," says the architect.

#### GETTING THE DETAILS RIGHT

Close up, the sense of detail becomes apparent everywhere. The main entrance leads through a small double door with a weathered limestone surround from Abt, in France. "You don't enjoy the best view of the house until you're through the doors and onto the loggia," says the architect. "The stones in the walls were hand set in recessed mortar to give it a 'dry stack' look, a technique that calls for a highly skilled artisan."

The doors lead into the loggia where the sound of water comes trickling from a fountain in the wall and a small circular fenestration offers a glimpse of the courtyard within. Here and there, the stones are touched with patches of moss and other growths, a reference to the passage of time.





Inside, the home remains true to its Provencal roots. The living space is organized around a spacious great room with ceilings 19 feet high to accommodate large family gatherings. "We wanted to create the sense of a family compound rather than a literal copy of a barn," says Milner.

Antique oak beams, warped and worn over time, were sawed into floorboards. Butternut wood—common in ancient French churches—was used for intricate carvings and millwork. Poplar was used for painted areas and where brushstrokes showed through, they were sometimes allowed to remain.

"Imperfections tell a story," says Milner. "They related to the human element. They say there's a bit of history here."

However, the architect and his client didn't agree on every detail. "There was a balcony railing that they wanted to do in iron, and I thought it would be better in wood," Milner continues. On reaching a compromise they produced one more subtle point of discovery—wooden stair railings inlaid with iron strips.

In spite of being told repeatedly by others how stressful the construction process would be, thanks to Bob Griffiths and Wayne Rowland of Griffiths Construction, the owners realized the opposite to be true. "They all made the building process so pleasant," she says.

"So did the masons of L&L Restoration of Parkesburg. "It was so touching to see the masons who worked here each weekday make the trip back with their families on weekends to share their handiwork," she says.

As for the interior, says Milner, the lady of the house deserves the credit for the handsome Provencal-inspired décor.

Of course, a home that's the product of so much craftsmanship and authenticity deserves grounds to match and for this, the owners turned to landscape designer Jonathan Alderson. "I have always had a passion for flowers, shrubs, trees and gardening," says the wife. "But it took Jonathan to sort out which plants or shrubs would achieve the European garden look while surviving the Pennsylvania hot summers and cold winters."

#### SHARING THE DREAM

After eight years in their dream house, the owners still pinch themselves that they live there. "We don't take it lightly or for granted the amount of incredible talent and expertise contributed by all who helped build this house. It has been the scene of countless celebrations of friends and family, including three backyard weddings.

"When our friends and the ever-growing families gather and thank us for hosting, our response is often, "You are welcome ... we built this home to share ... so glad you can be here!" she says with a smile. ♦



#### RESOURCES

*Architect* John Milner Architects

*Builder* Griffiths Construction

*Landscape Designer* Jonathan Alderson Landscape Architects

*Stonemasons* L&L Restoration of Parkesburg

*Millwork* David Dougan Cabinet Maker and Ralston Shop

*Hardware* Michael M. Coldren Company

*Antique Timber* Tindall's Virgin Timbers and Sylvan Brandt

*Framing* Mark Wagner Construction

*Tile and Stone* Petragrani Brothers Tile and Marble

*Pool* Armond Aquatech Pools

*Kitchen Cabinets* Coventry Kitchens