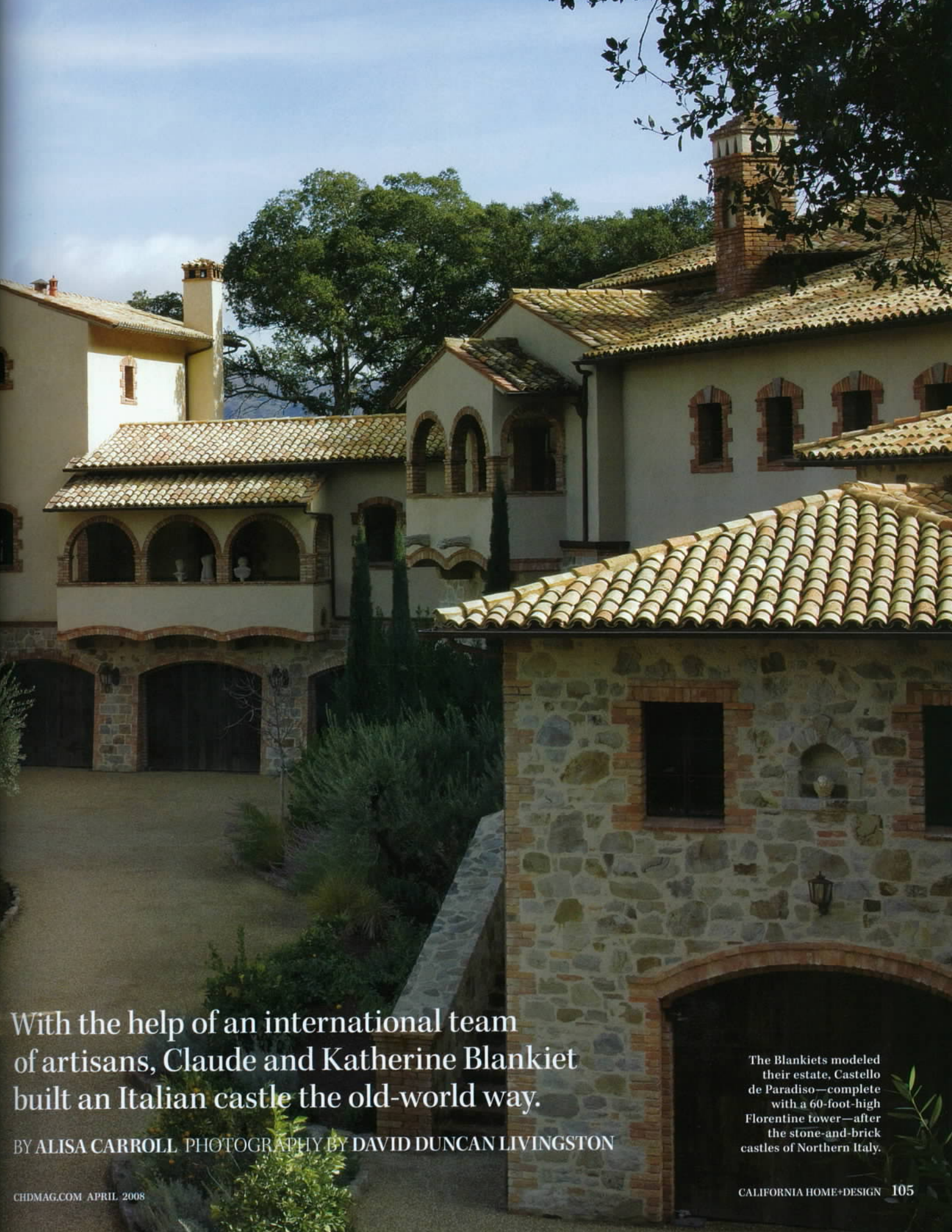


REMAKING HISTORY



With the help of an international team of artisans, Claude and Katherine Blankiet built an Italian castle the old-world way.

BY ALISA CARROLL PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID DUNCAN LIVINGSTON

The Blankiets modeled their estate, Castello de Paradiso—complete with a 60-foot-high Florentine tower—after the stone-and-brick castles of Northern Italy.



When Claude and Katherine Blankiet bought 46 acres in Yountville in 1996, they aspired to build a world-class winery and a home in the Renaissance style. A decade later, they have achieved their goals and then some: Blankiet Estate vineyards have yielded a cult Cabernet that retails for more than \$150 a bottle, and the couple's home, Castello de Paradiso, is a testament to old-world craftsmanship.

"Our goal was to create something that looked old, but not phony," says Claude, who grew up in Dijon, France (just a short walk from the castle of the Duke of Burgundy). A collector of art and antiques, Claude and his wife Katherine, a former antique-store owner, have amassed a world-class collection during their 25 years together. Before putting down roots in Yountville, the couple made frequent visits to Napa Valley. As oenophiles of the highest order, the Blankiets shared a vision of vineyard living and dreamed of

ABOVE: A L'Ancienne stonemason Pascal Faivre with his father Serge (visiting from France) and partner Dmitra Smith.
OPPOSITE: A view of the sprawling estate from atop the tower.







Faivre spent a year bringing antique details to the interiors, importing aged stone fireplaces (above) and chunky ceiling beams (opposite), carving limestone corbels and laying a pattern for the 17th-century stone floor tiles (right). "Pascal even installed the herringbone brickwork at the back of the fireplace, recreating the old way it was done," says Katherine. "He made sure our fireplaces were not only utilitarian but also authentic."



developing their own wine. Their estate would be an extraordinary expression of Claude and Katherine's combined love of history.

"We've traveled so much in Italy, we knew what the architecture looked like and how it felt to walk into a room that is hundreds of years old," says Katherine. Over the next nine years, the Blankiets assembled a modern-day guild of architects and artisans to lovingly create their dream home: A 15,000-square-foot stone "castle," complete with a turreted tower, vaulted ceilings, hand-painted murals and German limestone floors.

The home was initially designed by renowned architect George Livermore, who died in 2005. The Blankiets teamed up with Napa architect Mary Keetch, who would adapt Livermore's original plans, and Danish engineer Lars Nimskov, who was just finishing winemaker Daryl Sattui's monumental castle in Calistoga. "Lars lived in Italy and knows how things are built," says Claude. "He checked everything to make sure the details were authentic to an Italian structure." Nimskov designed the brick surrounds on the exterior windows and the brick eaves on the roof, and engineered the vaulted brick ceilings on the lower level.

Next, the Blankiets met Pascal Faivre and Dmitra Smith, co-owners of A L'Ancienne Imports in Glen Ellen. Importers of exquisite old stone, wood and decorative elements from France, the company also designs and installs custom stonework using traditional methods. A native of Burgundy, Faivre is an expert stonemason descended from a long line of craftsmen: He apprenticed with his father Serge, a respected authority in chateau and castle restoration, and continues to work with him on special projects today.

While Faivre would eventually have his hands in almost every room in the Blankiets' castle, he was at first commissioned to build the stone stairs for the 65-foot-high tower—which had been built to accommodate a square staircase. But after Faivre showed his clients photographs of a spiral version he had recently completed in Tiburon,



the Blankiets settled on the *escalier à vis*, a style of staircase seen in cathedrals and castles throughout Europe.

Fitting a spiral staircase into a square column was just one of Faivre's challenges. In order to build steps that would wind gracefully from ground floor to rooftop, Faivre had to align each one with the existing landings and windows. This recreation of Renaissance aesthetics also needed to satisfy today's rigorous building codes. Faivre meticulously calculated the dimensions and mocked up the staircase, determining that he would need seven spirals and 88 steps in a range of sizes and shapes. Each step was then individually cast in France using Faivre's secret recipe for reconstituted limestone, which calls for six different tints ranging from white and yellow to gray. Weighing between 300 and 400 pounds each, the steps were then shipped to California.

For the installation, Faivre secured the steps in place with metal rods, at a pace of approximately two steps per day over the course of four months. The entire structure was then reinforced with concrete. But it was worth the effort—the luminous ascent would get a nod of approval from Faivre's father, and his impressed clients went on to employ his talents throughout the property.

When Faivre came to the project, both the interior and exterior walls had been installed using natural stone and brick, but the colors were too bold and the building still looked new. In keeping with the centuries-old look that the Blankiets desired, Faivre softened the appearance by applying "Chateau Stucco"—a

In the foyer, the vaulted ceiling was painted by Sonoma artist Mark Marthaler to resemble an Italian stone and brick structure embellished with plaster detailing. Marthaler also created the estate's four other ceiling murals.


mixture invented by his father that replicates the look of old, weathered stone buildings. He then sandblasted the exterior walls by hand to further distress the facade.

"The building had a clean, almost modern look," says Claude. "By adding the Chateau Stucco, it brought it back to another time."

Faivre recommended Sonoma decorative painter Mark Marthaler to fulfill the Blankiets' wish for a hand-painted mural on the domed ceiling of the dining room—dubbed the "Venetian Room" for its wealth of antiques. The Blankiets chose a reproduction of a work by Venetian master, Tiepolo. "They were sensitive to quality—and not just the look, but also the feeling of it," says Marthaler. "They wanted to create a real experience."

Over the next six months, Marthaler painted four more ceilings throughout the house. In the great room, his "canvas" was comprised of wood beams salvaged from the Palais Coburg, a 19th-century neoclassical palace in Vienna, which is now a luxury hotel. Marthaler devised a decorative pattern inspired by a medallion motif. A wash of gray milkpaint was applied to the ceiling to give it a soft look before the design was hand-stenciled and painted. The entire ceiling was sanded for a gently worn appearance.

"To make beauty in architecture, you have to have guts and you have to take risks," says Faivre. Castello de Paradiso, through the vision and effort of the individuals who dedicated themselves to its realization, certainly embodies that philosophy. ■



The elegant, winding
escalier à vis, was
designed by Faivre to
look like the centuries-
old staircases in Europe.
Each step was cast
individually in France,
shipped over and
installed one at a time.