

Written by Rebecca Juretic

Mike and Marla Clay wanted a residence inspired by the Australian Outback, so they planned one in Paso Robles. The vineyard-carpeted countryside of the North County often inspires comparisons with Tuscany or Provence. For Mike and Marla Clay, it brought to mind a place somewhat farther south.

Their Paso Robles home is what Marla likes to call "Australian- Outback-meets-French-Country." She is referring to the home's Aussie-inspired architecture and her love for French Country decor.

Mike is a viticulturist and cultivates 38 acres of cabernet grapes in Paso Robles. Just over a year ago, the couple decided to leave their small Paso Robles farmhouse and build their dream home right in the midst of that vineyard.

The home was just recently completed, but the Clays had been planning it for a decade. Their goal was simple: "We wanted to make the border between indoors and outdoors as seamless as possible," Marla said.

The couple hired architect Jennifer Rennick and an Atascadero construction firm, Semmes & Company, which specializes in environment-friendly building practices. Together they agreed on straw-bale construction. "We went to Europe and fell in love with the deep walls of older buildings and houses there," explained Marla, who also appreciated the energy-efficiency that a straw-bale home would offer during sweltering Paso Robles summers.

Their second, more unusual request, was for a home reminiscent of the rustic structures found in the Australian Outback. With this in mind, Rennick designed the home with a steeply pitched metal roof, deep porches and peeled cedar posts. "The colors and textures of the exterior tie into the color of the soil and the vines that surround it," added builder Turko Semmes.

Rennick and Semmes carried the rustic, nature-inspired theme indoors. Concrete floors were stained to take on the look of sun-baked earth. Wood inlays made of ipe, a sustainable hardwood from Brazil, add a touch of sophistication.

Semmes & Company used rustic, reclaimed wood in the home for items such as the living room ceiling beams, shelving and fireplace mantle. Most of it is Douglas fir from a 100-year-old Arroyo Grande bridge that was washed out during the El Nino floods of 1994.

Marla decorated the home with a mix of new furnishings, American antiques and French fabrics. She and Mike appreciate the interplay of rustic and refined. Simple farmhouse-style dining chairs acquire an elegant air with the addition of French fabric.

Rustic kitchen cabinetry pairs beautifully with French-style Carrera marble countertops. Simple, primitive antiques sit by more refined pieces, such as a piano that Marla's mother found in a thrift store, its stunning burl walnut finish masked with black varnish.

One of Mike and Marla's favorite features of the house are the deep-set windows that are a constant reminder of how close they are to their beloved vines -- in fact, only two rows of grapes were removed to build the house. It may not be the Australian Outback but, for the Clays, their remote vineyard hideaway has proven to be ideal. "We had been planning this house for so long," said Marla. "When we moved in, we immediately felt like we were home."

CONSTRUCTION TIPS FROM SEMMES & COMPANY

- * It's really there: This 'truth window' reveals the straw-bale construction of the Clays' home.
- * Off-the-shelf charm. Finding rustic or vintage decor no longer requires scouring antique stores and flea markets. New products such as farmhouse sinks, copper fixtures, reproduction lighting and vintage design tiles are a great way to add a timeless ambience to your home.
- * A healthier hardwood. Semmes & Company used Brazilian ipe for the Clays' floor inlays. In addition to being a sustainably harvested hardwood, it is resistant to rot, insects and mold without the use of toxic chemicals. Keep in mind, however, that it is a very hard wood and can be difficult to work with.
- * Concrete adds character. Concrete, with the addition of inlays and stains, can take on many appearances. However, the final product can vary with factors such as the weather and the particular type of concrete used. For some, that's the beauty of concrete -- no two projects turn out exactly the same.