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The rear of the farmhouse was rebuilt in the original footprint to provide "volume, air and light," says Backen. Hundred-year-old wood from a barn in Eureka was used for the floors. Cabinetry conceals Sub-Zero refrigerator drawers. Holly Hunt custom light fixture.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Howard J. Backen Revamps an Airy Farmhouse in Napa Valley

The architect used elements of indoor-outdoor living to bring natural sunlight into the 1890s residence in St. Helena

By Peter Haldeman

Photography by Erhard Pfeiffer

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Building a house is rarely, if ever, a painless undertaking, but some residential projects seem to come together with just a little less Sturm und Drang than others. Consider the experience of Dick and Sue Wollack. Dick Wollack develops vineyards in California and the Pacific Northwest, and several years ago the couple decided they wanted to relocate from their San Francisco neighborhood of Presidio Heights to Napa Valley, where they own two wineries. They purchased property outside the picturesque town of St. Helena and began making plans to build a farmhouse on it.

“We were at a wedding in Napa on a Saturday, and I mentioned our ideas to someone who said, ‘There’s this architect you ought to take a look at, named Howard Backen,’ ” recounts Dick Wollack. “So then on Sunday morning I’m visiting another friend in Oakville, and driving up, I see next door to his entrance a sign that says Backen. My friend called Howard up, and Howard said, ‘How would you like to come over and see my house?’ He was just finishing his own house. And guess what? It was a farmhouse [see *Architectural Digest*, September 2004]. It was just so beautiful and open and so much our aesthetic that I called Sue on the way home and said, ‘I found him.’ If you want a real story, though, Howard designed a Greek restaurant in San Francisco called Kokkari, and years before, when we first went there, Sue said, ‘I want my house to look like this.’ ”





Given that auspicious beginning, a curveball or two was probably inevitable. Howard J. Backen (of Backen Gillam Architects in St. Helena) spent a year working on the plans for a modest but airy rural-flavored house that could function just as well for the couple alone as for large gatherings of friends and family.

In the meantime, the Wollacks bought another property nearby to live in during construction—a small yellow 1890s farmhouse on a single acre within walking distance of St. Helena’s historic Main Street. “Then Howard came and saw the place,” reports Sue Wollack. “He said, ‘You know, this could really be neat.’ ”

Out with the new, in with the old.



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Although they initially planned a new build, Dick and Sue Wollack were so charmed by their temporary residence, an 1890s farmhouse in St. Helena, California, that they decided to rework the home with the help of architect Howard J. Backen. The porch features the large pocket doors that have become a Backen signature.

“The house was very small and not in great shape, but it had a nice feeling and nice proportions,” explains Backen. “The Wollacks just wanted a one-bedroom house with a guesthouse, so my idea was to hold the scale of the farmhouse and its front porch—not go up a story or glom on a huge master bedroom—but have a glass connector run to a master suite, so it’s sort of like a compound. The third element is the guesthouse, which forms a courtyard around an old oak tree.” The majestic 400-year-old oak is now ringed by a brick terrace that defines the central gathering space between the farmhouse and the two added structures. “That big oak is a very important element,” says Backen. “We spent a lot of time making sure it was healthy.”

And the terrace is only one of a sequence of outdoor spaces—a border garden between the farmhouse and the master suite, a swimming pool patio behind the farmhouse, rose



gardens behind the master suite—that Backen, landscape designer Claudia Schmidt and project manager Edmund Juncker created to fashion “a house sitting within the landscape with large-scale openings that pull the landscape into the house and vice versa.”

In addition to the new master (which has its own gym and “bath garden”) and one-bedroom guesthouse, the Wollacks enjoy the use of a spacious kitchen and dining area at the rear of the rebuilt farmhouse. It has a screen porch that overlooks the pool area and is echoed by a porch off the master suite commanding a view of the surrounding foothills. Wide openings, screen porches and pocket doors are Backen trademarks, and they were critical elements in establishing the sense of space the couple sought within a relatively small building footprint. “The house keeps unfolding and opening up,” notes Dick Wollack. “It has—Howard taught us the word—cadence.”

French windows and brick pavers outside; reclaimed-fir floors, white-painted ceiling beams and trusses, and cozy fireplaces inside. Rustic antiques, contemporary paintings and DeSimone pottery—all of which the couple have collected for years—tie together the interiors of this versatile compound.

“The Wollacks had a strong program in the sense of how they wanted to live,” explains Backen. “They didn’t want it to come out looking big or being big. They wanted to maintain the character of being small.”

The couple recently hosted their daughter’s wedding at the house. Some 200 guests were invited, and all indications are that the event went off without a hitch. “We had a couple of big parties right when we moved in,” Sue Wollack noted shortly before the wedding. “It was summer, it was still warm, and when you opened up the doors on the big porch and on the porch of our bedroom—again this idea of balance and cadence—and you had all the lights on and all these people outdoors, it was magnificent.”

And that’s the point, says Backen. “A hundred people leave, and it feels like it’s built for two.”