



# European Charm *in the* BLUEGRASS

*Vinery Owner Looks to Old World for New Look*

By Sharon Reynolds | Photos by Lee Thomas

When Tom Simon moved his newly acquired horse farm, Vinery, to what was once part of North Ridge Farm on Spurr Road in Fayette County, he didn't plan to live in the turn-of-the-century house on the 440-acre spread. In fact, he envisioned opening it up as a guesthouse and converting the former tenant house next door into his temporary residence when he was in town. But gradually, as the German native and his family spent more time in the Bluegrass, they fell in love with the region and decided to make the larger house their new Kentucky home — with a European twist.

A cascading waterfall in front of the renovated main house adds a unique visual perspective.

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Simon, a retired corporate attorney who holds a doctorate degree, also developed Vinery Stud in Florida, a 220-acre breeding and training facility. Ben and Elaine Walden founded the original Kentucky Vinery in 1986 on Weisenberger Mill Road near Midway.

In 2001, two years after buying Vinery, Simon and his wife, Nora, embarked on a renovation project that would take five years to complete. Living in Europe and keeping up with his international racing and breeding interests meant they had to rely heavily on the support of Vinery staff to oversee the progress.



Key members of the team who helped the Simons translate the European culture into their new surroundings included Pam Michul, executive assistant to Simon; interior designers Thomas Birkman and Richard Kimbrel; building foreman Paul Murphy; and gardener George Shipp.

“When we started, no one had lived here [in the house] in a while, and we inherited late '70s and '80s interiors,” Birkman said. “You walked into a very dark hallway with a stairway up to the second floor. On each side of the hallway were small, boxy rooms with flowered wall paper.”

### A clean slate

Simon and his team decided to start with a clean slate. Everything had to go, so the interior was completely gutted.

“The house was a shell,” Birkman said. “There was no architect involved. The builder, design team, and owner all knew what they wanted, and we worked together. It was a matter of just dealing with the details.”

The first order of the day was to let in light. The front foyer was opened up, a balcony put in, and the staircase removed. Enhancing the entrance is an Aspen artist's 9-by-12-foot painting of two horses' heads installed to face the front door. The word “believe” is written near the bottom of the painting, which is done on plywood splashed with polyurethane.

Just getting the huge piece of art into the house

Pam Michul, executive assistant to Vinery owner Tom Simon, is part of the team that transformed the main house, office, and barns. The house was expanded 12-to-14 feet on both sides and the foyer opened up to allow more light and to accommodate the massive equine painting (right).



was a major production. Murphy removed an entire window in the living room and cut a side panel out of the house to slide it in. The next day he put everything back in place.

Such attention to detail was typical of the entire remodel-

ing project. Murphy — whose company also renovated Vinery's offices, barns, and guesthouse — described the undertaking as “top of the line.”

“The hardest thing about the house was getting the layout



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right. We remodeled everything at least two or three times," he said.

The house was expanded 12-to-14 feet on each side by enclosing the open patios and balconies. With the additional space, it now presents a more imposing, larger exterior. A former patio facing the back was enclosed to create a large party room where the Simons entertain, and a garage was converted into a billiard room.

Access to the three bedroom suites upstairs is from a new staircase installed in the center of the house — a major challenge that required removing a good deal of plumbing.

"The only thing we didn't change was the kitchen and the breakfast room," Birkman said. "We sanded and painted the old cabinets, built a new section to match the old, and added new butcher block countertops. It's ready for a caterer to roll in and set up shop, with two dishwashers, double ovens, and a wine cooler."

### **Comfy, country, continental**

To achieve the casually elegant European country look the Simons wanted, the designers used simple fabrics such as lin-

Building foreman Paul Murphy (right) oversaw the remodeling efforts while designer Thomas Birkman (below) helped ensure the interior reflected the owners' European sensibilities.



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ens and cottons along with crewel in upholstery and draperies throughout the house. The walls of the bedrooms were upholstered — a European touch that serves to absorb heat and create a luxurious look.

The furniture mixes American and European antiques. Much of it the Simons brought over from Europe or Australia, including a gorgeous Spanish oak dining table with carved edges that seats 18, and a 19th century French oak billiard table. The interior designers found a set of 19th century Belgian theatre chairs to match the billiard table and covered them in green mohair, a style typical of the era. They also purchased an unusual Scottish Chippendale mahogany table for the library, formerly a small den just off the foyer.

Two large oil paintings with pastoral themes by European

artists add to the country look of the living room, the only room in the house that might be considered the least bit formal.

“The Simons have taken an old house and made it one of the most beautiful in the region,” Birkman said. “It’s very understated, casually elegant.”

The additions to the house and new windows installed throughout were all made with a keen eye for the existing architecture and style, he noted.

“As a result, there’s a sense that the house has been in its present condition for decades,” Birkman said.

### From the inside out

The remodeling project didn’t stop within the house. To reflect the elegance and comfort of the interior, the Simons wanted an equally inviting and beautiful garden. Enter the driveway lined with 300 cedar trees, past mass groupings of taxus and boxwoods, and it may be hard to imagine the 10



Elegant yet inviting, the living and dining rooms contain American and European antiques.

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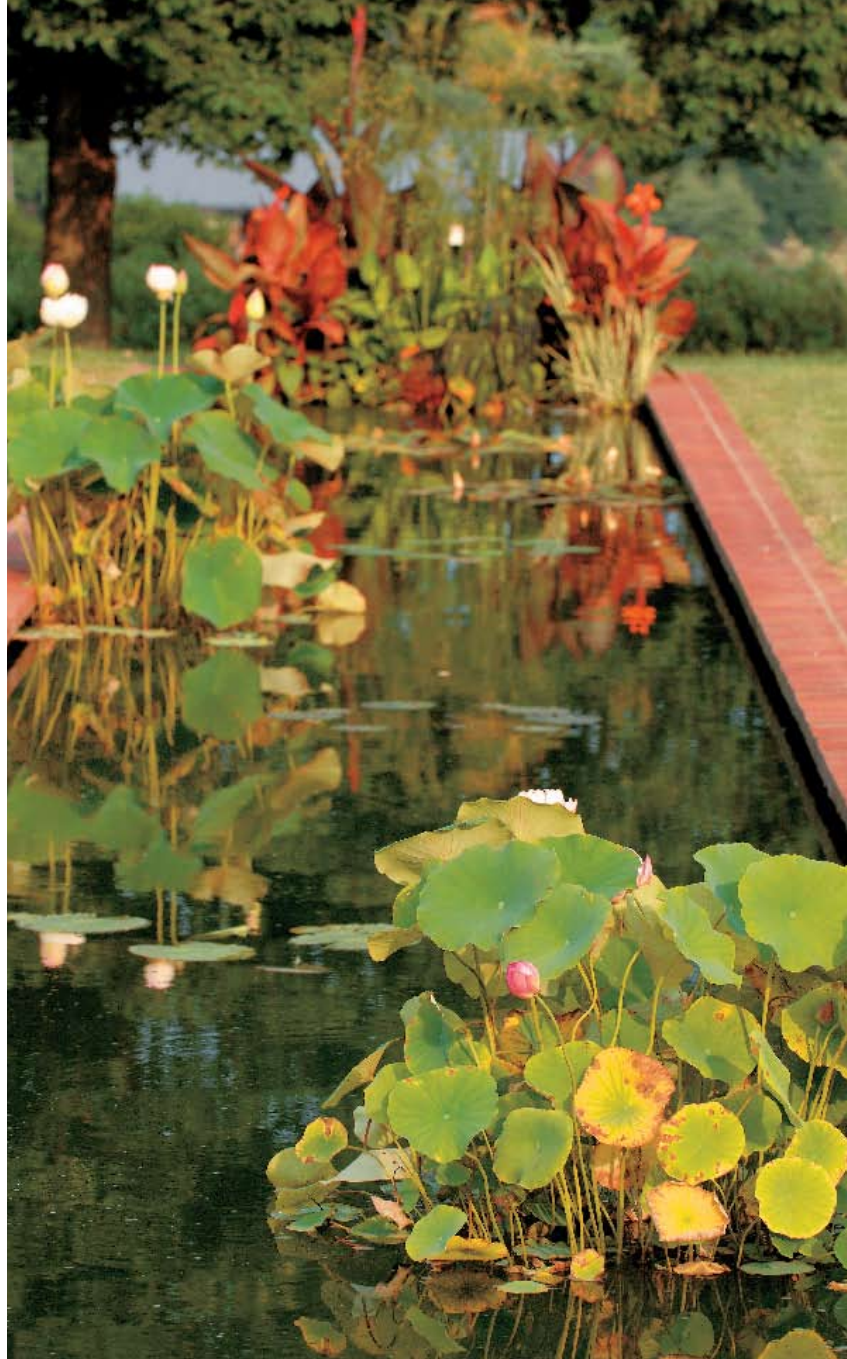
acres surrounding the main house were just bare grass a few years earlier. Gardener Shipp has overseen the transformation and continues to tend the gardens with an eye toward a succession of blooms year round.

"It was pretty daunting at first," said Shipp, "but after the first year, I began to feel like it's my own yard. I just wander around, doing whatever needs to be done."

The cascading waterfall in front of the house is the centerpiece of the garden. Around the side, overlooking the rolling fields of the farm and a lily pond filled with koi is a spacious patio where the Simons enjoy dining with their guests.

For a quintessential European touch, Simon added a hedge maze next to the swimming pool, just down the hill from the house. Designed by a Belgian landscape architect, it is a true maze, with dead ends and branches formed by 2,000 taxus that

Gardener George Shipp transformed the barren 10 acres around the main house into verdant gardens.



will grow six feet high or more. Shipp, who has to mow the maze, has it memorized. But most guests using the swimming pool prefer to skirt the maze and head straight for the water, he noted.

### No stone unturned

Because horses are Vinery's reason for being, Simon also had all the barns renovated. The classic white buildings with oak paneling reflect the style of the house. Crystal chandeliers won't be found in the barns, but there are comfortable touches such as Polytrack and an underwater treadmill for horses needing rehabilitation and conditioning.

Clients, shareholders, and friends who visit Vinery are lodged in the newly refurbished guest house at the back of the farm, near the racetrack. As for the tenant house that once was to be the Simons' quarters, it's now "Jan's house," reserved for the Simon's son, Jan, who stays there when visiting from his home in Rhode Island.

And to accommodate an expanding staff, the farm's offices have been remodeled three times. Pam Michul — who has spent her career in the horse industry, including a stint at Calumet Farm — is delighted with the new surroundings.

As to any future building projects, Michul said, "the farm doesn't anticipate any more growth. I think we're finished for now." 🐾

A lily pond filled with koi (left) is Shipp's handiwork; Vinery's horses enjoy all the amenities of a progressive farm.

