



French Country Casual

An intriguing facade is a clue that something extraordinary awaits inside this unique Bucks County home

by Bruce B. Blackburn III Photos/Top Kat Photography

Creativity comes naturally to Alicia Nakonekschry, and it shows in the delightful French Country home she and her husband, Michael, built in Buckingham, PA. This July marks two years that the couple has lived within the walls of this structure, so attractive and unique that it isn't unusual for strangers to appear out of the blue and ask permission to take photographs of its handsome stucco-and-store exterior.

Fortunately, Alicia and Michael share another talent that made this latest and largest of three homes they've built together possible: energy.

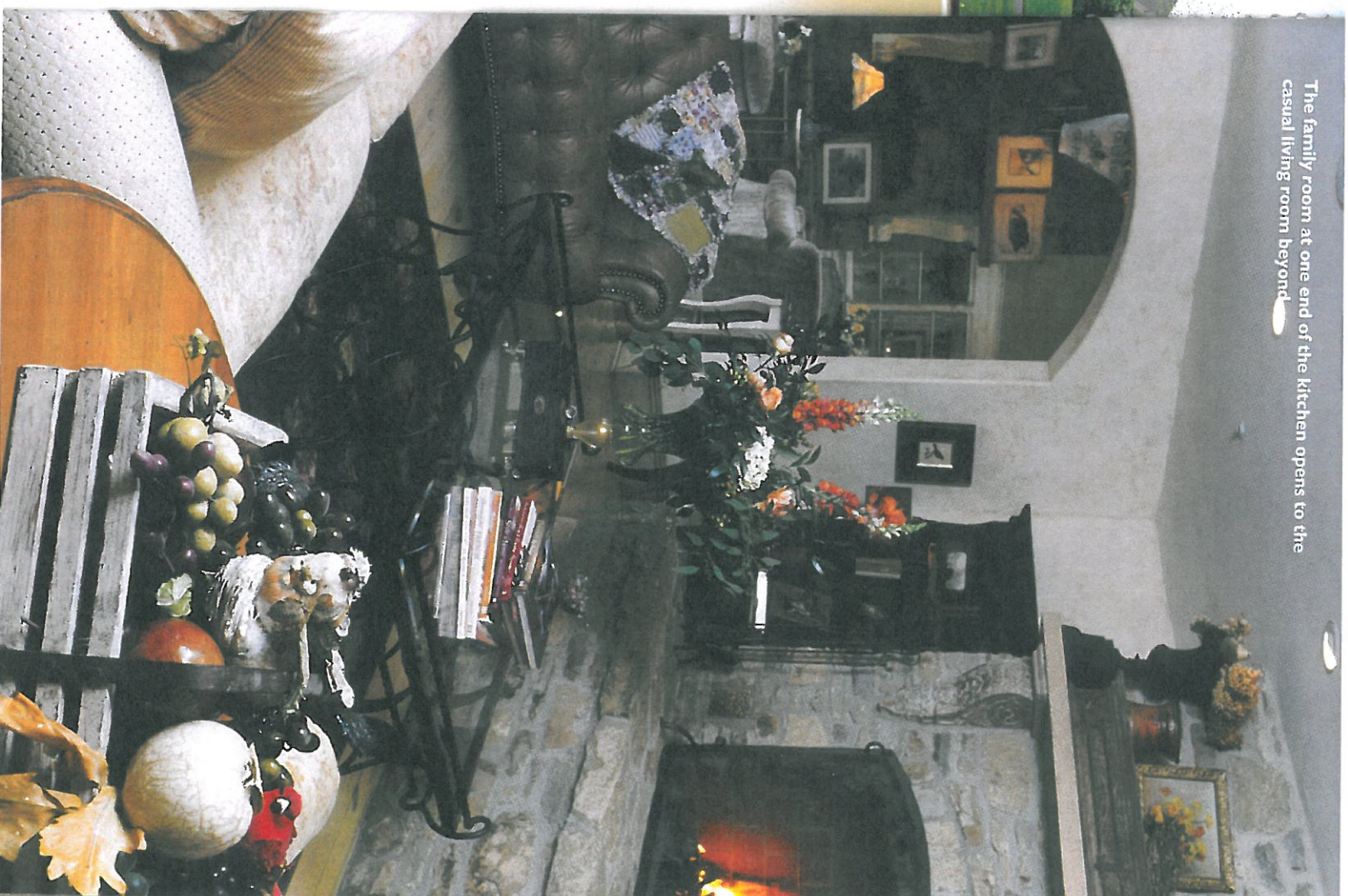
"Between us, we always have a project going," Alicia remarks. "We're always looking for something to do; we get a lot of satisfaction out of making progress."

A Smart Advantage

An interior decorator and co-owner of the new furniture and interior design showroom Sweet Willow Home Furnishings in Doylestown, PA, Alicia instinctively gave herself a smart advantage when designing the home, which she did herself: two years in which to plan. No rush. The result? Perfection. "I was very prepared. We're very pleased with the way it turned out," she says.

After searching through architectural and home-building publications, Alicia found plans for a European exterior she liked, which they modified. She wanted to fit into Bucks County, an environment in which French Country has always played a defining role—both outside and indoors. Essential was an open floor plan with large rooms and high ceilings. Alicia cre-

The family room at one end of the kitchen opens to the casual living room beyond





Alicia and Michael hand painted the diamond pattern on their foyer floor. "We enjoy doing things that bring us together," she says.

ated a floor plan that was conducive to what she calls "everyday entertaining." The couple reserve the formal dining room for holiday meals.

"I wanted a nice large family room and kitchen that joined together, so that when

you're in the main part of the house you can enjoy the entire floor," she explains. She and Michael contacted custom builder Gregg Bittner of Buckingham, PA, and the project started taking shape. Alicia drew on local vendors—everyone from Renaissance Tile, Anthony & Sylvan Pools and Signature Kitchen and Bath, to Knobs 'n Knockers for hardware and Heacock and Tinsman lumber yards for beams and milling.

Subtle Colors and Textural Accents

Never one to be conflicted by color, Alicia chose a fundamentally neutral, tone-on-tone scheme, noting, "I wanted my palette for the inside to be a very subtle and soft backdrop to the home." Selecting a range of neutral hues that included alabaster, limestone, putty and shades of butter yellow, she applied them freely. "I built on that; I chose furnishings that were also tone-on-tone, and I added hints of color like warm brown, clay and terra cotta." Other color accents, such as cranberry and green, come through in carefully chosen paintings and wallpaper.

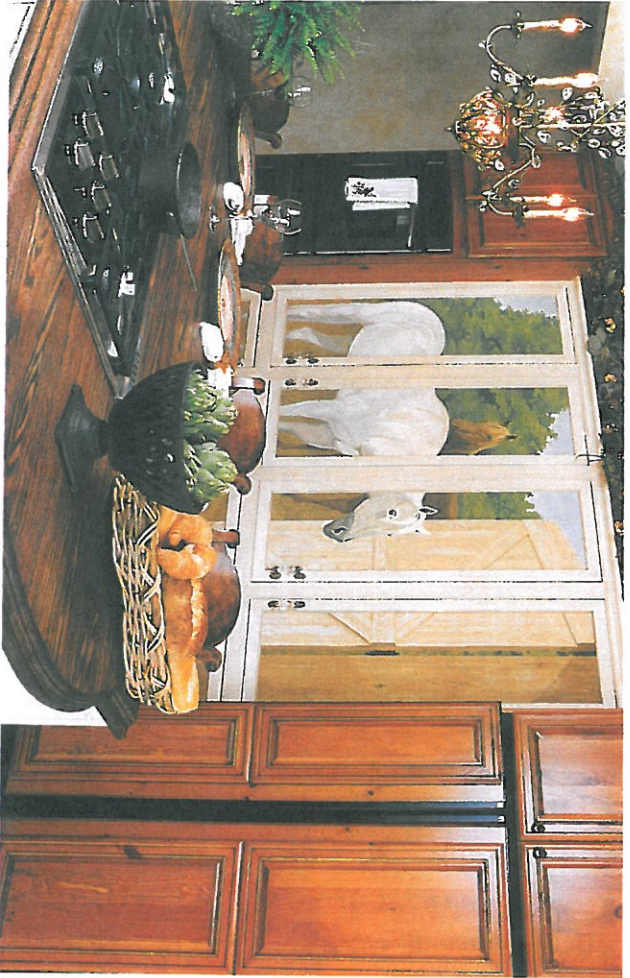
Artist John Schmidberger, of the New Hope mural and decorative painting design firm, Brushworks, brought additional texture to interior walls with faux painting



The master master bedroom



Faux fireplace, chandelier and faux-finished walls add provincial warmth to the master bath.



The mural on the kitchen cabinets was painted by John Schmidberger of Brushworks.

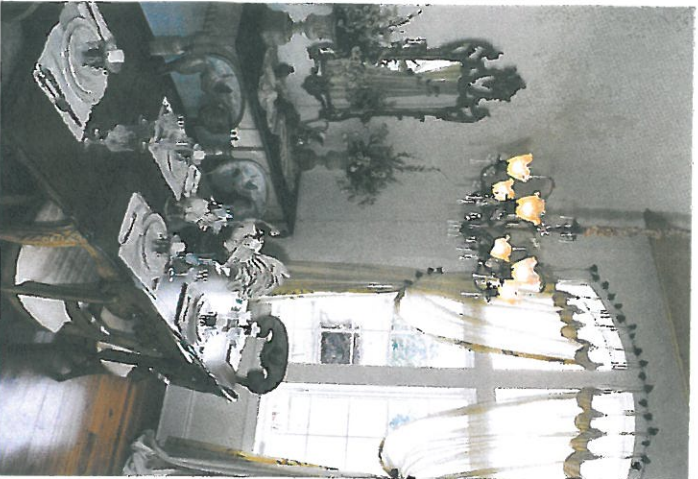
simulating hand-troweled and glazed stucco. He produced a trompe l'oeil effect of stylized trees in the dining room and accented other spots throughout the house with glazes and natural floral patterns that

augment the floral and vine motifs on various pieces of hand-painted furniture. A 7 x 9-foot mural of horses next to barn doors, painted on pantry door panels in the kitchen, is his crowning work.

The office, which doubles as a mudroom between the great room and garage, is the only space in the house with tile flooring, a light limestone; Alicia and Michael's two children, Amber, 13, and Austin, 7, have their own closets there for shoes and coats. The walls, painted a rich red-brown, evoke a rich leather finish and provide contrast and visual texture.

Elements that unify the interior include random-width knotty-pine flooring, ceiling beams, chandeliers and light—lots of light. Alicia is particularly fond of chandeliers, to the point of putting one in virtually every room, including over their king-size bed in the first-floor master bedroom, over the spa tub in the master bath, and in the walk-in closet. (Of course, that particular closet is fifteen feet square and has a fifteen-foot-high wallpapered ceiling and an over/under combination washer/drier!)

Between the ample windows and the artificial illumination, there are no dark



The Nakonechnys enjoy afternoon entertaining and lounging on the veranda, steps away from the kitchen.



corners here, unless it's by design; dimmers are built into every light switch. Instead of upper cabinetry in the kitchen, windows offer views of the expansive veranda with patio area and pool. "I like to see what's going on," she says. "I love a lot of windows and bright light." French doors with transoms supply additional natural light and elegance to the kitchen area. "It was important for me to be able to have a view of the horses," she adds, referring to her neighbor's animals, which graze in the generous fields behind her property.

The Sweet Willow Look

Not surprisingly, the furnishings at her business and in her home reflect Alicia's personal style—a distinctive way of combining furniture and decorative elements that could be labeled "the Sweet Willow look."

"I like to mix the old with the new. That's really what Sweet Willow specializes in," she asserts. The look combines new hand-painted, often glazed or distressed antique reproductions and natural-finish wood furniture with architectural artifacts and antiques; the Sweet Willow look is the ideal interior complement to her French

Alicia with her faithful companion, Cody



Country home. Oversized pieces, including hutches, armoire-style entertainment centers, cupboards and tables by furniture manufacturers Eddy West and Habersham dominate, some brought from her previous home, some bought new through her company, which carries both brands.

Raising Expectations

"The living room is my favorite part of the whole house!" Alicia proclaims, gesturing in the direction of the fieldstone floor-to-ceiling fireplace that dominates the room. The hearth is built up three feet from floor level. "I raised all the fireplaces off the ground because I wanted to be able to see the fire; that way, the flame isn't hidden by the furniture. I can be in the great room or in the kitchen cooking dinner and still see the fire burning in the fireplace. I had a standard-height fireplace in our previous house, and something—the furniture or a wall—was always blocking the view. I'm thrilled with how these turned out!"

Eye-catchingly large corbels supporting the wood-beam mantel may at first elicit blinks from guests, but the effect quickly works its magic. "I wanted corbels that fit the size and scale of the fireplace," Alicia explains. "Scale is important, and anything too small there wouldn't have worked."

Staying a While

Alicia observes that people usually either love or hate building their own custom home, and there's no doubt about where she and Michael come down on the subject. "Mostly you hear, 'I'll never build again!'" she says. "Yes, what we did took a lot of time, a lot of thought, a lot of energy. But we're ready to start another project."

Tempting, perhaps, but not likely, at least for a while. The children are at that important stage where continuity at school and with friends is a paramount concern. And with her new business to consider, it may be just the right time to settle down. Besides, there's nothing like living in your own dream come true. ♡

An outdoor fireplace and grilling facilities are conveniently located on the patio between the pool and the loggia.

