



THE WELL

BY THE SEA

The French owners of a Costa Brava home want every room to reflect the land and culture in which they are immersed

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THE FIRST THING a father's two teenage daughters said upon his buying a dilapidated century-old-plus fisherman's house as a weekend retreat was, "We will never go there." But once the work by designers Serge Castella and Jason Flinn was complete, the daughters have been heard to say, "We will never leave."

For years, Castella and Flinn, partners in design and in life, had passed the dwelling, which sits high on its site along a particularly dreamy stretch of Spain's Costa Brava, not far from one of their own homes. And while the designers admired the house and saw its potential, even they were a bit reluctant to commit to a project that would require such extensive work. Their client, however, who is also a friend, was looking for a retreat from his native France, where he and his wife and daughters could reside, ideally for an entire summer at a time. "Our client is someone so incredibly cultivated and with such incredible taste that both Serge and I are inspired by him," says Flinn. "He's involved in the world of fashion and understands style and how a house can embody that."

But to make the house chic and stylish required gutting it down to the boards and rafters. "We were able to start our work with a blank canvas and add to it, piece by piece," says Flinn. From that point, Castella and Flinn configured a new floor plan, which incorporated four bedrooms and expansive dining and living areas and terraced outdoor spaces. Although the intention for the house was that it would be a relaxed and casual destination for the family, it also needed to be functional. The daughters and their friends would be coming in from swims at the beach without much concern about wet clothes and sand and the husband and wife would be hosting casual dinners for family and friends.

"The client's great taste allowed us to bring in antiques and art pieces, as well as more eclectic furnishings and treatments," says Castella. "We tried to bring in a variety of elements without trying to make anything too precious. And he definitely wanted accessories and architectural

"When you have a client who has superb taste and style, you can't help but be inspired by him."

—*Serge Castella*

elements that really said that this was Spain, that this was a Spanish house."

Visitors come upon the Spanish theme immediately when they enter the living room and confront a pair of floor-to-ceiling eighteenth-century Sevillian doors that act as both sculptural elements and practical ones delimiting the space, notably a recess that functions as a small office, with views out to the sea. After all, as Castella emphasizes, "The other design element already in place was the sea." Elsewhere, Spanish oak doors, also from the eighteenth century, lead into the master bedroom, which features a painted headboard from Spain of the same period. Castella says that most such polychrome objects of the time depict

Opening pages: The master bedroom and living room of an old fisherman's cottage on Spain's Costa Brava has been transformed into a modern home for a family by designers Serge Castella and Jason Flinn. Farrow & Ball's All White serves as the background for the living room, which includes a sofa designed by Serge Castella, upholstered in a wool from Bute, and a Harry Bertoia "Bird" chair and ottoman from Knoll. This page: The kitchen table uses one oak plank for the top and another as the vertical support. The chandelier is a Schmidt design.



The design for the handmade ceramic glaze and terracotta tiles in the kitchen is by Serge Castella. The fish ceramic is by G. Pelletier. Castella and Flinn created display niches throughout the home; here they contain handmade contemporary Portuguese jars. The 1950s perforated sconce is attributed to the French designer Mathieu Matégot. The Spanish Baroque polychrome door dates from the seventeenth century.

When devising a floor plan for the home, Castella and Flinn created a living room alcove for an office. The 1950s French desk is made of oak with a Formica top. The Louis XV armchair is upholstered in a Serge Castella fabric from his Port Lligat line for Gancedo. The 1985 "Tartar" console table was designed by Ettore Sottsass.



With its All White Farrow & Ball walls and white bedding from Ralph Lauren Home, the master bedroom's painted eighteenth-century headboard pops. The master bath is lit with a 1950s Spanish chandelier made of iron and conch shells. The custom sink, made in-situ, is fashioned of polished cement; the Axor faucets are by Philippe Starck.



*“Yes, even though the house is in Spain,
the client wanted to be reminded of
that everywhere.”*

—Serge Castella

religious scenes. “This one is rare,” he says, “because it shows some architectural ruins and a sea with boats bobbing in it, all appropriate for the setting of the house. It’s a strong decorative touch and it helps further foster that Spanish theme the owner was intent on having.”

Given the neutral backdrop that Castella and Flinn established throughout the home, every work of art, decorative object, and sculptural furnishing stands out in full relief. So excited was the client by interiors that seemed able to accommodate anything, he embarked on a mission to, as Flinn says, “go, go, go with more, more, more, but we urged him to not go too far, to step back just a little.” Much of what the designers chose for the rooms are powerful elements that stand out on their own. It was while Castella and Flinn were walking through a local quarry with the client that the three came upon a giant stone.

“This is it,” recalls Castella, when he saw the rock on the ground. “It was perfect for what would become the living room fireplace. The rock now appears to float or cantilever above the floor.” Its very form is both organic in shape and, yet, seemingly sculpted—and certainly an element directly related to the region.

Another bow to the organic is found at the custom-designed ten-seat kitchen table. During their travels, Castella and Flinn are always acquiring antiques and objects, whether to be used for specific projects or for ones not yet even imagined. They store their goods and finds in a warehouse until the right project comes along.

“We’d bought a huge stock of old European oak planks,” recalls Flinn, “and we liked the idea of using one as a horizontal surface for a table and putting another on the vertical as a T support. To get the thick, glossy, durable

lacquer we wanted, we had each of the two boards treated in an automobile garage, where they normally paint cars.” As a result, the table is nearly indestructible.

The other animating design force in the kitchen are the tiles that are used as a backsplash and countertop. The two-tone, two-textured squares, with their reflective white glaze and tactile terracotta matte finishes, reference seventeenth-century Catalan tiles. While Castella and Flinn often use vintage Spanish tiles in their projects, they were unable to find ones with this vigorous geometric pattern, so they had dozens fired and handmade by a local artisan. “The kitchen is kept deliberately very neutral, with the cupboards and all the appliances white, and these provide a jolting visual effect,” says Castella. “Plus, they’re fun.”

Because the two designers are good friends with the owners, they spend much time in the house as guests of the family. Flinn is very much aware that the house, the interior designs for which are now complete, is “a living space.” By that he references the sheer amount of activity—and leisure—that occurs inside and out. “You have to picture the girls with their friends on the sofa after a day at the beach and the kitchen table arrayed with fresh fruits and vegetables that the wife and housekeeper have brought in from the local market. We drink a lot of Champagne at this place.”

Castella adds, “Everything just clicked with this project. The house works so well for the client and his family and as a designer that’s as satisfying a feeling as is possible.” ■

The Spanish designer and antiques dealer Serge Castella often creates neutral interior spaces in which every object and furnishing he chooses assumes a strong visual presence.

