



southern grace

A MEANDERING ROAD TRIP THROUGH FRANCE AND CREATIVE TEAMWORK PRODUCE AN ALABAMA FARMHOUSE THAT CULTIVATES BEAUTY FROM SIMPLE DETAILS.

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A gathering of French antiques and reproductions in the living room of Rick and Beth Stukes' manor home in Alabama fosters a relaxed, gathered-over-time ambience. A Louis XVI-period bibliotheque from the Normandy region showcases a carved flower-basket cartouche, a hand-painted French blue interior, and a collection of limited edition leather books. Cozy velvet-upholstered chairs frame a new gilded-iron fire screen designed and fabricated in France. The French chandelier is a family heirloom.



Pitched roofs are great for shedding snow, but there's little use for them in Auburn, Alabama, a place that may only see a few flakes a year. So when architect Louis Negrette presented Beth and Rick Stales with a sketch for a French-style home that was more Medieval château than farmhouse, Beth set the sketch aside, asking, "What do we need those pointed roofs down here in the South for?"

Beth promptly invited Negrette, her son and architect Brent Uptain, and his wife, Karyn, on a road trip to explore the French countryside. They hired a driver and let the winding dirt roads direct their way. "Beth had more of an idea of what she didn't want in a French-style home than what she did want," Negrette says. "She didn't have to twist my arm to go exploring."

Meandering through the Loire Valley, Brittany, and Normandy, the foursome encountered centuries-old farmsteads that had evolved over time as families needed more space and could afford to build. "The

homes were purposeful and showed the patina of a handworking but simple lifestyle," Beth says. She found a connection with the locals that reminded her of her own small-town upbringing. "They have a strong community and appreciate life and the quality of things well done," she says.

After hundreds of miles and even more photographs, Beth returned home—with a new sketch in hand that Negrette and Uptain got to work executing. "Sometimes you have to go places, see things, and put your hands on something to really understand it," Beth says.

The pair combined parts and pieces of the farmsteads the team had visited to create a sustained compound that put honest materials over flourish and purposeful spaces over frills. Built around a courtyard that's reminiscent of a traditional fidd yard, the home is composed of a traditional two-story, one-room-wide manor house; a barrel-vaulted dining hall the couple uses for entertaining; a guesthouse akin to a osteria's



OPPOSITE LEFT: The two-story manor house is the focal point of the farmstead. Only one room wide, the interior takes advantage of natural light from both sides, just as French farmers did before electricity. **OPPOSITE RIGHT:** Rick and Beth welcome guests at a custom arched door framed by limestone. **THIS PHOTO:** The stairwell just made the entry showcase a gracious sweep and the home's material palette reimagined white oak, steel, and Venetian plaster.

THIS PHOTO: A Dutch door crafted from reclaimed white oak leads from the kitchen to the back yard. Oil paintings depict still lifes of fruits and vegetables, which Beth says would be at home in the kitchen of a French farmhouse. OPPOSITE TOP: Seeking period-appropriate furnishings for the kitchen, Beth opted for reproduction Louis XV-style chairs cradled on early-20th-century French iron-and-brass butchers table base topped with a new slab of limestone. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Beth's collection of new copper cookware is from Moulin, a company that started production in the 1850s in the Normandy village of Villerville-les-Bocaux.



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cottage; and a garage and potting shed that recall farm outbuildings.

"We never wanted to re-create the French countryside in Alabama," Nequette says. "We wanted to interpret that lifestyle, add it to the Southern way of life, and create something new rooted in history."

Key to their success was builder Hulham Farris and their team of local craftspeople. "Beth insisted on working with people in the community—just like farmers would have done when building their own homes in France," Nequette says. "The team sourced reclaimed wood from Pennsylvania barns, and the builder turned it into beams, floors, and doors at a nearby mill in Montgomery, Alabama. "We used design principles that were authentic 100 years ago and that will still be authentic 100 years from now," Nequette says.





ABOVE LEFT: Garden designer Troy Rhone worked with architect Louis Nequette to create casual yet structured garden spaces. This bench is new but addressed to look vintage. ABOVE, RIGHT: Fountains such as this classic French one, surround the property from borders and cutting gardens. BELOW: Café lights turn on automatically at dusk, casting a romantic glow across the property. OPPOSITE: To make the pattern of the Albarno stone as true to French country houses as possible, the stone masons enlarged Belin's trip photos to actual size and locked them to exterior walls, laying stone over the images.



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OPPOSITE: An antique Louis Philippe mirror hangs above an antique commode-turned-vanity in a guest bath. LEFT: The master bedroom exhibits traditional French style, but underneath the silk bedcovering are sheets from fled Land Cotton, a luxury linen and towel company in Moultrie, Alabama. "Just as the French sourced local materials, I wanted to source Alabama products," Beth says. BELOW: The master bath employs a large, single slab of marble to set off the wall dividing a double-sided shower.

For the interior, Beth worked with Nequette's design team for the finishes and interior designers Ashley Garrison and Mary Helen McCoy to collect period furnishings, art, and accessories. "No one designer could have done this and given it the collected look I wanted," Beth says. "It needed to have the look of pieces handed down and accumulated over time."

Rooms are decorated with pedigree 18th- and 19th-century antiques and accessories along with bespoke upholstery and family heirlooms, but there's not an air of pretense anywhere—thanks to the Stukeses' hospitable nature. The couple entertains often, both casually and formally. Yet whether it's Auburn University game day, a simple taco soup night, or a seated multicourse dinner, Beth always opts for crystal and porcelain. "I love using our good pieces while still keeping our life simple," she says. "If we have nice things, we should share them, use them, and enjoy them every day." ♦

