

Sing Noël

TOASTY FIRES
AND FESTIVE
GATHERINGS
WARM THE
SEASON IN
**A FRENCH-
INSPIRED
HOME**

BY AMY ELBERT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL PARTENIO
PRODUCED BY STACY KUNSTEL





Christmas wouldn't be complete for the Rinfret family without an evening of snuggling under blankets around the fireplace on the back porch. After all, it's Cindy Rinfret's philosophy that if you're blessed with four seasons, you should embrace them. She has zero interest in enclosing the candlelit porch overlooking the Connecticut countryside.

"We put on parkas or sweaters, wrap up in blankets, and light a fire," she says. And if the crackling fire isn't warm enough, the family's trio of friendly golden retrievers (*aka* the Three Amigos) are more than happy to nuzzle in.

"We call it our outdoor living room," says Cindy. "We probably use that room more than any other in the house." One Christmas Eve, Cindy, her husband, Peter, and their two teenagers, Spencer and Taylor, bundled up in fur blankets and told stories around the fireplace until 3 a.m. "We had the fire going, and all the candles were lit. It's all about creating memories."

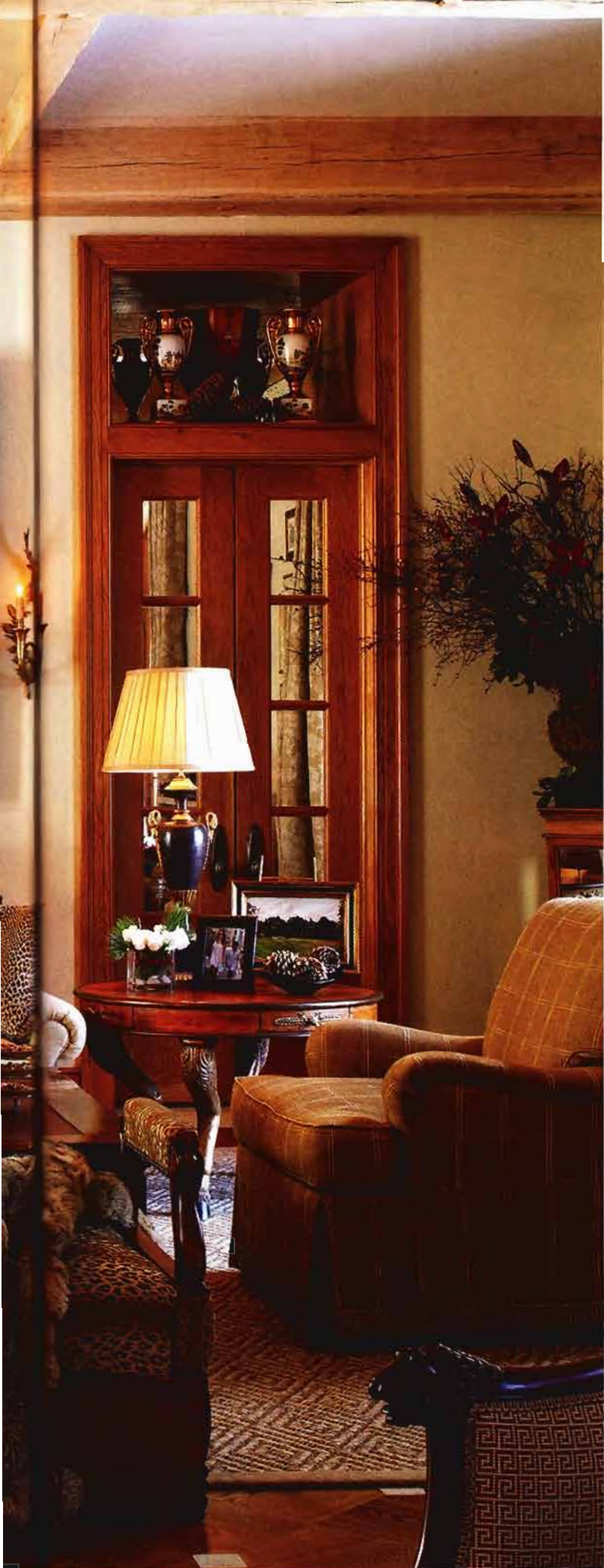
In many ways, the house is inspired by memories—family trips to Europe and Asia, and Peter's teen years at a boarding school in Normandy, France. "We wanted a house with a Normandy farmhouse feel to it," Cindy says. That translates to spaces that are elegant, but most of all, relaxed, comfortable, and inviting.

When the couple found a five-plus-acre lot in Greenwich that backed up to hundreds of acres of protected wetlands, their dreams began to take shape. Finding an architect who shared their vision, however, required a trip to Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Left: The pine-paneled library acts as a sitting room for the nearby master bedroom. A houndstooth-patterned sisal wall covering adds texture when paired with the Federal-style mantel and pine cabinetry, designed by homeowner and designer Cindy Rinfret. **Below:** Two of the family's three golden retrievers sit by French doors just outside the library. The narrow holiday trees are set in rustic pots from Thailand. **Preceding page:** The white oak front door is sheltered in a stone niche.







Cindy, who is a successful interior designer (fashion icon Tommy Hilfiger's family are regular clients) and owner of a design shop, had seen the work of architect Jack Arnold in home magazines. "His name kept coming back to me. I love his European sensibility," Cindy says.

The Rinfrets flew to Tulsa, met with Arnold, and toured several houses he had designed, including his own. "I could tell by his work that he totally got it," Cindy recalls. "He understood exactly what I had in mind." The architect regularly visits the French countryside, sketching and photographing houses, out-buildings, and architectural details. He then translates those classic styles and graceful proportions to new houses built in the United States.

"When I drive through the countryside in France, I'm very influenced by the simplicity of the architecture of the rural buildings and farmhouses, the way the buildings are clustered around courtyards," Arnold explains.

The Rinfret house—with its high-pitched rooflines, arched windows, dry-stack stone landscaping, and a stucco exterior that mimics the ancient plaster-over-stone technique used in rural France—reflects those European scenes. Arnold even beefed up the thickness of exterior walls to 12 inches to capture the character of an old structure.

Inside, he varied ceiling heights, which also replicates many of the old houses he's seen in France. Most of the Rinfrets' ceilings are 12 feet high, while the family room and master bedroom

Left: Rustic ceiling beams and white oak floors combine comfortably with refined furnishings in the living room. Armchairs next to the sofa swivel for easy conversation. "I love the mix of casual and elegant. It's like wearing jeans and a silk shirt," Cindy says. French doors flanking the sofa open to the kitchen and family room area. Below: The family Christmas tree sits in the opposite end of the living room near the fireplace and in front of French doors that look to a courtyard.







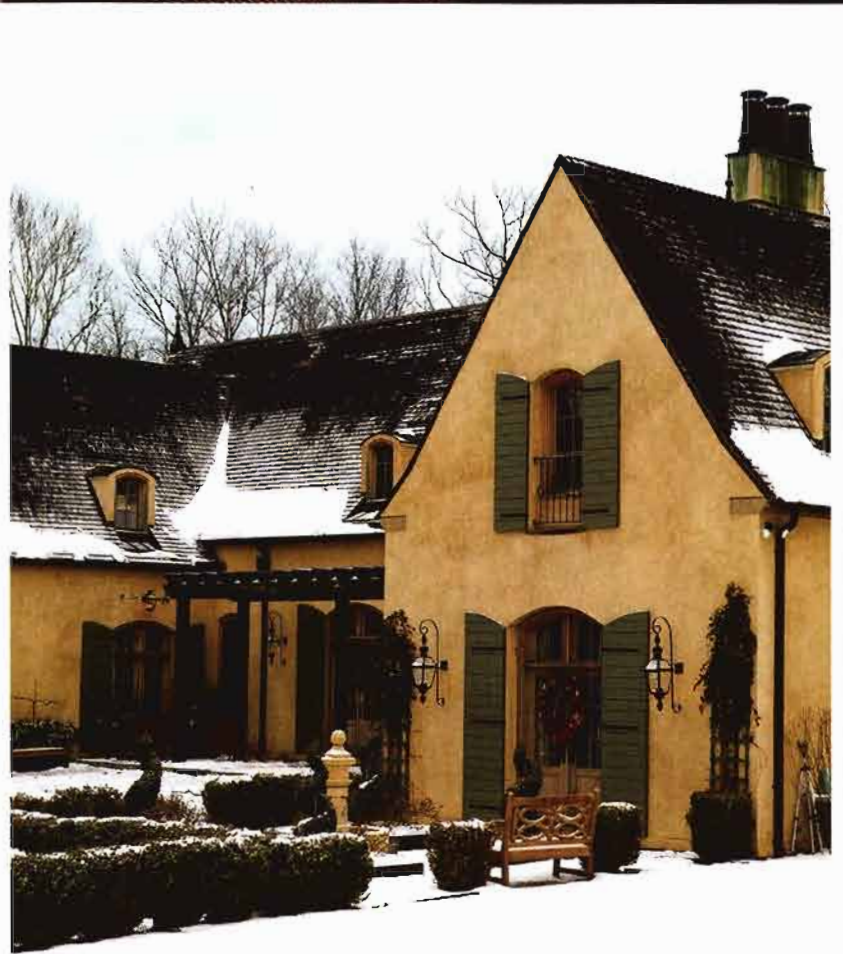
vault to 20 feet. Even with soaring ceilings, the rooms feel intimate, thanks to massive French white oak ceiling beams. And because the beams are real, not simply built to resemble beams, they add authenticity. "You get some checking and twisting as the wood beams dry that you don't get with thin pieces of wood," Arnold says. "It's those details and proportions that you experience when you're in the house that make it feel authentic."


The house's H-shaped floor plan allows for rooms with windows on at least two sides, opening spaces to natural light and views of the outdoors. "Much of the house is one-room deep," Arnold explains, "so you can see through spaces and keep rooms light-filled." Tall windows with arched transoms and multiple French doors look to back and front courtyards, another European influence. "You can sit in the living room or dining room and look to both courtyards, and have a sense of connection to both of them," he says.

Cindy's previous Colonial home required her to make trips to "visit" her gardens. Now they are just a step away from

Opposite: Stone was applied to the wall above the large fireplace, dramatizing the 20-foot-high peak of the vaulted family room ceiling. The glass door to the left of the fireplace leads to the dining room and porch. Left: Peter, Spencer, Taylor, and Cindy with their golden retrievers, Sconset, Coatue, and Cisco, who are named after Nantucket beaches. Below: A wood-topped island and a refrigerator armoire give the kitchen furniture styling that blends with the adjoining family room.







An outdoor courtyard, decorated with a vintage mirror and a wire urn filled with greens and branches, offers an interesting vignette from the house.

Top left: Heavy oak timbers and salvaged French terra-cotta pavers contribute to the rustic feel of the back porch, which the family uses as an outdoor living room. **Left:** Steep-pitched roofs, arched windows, and courtyards were inspired by French architecture. **Far left:** Cindy hangs a wreath with help from Coatue.

several rooms. "There's something of interest out of every window in the house," she says.

Rooms flow one to another, creating a meandering sense of discovery as people move through the house. The back porch (dubbed the outdoor living room by the family) and the dining room are reached via a window-lined gallery hall off the family room. "I love how you discover the rooms gradually," she explains. "The house has unexpected, quiet surprises." There's even a hidden staircase behind faux bookshelves in the library. The staircase is one of two that go to the children's bedrooms upstairs. The other is by the mudroom.

An understated palette of pale green and quiet khaki blends outdoors with indoors as well, adds Cindy. "The architecture was so strong, I didn't overdecorate the house. It's like a girl with good bones. She doesn't need to wear much makeup. It's the same with this house; it stands on its own."

More than a pretty face, the house has to stand up to plenty of activity, too, including teenagers Spencer, 18, and Taylor, 16, and their friends, three dogs, two cats, and a pet bird.

Floors are durable and easy-care limestone, white oak, and antique terra-cotta pavers. Cindy repurposes garden antiques for furnishings for an unexpected mix of elegant and rustic. "The whole house is meant to create comfort—in an emotional sense as well as the physical," she explains. "You feel like everything is right with the world when you're here." ■

Architect: Jack Arnold For more information, see sources on page 90

Right and below: An antique French cheese table with marble insets on the tabletop keeps the mood casual in the dining room. The walls are upholstered in a lighthearted botanical fabric that complements the framed arrangement of antique pressed flower specimens hanging above the sideboard. The Rinfrets eat most of their meals in the room, except in the summer, when they move outdoors to a dining terrace just outside the French doors.



