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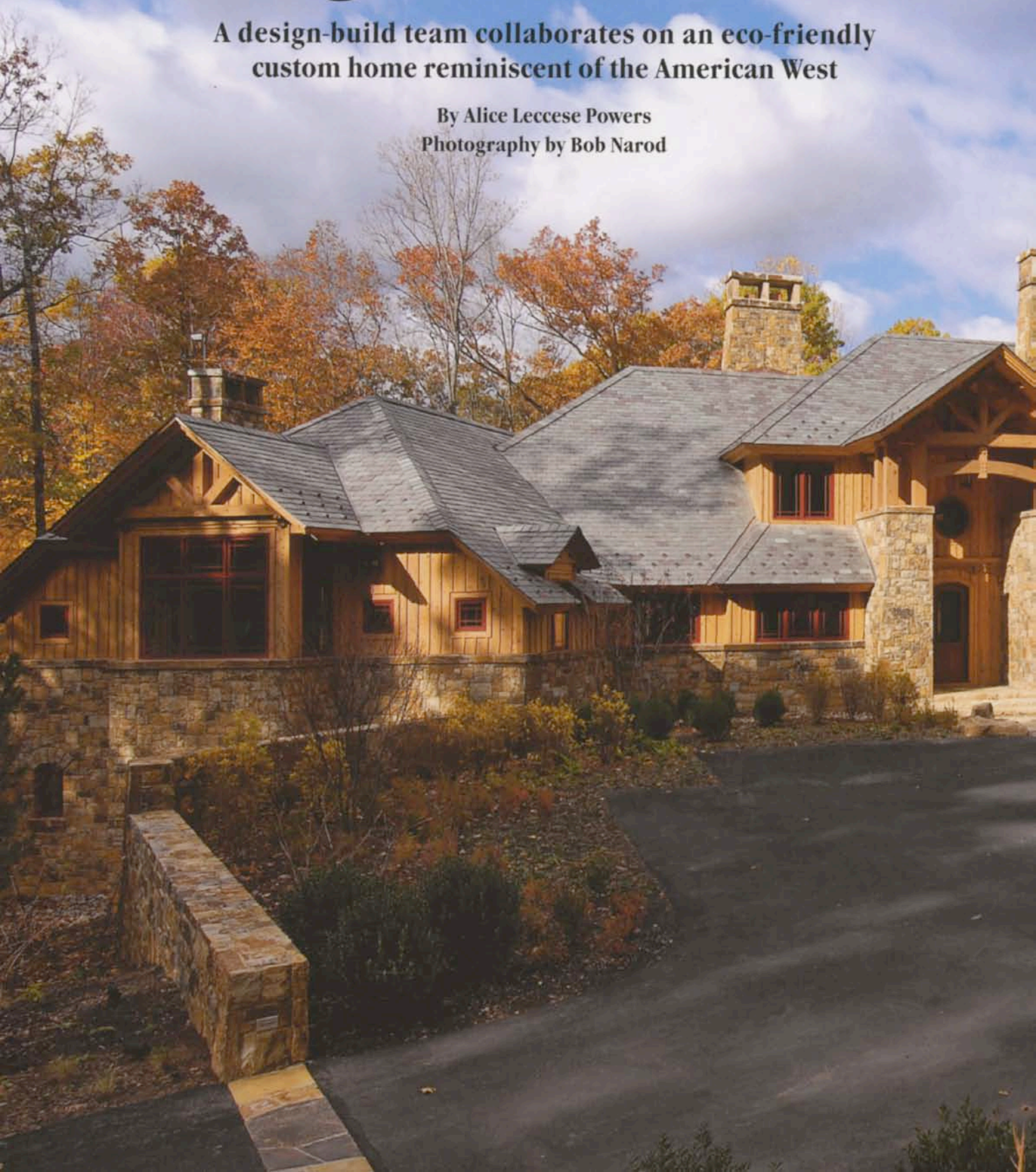
A Custom Dream Home Takes Shape

A Lodge in the Woods

**A design-build team collaborates on an eco-friendly
custom home reminiscent of the American West**

By Alice Leccese Powers

Photography by Bob Narod







IN MARCH 2005 BUILDER ROGER BLATTBERG AND ARCHITECT BILL SUTTON WALKED JOHN BACKUS'S 20-acre parcel of land in Great Falls, Virginia. Backus explained his vision of a grand home influenced by both the villas of Tuscany and the lodges of the American West. The house would accommodate the lives of his young, active sons. It would not only be built green, but would rest lightly on the land, drawing its source of heat and cooling from the ground itself.

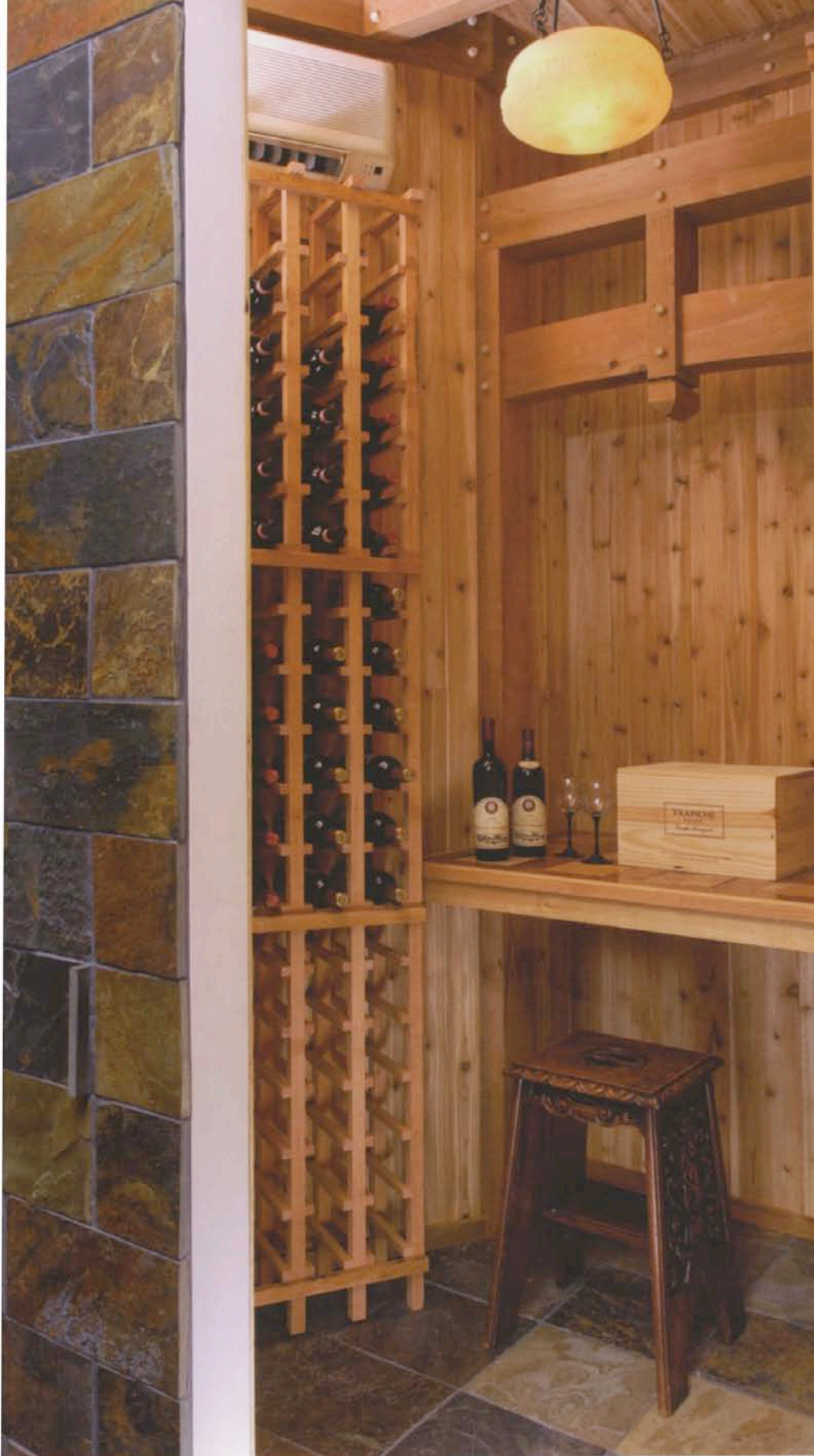
A lifelong skier with an abiding love of the Rockies, Sutton went back to his office and drew a preliminary concept sketch. Backus, a venture capitalist, was considering another architect from Aspen, but Sutton's sketch—remarkably true to his finished house—was enough to convince Backus that Sutton was the person for the job.

The secluded new home (previous spread), located just outside a nature preserve in Great Falls, Virginia, has a façade clad in cedar and stone. Architect Bill Sutton designed the intimate entry foyer (opposite top) in the spirit of an Indian roundhouse. A wrought-iron-and-mahogany balustrade overlooks the foyer. To the left, the foyer leads to John Backus's library (opposite bottom). To the right, a hall clad with a wall of stone and slate floors (above) leads to a magnificent main staircase and dining room beyond.



Architecture: Bill Sutton, Sutton Yantis Associates Architects, PC, Vienna, Virginia
Builder: Great Falls Construction, Great Falls, Virginia
Interior Design: Victor Shargai, ASID, Victor Shargai and Associates, Inc., Washington, DC
Landscape Architecture: Richard Arentz, Arentz Landscape Architects LLC, Washington, DC
Landscape Construction: Jeff Rienks, Ironwood, Washington, DC



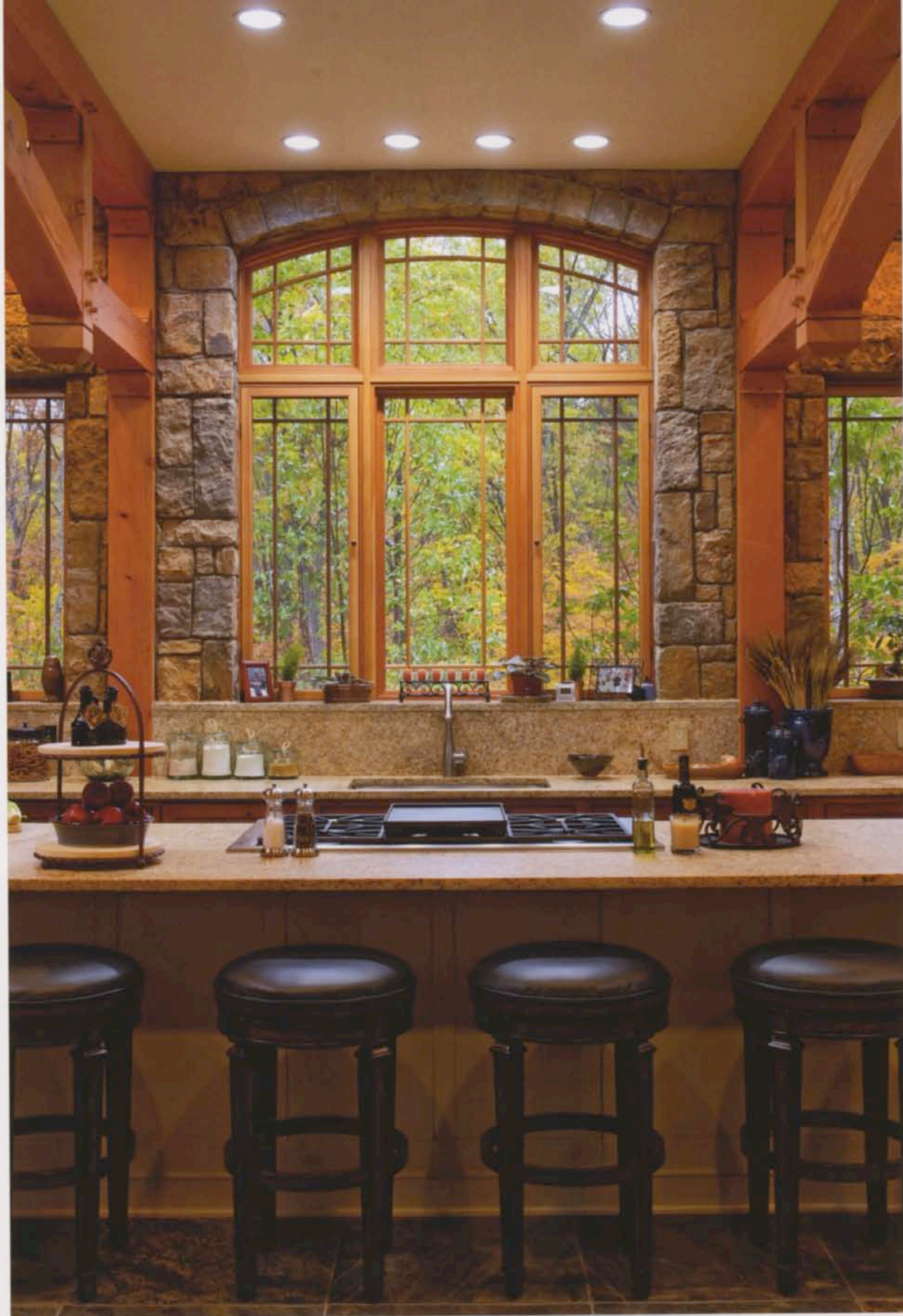


Homeowner John Backus purchased the dining room chairs (opposite) in a Paris flea market, while interior designer Victor Shargai discovered the two-tier wrought iron chandelier at John Rosselli & Associates in Georgetown. On one side of the room is a vestibule where a stone wall slides open to reveal a hidden wine cellar (above).

I always wanted to build something," said Backus. "I've lived in a bunch of houses, but never one that I had built. I came to the point in my life when I had the resources and the desire." Backus decided to build on five of the original 20 acres. Siting the structure correctly was critical. "There were three sites that I really liked, but in the end I wanted seclusion." He chose acreage that abutted a nature preserve on which no other houses could be built.

Architect Sutton, principal of Sutton Yantis Architects, had another advantage over his competitor—a long association with Great Falls Construction, its president Roger Blattberg and vice president Stacey Hoffman. With 30 years of experience in residential construction in the Washington metropolitan area, the firm has assembled a team that includes skilled artisans. Backus had a tight deadline and Great Falls promised to deliver. With a construction start in December 2005 and overall completion 15 months later, the project and all of its various complexities were successfully managed by Great Falls' director of field operations, Dave Haber.

The finished 15,000-square-foot home blends into its tree-filled lot. With its stone and cedar-clad façade, topped by a varied roofline that moderates the volume of the house, it looks like a collection of cottages anchored by a central stone chimney. "It looks casual," said Backus, "unlike many of the colonials in Virginia. For the last half dozen years I vacationed in Wyoming and loved the mountain look...I've also spent time in Europe and like the design features found in Italy, including the natural cooling properties of stone."



The kitchen (above and opposite) reinterprets the timbers and the stone of the house's exterior. The countertops are honed granite with an antique finish and the custom cabinets are distressed cherry. Radiant heat comes from beneath the slate floor. Like a European abbey, the room's ceilings are elaborately trussed and light floods in through cathedral windows.

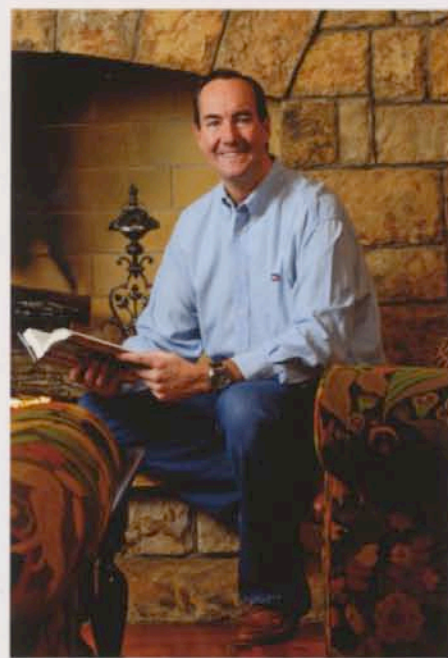






"FOR THE LAST HALF DOZEN YEARS I VACATIONED IN WYOMING AND LOVED THE MOUNTAIN LOOK," SAYS HOMEOWNER JOHN BACKUS.

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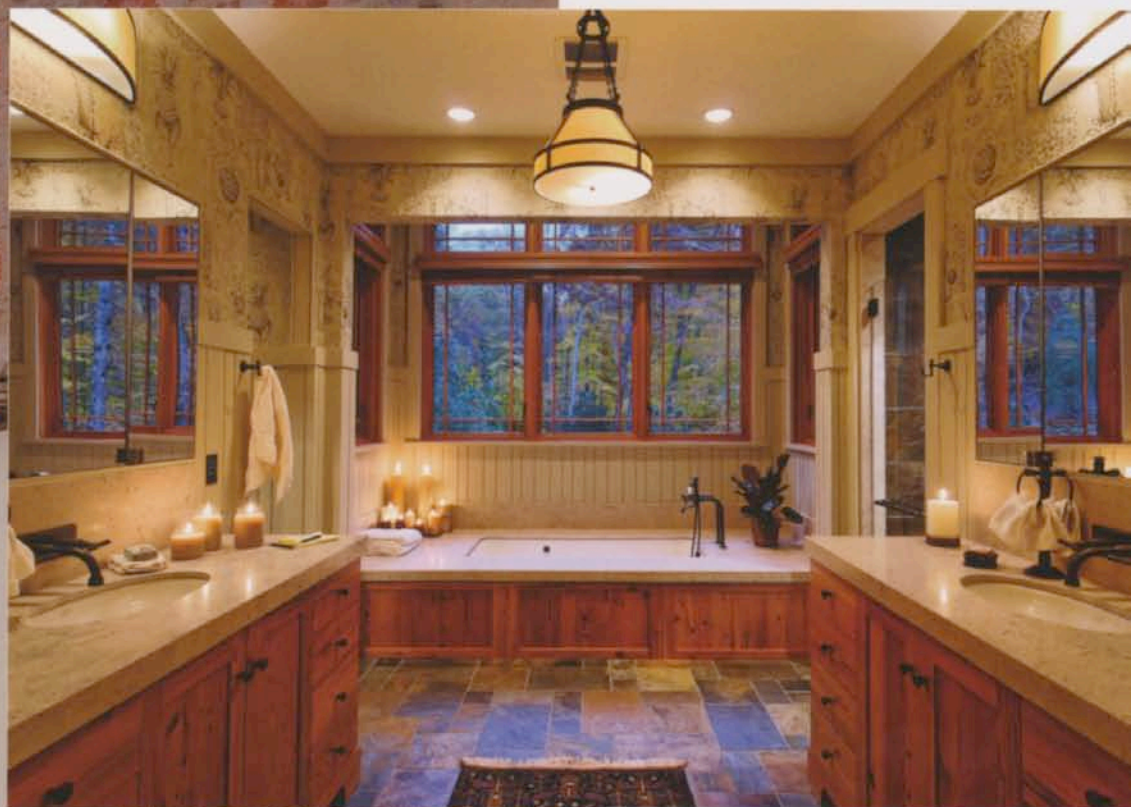


Homeowner John Backus (above) relaxes by the hearth in the great room (opposite), which features a vaulted timbered ceiling and two-story windows. Outside the great room, a natural-looking landscape designed by Richard Arentz unfolds, featuring a dramatic waterfall (left), a pond and an outdoor terrace overlooking the nature preserve beyond. The house was designed and built with the environment and energy efficiency in mind. It incorporates natural materials; most of the interior floors are reclaimed heart pine. Most of the heat and air conditioning is provided by 11 geothermal wells. "I spent twice what a conventional H/VAC system would have cost and plan on a six-year payback," said Backus.

The interior of the house is an amalgam of the American West and Tuscany. The foyer is surprisingly intimate, almost contemplative, drawing on the vocabulary of the Native American roundhouse. In stark contrast is the adjacent great room, with its vaulted timbered ceiling, two-story windows and massive fireplace. The great room overlooks a manmade pond and waterfall, an outdoor terrace and the nature preserve beyond.

Backus collected many furnishings for the home in his travels. "I bought a lot of the pieces from antique markets in Paris," said Backus. "There are outdoor antique markets—big flea markets—that must be three-by-three-square city blocks with a couple thou-





Backus's master bedroom suite boasts a vaulted, timber ceiling and has its own stone fireplace, one of many in the house (left). The master bath (above), with custom-built cabinetry and stone floors and countertops, also enjoys views of the surrounding plantings and trees.

sand shops. I filled up a container and brought it back." Interior designer Victor Shargai of Victor Shargai and Associates helped Backus incorporate his finds into his new home and acquire new furniture and carpets when necessary.

Because Backus had bought so many items in Europe, "it was kind of like coming into a person's home who wanted to redecorate," said Shargai. Some were re-positioned once they arrived—the foyer mirror was originally bought for the dining room, for example—while others were re-purposed. A table ended up in the foyer as a bench.

The dining room to the right of the foyer is more Tuscan than Tucson. Its brocade dining chairs, a two-tier



wrought iron chandelier, an antique Oriental rug, French doors with custom glass inserts and blue walls lend the room an air of formality. "I'm totally instinctual when it comes to color," said Shargai. "The color of the dining room is the color it had to be after we chose the rug...it had to be rich and strong." On one side of the room is a wine cellar with a custom-made wrought iron door. Backus purchased antique gate straps in France and incorporated them into the door's design.

The kitchen reinterprets the timbers and the stone of the house's exterior. The countertops are honed granite with an antique finish and the custom cabinets are distressed cherry. Radiant heat comes from beneath the slate floor. Like a European abbey, the room's ceilings are elaborately trussed and light floods in through cathedral windows.

The core of the home—the great room, dining room, foyer, kitchen, and conservatory—is flanked by two distinct wings, each with its own staircase. One wing is for Backus and the other for his sons, ages 10 and 14. "I wanted this to be the house that my boys wanted to come and play in. I want my kids and their friends to be here rather than someplace else." Most boys would consider this house nirvana. There are multiple guest rooms on the boys' wing and the lower level has a sports memorabilia area, a casual family room, a game room, an indoor sports court, a home theater and a full gym. After a discussion with landscape architect Richard Arentz of Arentz Landscape Architects, Backus chose a natural water feature in the back yard like those he had seen in mountain homes, rather than the conventional in-ground pool.

The home's lower level is a veritable playground for Backus and his two young sons—perfect for entertaining guests of all ages. It encompasses (clockwise from top left) a comfortable seating area, a rustic bar, a full-size sports court, a well-equipped gym complete with a cork floor and a plush home theater.

Backus's master bedroom suite overlooks the back of the house and the adjacent preserve. It repeats the vaulted, timber ceiling and has its own stone fireplace, one of many in the house. Scale was important to Backus. "We made sure all of the doorways were at least seven feet tall, some eight feet tall on the main level," he says. "I am six foot four and my eldest son is going to be taller than that." A staircase from the master bedroom leads directly to the gym on the lower level.

Despite its size, the Backus residence was built and is maintained



with state-of-the art, energy-efficient technology. "We're witnessing what is the start of a green revolution," said Roger Blattberg, president of Great Falls Construction. "People feel that they individually should play a role in protecting the environment." This includes minimizing waste during construction, limiting the use of fossil fuel and building with natural materials. The exterior stone was quarried in Arkansas and the roof is slate. Most of the interior floors are reclaimed heart pine with mahogany used sparingly.

"I love the old nail holes that I see in the heart pine; it gives it great character," said Backus. "You don't see any-

thing that's formica or acrylic."

The most revolutionary aspect of the house is in its least photogenic area, the engine room. "I spent twice what a conventional H/VAC system would have cost and plan on a six-year pay-back," said Backus. Most of the heat and air conditioning is provided by 11 geothermal wells that transfer both heat and cooling through heat pumps. The wells provide all heat up to 55 degrees; the air conditioning is on an energy-saving, six-zone system. The home's Loewen windows are built for maximum draft resistance and the whole structure is insulated with Icynene foam.

The completed house is testament to a near seamless collaboration among client, architect, builder, interior designer and landscape architect. "I'm the kind of person who loved the experience and would do it again," said Backus. "I'd be better at it than the first go-round." ❖

Writer Alice Leccese Powers is a Washington-based writer and the editor of Spain in Mind, France in Mind and Italy in Mind, all Vintage/Random House books. Photographer Bob Narod is based in Sterling, Virginia.



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