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A 17th-century stable inspires a

WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY JOHN FRANCISCO ANDREU PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON BLUNT

A hammered-iron *tonnelle*, or arbor, enhances the timeworn look of the fieldstone façade of Diana Cummings's house. The shutters are painted a distinctive powdery French blue.

A photograph of a stone house with blue shutters and a young tree in front. The house has a rustic, textured stone facade. A young tree with green leaves is planted in front of the house, partially obscuring the view of the windows and door. The scene is captured in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The text "new home in the hills of Virginia" is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font.

new home in the hills of Virginia

The living room's stylish comfort is accented with fine art, including the classical bronze *Woman with Deer*, circa 1900, by Karl Bitter, on the mantel of the limestone fireplace. It was one of the lucky finds by interior designer Shoshana Datlow, who thought it communicated Diana's love of animals. **Inset:** Diana takes a ride on Midnight Sky, a registered Irish Draught Horse. **Far right:** The long, narrow house design was inspired by a 17th-century French stable.



The Virginia Hill Country has long attracted

outdoorsy types. Among them is Diana Cummings, who was lured by the region's rolling hills, meandering rivers, and meadows of wildflowers. Once she saw the area, her fascination grew.

Virginia is a long haul from the Provence region of France where Monaco-born Diana grew up, but it's where this transplanted European found her future as a horsewoman. "I was new in the States, a 19-year-old journalism student at American University in Washington, D.C., when I got into weekend living at my father's retreat in the horse country," she says. "I knew right away the Virginia hills were for me."

In 1988, she inherited a working farm occupying 450 acres of fertile land about 50 miles from the capital. Located on the south bank of the Rappahannock River in Culpeper County, the property offered unfettered vistas of natural splendor. "It was a soul-soothing setting," she says, "an ideal place for a horsewoman to put down roots and build a home."

But it would be another 13 years before Diana built on the land. She wanted a simple farmhouse, not a trophy house, and she envisioned a style of architecture with a familiar French feel. It had to be suited to the Virginia countryside and have just a few necessary rooms. The year-round house needed "rugged elegance" and a weekend attitude.

She turned to custom home builder Jim Eicher and to Virginia architect Mark Buchanan to execute the house design. Then she hired Shoshana Datlow for the interior design. "All three were living nearby and comprehended rural life," she says. "I was confident my team understood my casual lifestyle."





In response to Diana's desire for a home with a Gallic flavor, Buchanan created a house essentially one room deep, drawing inspiration from a 17th-century French horse stable. Like the stable, Buchanan's linear design featured a tiled hipped roof, dormers that broke the otherwise continuous roofline, stucco-faced stone walls, and shuttered doors and windows.


To make the French-inspired design complement the setting and reflect regional construction techniques, Buchanan chose local fieldstone for the exterior walls. He had a granular mixture of cement, sand, and lime roughly buttered over the face of the stones. This mortar technique goes back at least 100 years and was used on agricultural buildings in Northern Virginia. "It's an expedient method of binding and sealing," he claims. "It instantly lends a timeworn character."

The house, set on the edge of a wooded slope, took two years to build. On the advice of an acclaimed Virginia landscape architect, the late Meade Palmer, gardens surround the house.

The structure was situated so that Diana could watch the perennially changing colors and textures of her alfalfa, corn, wheat, and soybean fields.

The necessary rooms she requested are logically arranged on the ground floor. The architect designed a functional, linear flow of a multipurpose living-kitchen-dining space, a cozy den, a spacious master bedroom suite, and an enclosed porch. He included such conveniences as a powder room, a laundry, and a mudroom. Additional bedrooms are located upstairs. Natural elements like floors of fallen-oak planks and limestone tiles plus ceiling beams of weathered Douglas fir contribute to the authentic farmhouse character.

For the interior design, Datlow emphasized comfort and casual style. To achieve a relaxing, mellow ambience throughout the house, she dressed the plaster walls with a three-color wash that harmonizes warm hues of yellow. She shunned window treatments entirely to keep spaces light and airy.



In the ground-floor mudroom, visiting pooch Sidney pauses in front of the pet door to contemplate the great outdoors.

Opposite: The view from the open kitchen and dining area to the living room reveals an easy flow of functions. Diana didn't want "size for show."



In the living area, relaxed seating surrounds the fireplace to encourage conversation. A hand-woven wool rug in soothing earth colors gives a unified look.

Diana liked the designer's choices of simple French Provençal furniture, like the slender console in the front hall and the armoire in the living room. She was especially pleased with Datlow's own custom furniture. The handsome farm table with its substantial cabriole legs was created especially for the kitchen and has become Diana's favorite piece. "It anchors the space," she says.

The house's hub is the combined kitchen-dining-living area, which seems to draw everyone, including Diana's coterie of pets. She has two dogs—a German shorthaired pointer and a Bull Boxer—plus two tabby cats. The animals have the run of the house, so all of the fabrics are durable and pet-friendly.

Diana is thrilled with the open kitchen's efficiency. It has a compact L-shaped work area that accommodates such gourmet basics as a Viking stove and a Sub-Zero refrigerator. Hand-painted

blue-and-white ceramic tiles on the walls as well as a variety of hanging copper pots and pans contribute French flavor.

"This kitchen has a friendly spirit," says Datlow. "Everyone feels right at home." Casual entertaining also frequently spills outdoors to the pea-stone courtyard fronting the house, where a black iron *tourelle*, or arbor, with a roof of bamboo invites guests to linger. It's here that Diana and her fellow equestrians like to relax and discuss the horse circuit. Diana owns four horses and participates in amateur competitions, so there's plenty for her and her friends to chat about.

From her courtyard, the expansive view of the Virginia Hill Country could not be more stunning. Given her home's idyllic setting, it's easy to understand how Diana maintains a weekend attitude every day, and why her ties to the land have grown ever stronger over the years. ■

Architect: Mark Buchanan Interior designer: Shoshana Datlow
For more information, see sources on page 182.

The subtle curves of the bath's vaulted ceiling heighten a feeling of spaciousness.



Sunshine warms the airy master bathroom that is Diana's sanctuary. It features a lofty vaulted ceiling and windows that look out on the garden. **Opposite:** In the den, French doors lead to a pea-stone courtyard, blurring the boundaries between outside and in.