



ROMANTIC
FRENCH HOMES

LANIE GOODMAN *photography by* SIMON BROWN





OPPOSITE: The rural eighteenth-century-style bastide “Les Confines” was rendered more elegant by lime-washing the facade, realigning and enlarging the windows, and repainting the shutters in a natural shade of green that would be harmonious with the garden. “The five magnificent plane trees and the underground source were a real draw,” says owner Dominique Lafourcade, whose passion for gardens is reflected in the artistic design of the bastide’s interiors. In place of an unsightly metal shed in front of the house, the owners dug out an oval pond filled with water lilies and connected it to a long central ribbon of water, which serves as the geometric “spinal column” of the landscaped garden.

THIS PAGE: A view from the bastide terrace of Dominique Lafourcade’s landmark garden, bordered by trellises covered with vines and wisteria. The 20-acre property includes two swimming pools bordered by greenery, a flower and vegetable garden, a fruit orchard, and a fanciful African garden hemmed in by bamboo with rare exotic plants. The smaller southwest-facing dining terrace faces a garden of clipped ornamental round hedges. “It’s the perfect spot to enjoy the last rays of light before sunset,” says the owner.

Wedged between Saint Rémy de Provence and Avignon, the sleepy medieval village of Noves is perhaps best known historically for its famed descendant, Laura de Noves, the fourteenth-century muse of Francesco Petrarca, whose beauty was celebrated in his poems. There’s a decidedly timeless aura to this uncharted pocket of Provence, and the same could be said of “Les Confines,” a stately eighteenth-century-style ocher-yellow bastide, situated just outside of town.

LES CONFINES

NOVES, PROVENCE

Flanked by towering plane trees, the green-shuttered country manor sits across from a vast expanse of elaborate gardens. From the pebbly front terrace, embellished with large glazed Anduze pots filled with lavender, this stunning perspective of luxuriant greenery begins with an ornamental pond of floating water lilies. Between the rows of cypress trees and topiary hedges—all meticulously clipped into geometric arches, squares, and ornamental spheres—is a cutting garden of roses,





peonies, and azaleas, and long wooden trellises covered with mauve and white wisteria.

Indeed, at first glance, the bastide's three-story lime-washed facade seems to have weathered centuries of blazing sunshine, Mistral winds, and winter storms. In fact, Dominique Lafourcade, an artist and self-taught landscaper, and her architect husband, Bruno, acquired the 20-acre property in 1989, and have since invented everything at "Les Confines" from scratch.

"There was nothing here but a flat, fallow wheat field, a few plane trees in front of the dilapidated farmhouse, and an ugly metal shed," Dominique explains. "It had belonged to the Chauvet family, who were well-known landowners in the region, yet they never set foot here. Aside from a few

ABOVE: Dominique Lafourcade designed the picture frames with seashells and other salvaged materials. The lamp is an original creation fabricated with cutouts of painted tin cans.

RIGHT: The cozy winter living room is a fanciful mix of trompe l'œil murals, lamps, and mirror frames by Dominique and faux animal skin chairs. The floral vases by Julie Tareaud and Clousclat green earthenware plates are part of the owners' vast collection of porcelain.







LEFT: The former stable was converted into a west-facing salon and library, used as a second winter living room. The owners added the gray country-style fireplace adorned with spheres, a subtle reference to the adjacent jardin des boules (garden of the balls).

OPPOSITE: The dining room is a patchwork of color and whimsy, filled with local animal-themed bric à brac and garden flowers. Dominique Lafourcade's trompe l'œil murals depict the couple's favorite landscapes from their travels to the far corners of the globe.

BELOW: The Provençal-style cupboards are filled with pieces from the family collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century china, including Dominique Lafourcade's own floral designs of Gien porcelain.

sheep and a peasant farmer who lived here, it was essentially an abandoned property. We called it our 'sleeping beauty... without the beauty!' at first, but recognized its potential right away."

However, the most decisive factor was the presence of an underground natural source, a treasured asset to the sun-baked soil of Provence. The first thing the owners did was erect a small wind-powered pump to get the water flowing through ribbon-like paths throughout the property.

Pooling their multiple professional talents, the husband-and-wife team designed a plan that would preserve the spirit of a farmhouse and salvage as much as possible from the original construction. "We even kept the old shutters and later used them as doors for our garden huts," Dominique says. "It was also important to respect the original volume of each space." Bruno, whose specialty is the renovation and transformation of homes and instilling them with a classic eighteenth-century spirit, was able to create a more "noble" effect by realigning some of the west-facing facade windows. By elevating one layer of red roof tiles, he also reconfigured the attic space by opening up the small dark rooms without changing the









LEFT: The cheery country kitchen is the central hub of activity since the owners are also passionate cooks. The antique wooden farm table, found locally, was given a Verona marble tabletop. For added color, the simple chairs, rescued from a brocante market, were painted blue. In bold contrast, the walls are decorated with Salernes ceramic tiles from Alain Vagh.

RIGHT: A collection of copper pans adorns the walls. The marble mortar, a typical Provençal utensil, is used to make aioli and pistou.



“We’re fanatical about collecting local dishware and pottery,” says Dominique. “But it’s a luxury to be able to change plates according to your mood.”

harmony of the building’s exterior. Above all, “Les Confines” reflects the artistry of Dominique, who was born in nearby Avignon and initially studied interior design at the Paris Ecole Camondo. After years of designing Gien porcelain with her vibrantly colored floral and vegetal-inspired patterns, she developed her knowledge of Provençal and Italian-style gardens into a personalized style of landscaping that always includes a touch of whimsy.

“I don’t like to feel confined, and, for me, the garden is an extension of the house,” says Dominique, whose sunlit loft-style atelier is a joyous pandemonium of work-in-progress and offers a sweeping view of the verdant property from the tall, curved sash windows and French doors.

Since Dominique and Bruno are both fond of cooking, the real hub of activity at “Les Confines” is the spacious country kitchen. Amid an array of copper pots and a wall lined with brightly colored Salernes tiles, simplicity and functionality prevail: straw baskets dangle from the ceiling; others sit on the wooden table, stacked with hand-picked vegetables and herbs. The cupboards—local farmhouse antiques—are



OPPOSITE: Dominique's garden-view atelier, originally two dark rooms, was opened up and reconfigured into an artist's loft with high ceilings and large sash windows to maximize the dazzling light. Amid a jumble of straw baskets and tools for the garden are a multitude of original works-in-progress: lamps, picture frames, hanging mobiles made of salvaged tin cans, models for life-sized children's doll houses, and architectural drawings for garden designs.

all lined with Dominique's Gien china but for everyday use there's also a large collection of Provençal yellow and green Cliousclat earthenware from a small potter's village in the Drôme.

"Changing décor is one of the greatest luxuries," Dominique says, which is why the couple decided to build contrasting dining rooms on each side of the kitchen, along with an additional al fresco dining porch on the southwest side of the bastide, next to the living room.

The small sitting room and living room, formerly the stable, were refurbished with fireplaces and retain a rustic quality, since nearly every lamp, picture frame, painting, drawing, or trompe-l'oeil collage is one of Dominique's handmade creations. "Everything is



made with materials I happen to find—tin cans, seashells, pebbles, bits of wood or bamboo, pods, pine cones, apricot and peach pits—nothing gets thrown away," she says.

The narrow stone stairs, which were left in their original state, lead to the second story of the house, which is divided into five bedrooms. Everything, from the wooden four-poster canopy bed in the master suite to the hand-stitched flowery quilts, was found in local antique markets. Dominique has also kept many of her early creations, including an armoire made of vintage cigar boxes and the children's room headboard adorned with hand-drawn labels of flowers.

The third level comprises two large sloping-walled bedrooms under the eaves and an attic. A dazzling array of trophies abounds in the former room of their son, Alexandre, a racer and noted

LEFT: An upstairs guest bedroom with an armchair from the family's collection. The base of the lamp that sits on the small table was made from a pile of superimposed books. The artist chose all the curtain fabrics and linens.

ABOVE: Each of the eighteenth-century Provençal-style bedrooms is unique, filled with beautifully appointed furnishings and tall French windows.





architect who now heads the Lafourcade firm. Bruno Lafourcade, who is also a car aficionado, says that one of his priorities was to build a garage large enough to house the family collection of vintage Bugattis.

Among the many original constructions at "Les Confines," Dominique constructed a wooden "temple" at the edge of the property which picks up the last rays of the setting sun, and framed the perspective with a circle of hedges and a porthole window inside the house. Another romantic vantage point is the "belvedere," a custom-built wooden circular spiral staircase and platform atop the century-old plane tree.

Hidden away in the garden next to the vegetable patch and the fruit orchard, is the summer house, dubbed "Piccola," a converted stable that the couple uses as a weekend retreat, fully equipped with solar-heated shower and tiny kitchen. "We originally built the cabin for our donkey, Piccolo, but after one year he became odious and we had to give him away," recounts Dominique with a smile. "Our idea was to convert it into a kind of garden version of a Marseillais fisherman's hut, which is why we painted it the same traditional cobalt blue as the little boats."

Though only meters away from their deeply comfortable yellow bastide, this spare mini-cottage equally reflects the spirit of the Lafourcades' distinctive approach: "home" is always a glowing interior space that mirrors the owners' love of nature. As Petrarch wrote, referring to his beloved Laura de Noves, "... from a little village a sun is given, such that the place, and nature, praise themselves, out of which so lovely a lady is born to world." The same might be said of today's lovely lady of Noves, "Les Confines."

ABOVE LEFT: The bathroom for the master bedroom with an antique claw-foot tub.

ABOVE: The guest bedroom with a mix of stripes and flowers. The original painted headboard and seashell mirror frame are by Dominique Lafourcade.

OPPOSITE: The yellow master bedroom with a garden view. The canopy four-poster, fabricated by Brone, was custom designed by the owners, right down to the faux fauve skin trim, a playful reference to Dominique's passion for animals and nature.







VILLA BAULIEU

PROVENCE

Over two thousand years ago, when the Greeks arrived in Marseille, they had the excellent idea to cultivate vines and plant olive trees throughout the Provençal countryside. Today, the small flower-lined village of Rognes, roughly nine miles northwest of Aix-en-Provence, still produces award-winning wines due to exceptional quality of its grapes. The town is also known for its unusual stone—a curious mix of sand, molluscs, and seashells, discovered as early as the Roman Empire. Likewise, the history of this unspoiled tiny pocket of Provence, on the crossroads of five ancient trade routes, is as rich as its fertile soil.

Built atop the ancient volcano crater of the Trévaresse, Villa Baulieu is situated inside a 300-hectare estate bordered by forests of truffle oaks, almond trees, and lush vineyards. Viewed from the majestic pine-shaded walkway leading to the entrance, this Italianate Provençal manor exudes a timeless quality that conjures visions of noblemen on horseback and elegant country fêtes of centuries gone by.

ABOVE: The facade of the castle with its crenelated tower and the majestic cour d'honneur entrance.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: View of the vineyards, Villa Baulieu, and the Alpilles mountains of the Luberon.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: Above the entrance to the summer kitchen, formerly the stable.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: The main door of the Villa Baulieu. A coat of arms figures above the door that dates to the Counts of Candolle, depicting a gold and azure shield with two lions, each holding a banner marked "Aide Dieu en bon Chevalier" (Aid God as faithful Knight).

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT: One of two stone grottoes on the estate, lined with fossilized seashells.

The sprawling property once belonged to the Counts of Provence, who ruled the fiefdom beginning in 1576, under the reign of Henri III. As the property was passed from one aristocratic family to another, the estate also underwent several modifications during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Essentially a country bastide, the Jullien/Julhans family transformed the Baulieu mansion by laying

BELOW LEFT: A Louis XIV armchair (fauteuil d'apparat) from the family collection.

BOTTOM LEFT: A detail from the eighteenth-century Provençal chandelier in the music room.

BELOW: The ornate sculpted white plaster chimneypieces, called gypseries, are typical of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Provence.

OPPOSITE: The music room, with a harpsichord and a nineteenth-century Steinway, for informal evening concerts among guests. The seventeenth-century portrait above the chimney is one of several examples of a tondo, a Renaissance term for a circular work of art.







OPPOSITE: The 33-foot long Renaissance-style walnut dining room table was custom-designed for the house and can seat up to 24 guests. During the restoration process, the owners rediscovered the original 1635 decorative painted motifs on the wood ceiling beams that were hidden under a layer of plaster.

ABOVE: Another example of a reconstructed Provençal plaster gypserie chimney, built by Pierre Caron and his team of exceptional local craftsmen.

sturdy basalt foundations and rebuilding it in an Italianate villa style, circa 1635. Given that the Aixois countryside is located midway between Rome and Paris, it was not surprising that the Italian influence in architecture flourished in Provence during this period.

The castle's next notable change came in 1805, when four crenelated towers were added to the main house. During the same period, the surrounding 54-acre park (where a romantic seventeenth-century stone temple of love still stands) was transformed by the creation of

a formal French-style garden filled with roses and irises. Similarly, the ornately carved stone statues, fountains, and ponds, fed by an ancient source that runs beneath the property, all contributed to a new air of grandeur.

However, after two centuries of successive owners—among them the Counts of Candolle, family of the renowned botanist, and the Barlet, a Lyonnais silk manufacturing family—the thriving vineyard estate of Baulieu gradually fell into a state of disrepair. In 2001, the Guénant family bought the property and immediately





decided to rescue the 350 acres of vineyards. This entailed replanting many of the vines and becoming actively involved in boosting the quality of the wine production at every level. A decade later, the Château Beaulieu vineyards have become the leading winery for the AOC Coteaux d'Aix appellation, producing almost a million bottles of rosé per year. Bérengère Guénant, the daughter of the current owners, heads the operation of the domain.

While reviving the vineyards, Pierre and his wife Nicole also faced the daunting task of renovating the three-story château, which took seven full years of work. "When we arrived, the house was in a complete state of abandonment—*dans son jus*—in its original condition," says

OPPOSITE: The sixteenth-century monastery table and brightly painted nineteenth-century English chairs lend a warm touch to the kitchen.

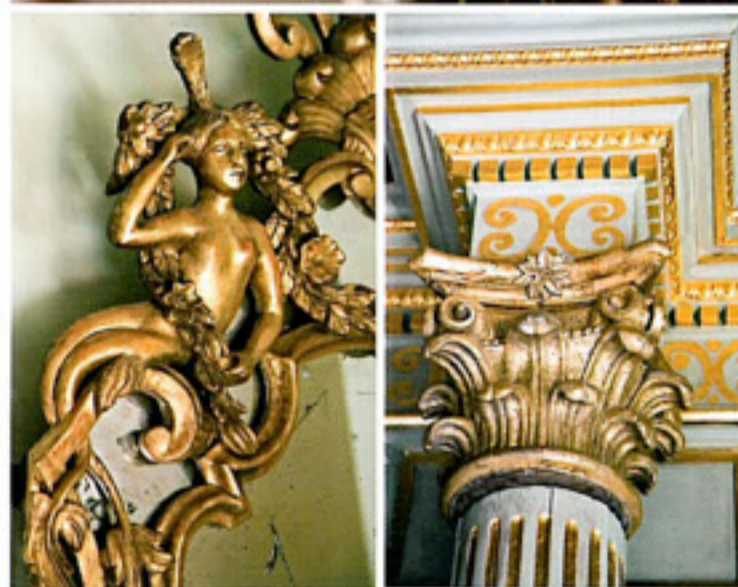
BELOW: Some of the family's antique silver pieces are on display in the kitchen.

RIGHT: Owner Nicole Guénant's collection of English china and crystal.



Pierre Guénant. "There hadn't been any veritable work or modernization here since 1782. The plumbing and electricity dated from the early 1900s. There were huge ugly pipes everywhere."

As the estate had been uninhabited for approximately twenty years, the park was also overrun with weeds and brambles. "You couldn't even see the fountains," says Pierre. "We rebuilt the crenelated wall surrounding the main courtyard." Much to the owners' delight, they discovered that two of the three Roman aqueducts on the property were still intact, as well as an altar dedicated to the Goddess of Springs, which dates back to the Augustan Age. Another surprising find were the two small



cave-like grottoes, built in the fifteenth century, which are lined with volcanic fossils. The surrounding forest, planted with chestnut, pine, cypress, walnut, almond, olive, and plane trees, also includes ten acres of truffle oaks. "Truffles are the pride and joy of Rognes," says Bérengère. "Our neighbor's dog hunts them for us every year."

With the help of architect Guy-Marie Kieffer and a team of artisans, the castle was reconfigured into a twelve-bedroom home that includes a library, a music room, a smoking room, a country-style kitchen, a refurbished glassed-in

ABOVE LEFT: A nineteenth-century Murano glass chandelier, bought by the Guénant family during their frequent trips to Venice.

TOP RIGHT: Detail from the Tuscan marble chimney.

ABOVE CENTER AND RIGHT: Details of the gilded early eighteenth-century décor of the Italianate bedroom.

OPPOSITE: The bedroom pays homage to the castle's former resident, Guillaume de Julien, who gave the estate its present appearance. The prevailing Italian influence ranges from furnishings such as the ornate Sicilian throne armchair to the terrazzo marble flooring, invented in Venice.







OPPOSITE: Another bedroom was created in place of a sitting room, with a Louis XVI-style canopy bed. The rare eighteenth-century "deux pigeons" wallpaper was originally in the ground-floor drawing room of the castle.

ABOVE LEFT: The mirror, canopy bed, and decorative ornaments are all original furnishings found in the Baulieu attic.

ABOVE RIGHT: The drop-leaf crystal chandelier hangs from a painted ceiling, possibly done by one of the castle's former owners, Pierre Robineau de Beaulieu, who arrived in 1754 and was a well-known artist of his era. Some of Robineau's works are on display at the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence.

orangery, and a number of small sitting rooms and parlors. The décor was largely inspired by the style typical of the Louis XVI period and a touch of eighteenth-century Italian splendor.

Among the many steps involved in the long process of bringing the walls back to life, the Guénant family found old painted beams from the seventeenth century, situated both on the ground floor and the antechamber of the first floor. "Of course, we felt obliged to restore them," says Pierre, an art connoisseur who is also a distinguished member of the Commission of Acquisitions at the Louvre.

The sumptuous antique furnishings and museum-quality artwork were carefully selected from a variety of sources. "We knew what we wanted, but it has taken almost ten years," says Pierre Guénant. Essentially, he recounts, about one-tenth of the furnishings was retrieved from the attic of the Villa Baulieu, such as the impressively restored gilded Louis XVI canopy bed, one of many neglected treasures that was salvaged. The rest of the furniture were brought in from the family's collection or purchased while traveling throughout Europe. These unique pieces—an elegant

