

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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# Cultivating a View

A CONTEMPORARY RESIDENCE TAKES  
ROOT IN THE ALEXANDER VALLEY

Architecture by Howard J. Backen, FAIA/Text by Michael Frank  
Photography by Erhard Pfeiffer

“It’s a subtle introduction to a subtle house,” Tom Klein says of the entrance (above) to the Healdsburg, California, residence designed by Backen Gillam Architects for him, his wife, Kate, and their family. **RIGHT:** The living room and kitchen. Slipcover and drapery fabrics, Henry Calvin. Palecek dining chairs.

**M**odesty, in architecture, has nothing to do with size or ambition. A modest house can be clever, vigorous, sensitive, even—sometimes especially—powerful, since little gives a house more impact than an architect’s respect for the place in which he is building.

The home that Howard Backen recently completed for Tom and Kate Klein in the Alexander Valley, in the heart of Northern California’s wine country, belongs to this category of modest house. Backen’s clients have a long history in the valley. Tom Klein’s family has farmed its land since the early 1900s. In 1989 the family diversified





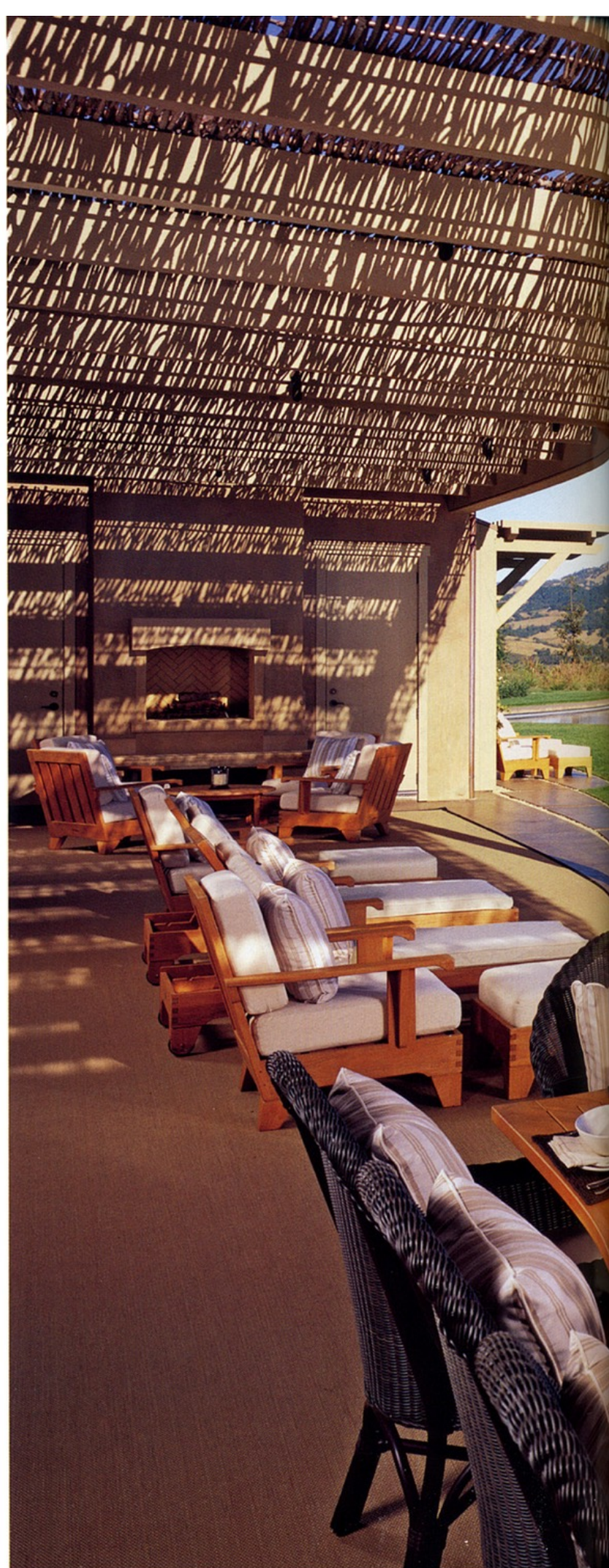


**ABOVE:** From the living room, a 30-foot-long sliding glass doorway opens onto the terrace. **RIGHT:** “The portico off the living room is really the living room extended out,” says architect Howard J. Backen. A trellis of cedar beams and woven willow shades the seating areas.

into grapes by acquiring Rodney Strong Vineyards, which, under Tom Klein’s direction, now has 12 growing sites spread over 952 acres and produces cabernet, merlot, pinot noir, zinfandel, chardonnay and sauvignon blanc varieties.

When the Kleins, whose primary residence is in San Francisco, decided to build a permanent retreat in the Alexander Valley, their first consideration was how such a house would engage with the land. They consulted Backen, who has a lively practice in Napa County and now lives in Napa Valley himself (see *Architectural Digest*, September 2004), because they knew that his sensibility would be simpatico with theirs. “We weren’t looking for some re-created Tuscan village,” says Kate Klein. “We wanted a California ranch house, but translated into this century.”

Since they knew the house would often be used by their extended, and close-knit, family, the Kleins needed a place that could accommodate several couples or families at once, yet be intimate and comfortable enough for Tom Klein to stay in alone when he was at the vineyard on business. The parents of two active boys (ages 13 and 10), the Kleins wanted a wide, clear lawn that could serve as a playing field. And, critically, they wanted the house to be as open as possible to its striking landscape and views.







“We weren’t looking for some re-created Tuscan village. We wanted

“We faced the house east because of the views,” Backen says, “but also because the west can be blisteringly hot. The west side, therefore, is the approach. It has more trees, more shade and an understated profile that draws you in.”

Backen’s long, low silhouette, while being a kindness to the ridge on which the house was carefully sited, allowed him to make several interesting architectural gestures. “I often try to get the long side of the living room to be able to open up, as here,” he explains. “We have a 30-foot opening, with a lift-and-slide window system that allows the room to be entirely accessible to the loggia and the lawn.” Backen went on to flank the living room with a pair of mas-



**RIGHT:** In the couple’s master bedroom, a Jean Mooney oil in the built-in study area echoes the view east to the Mayacamas Mountains. Sham fabric, Larsen. Desk chair, Palecek.

The residence at dusk, from the east lawn. The house sits on a hill in the Alexander's Crown Vineyard, part of Rodney Strong Vineyards, which the Kleins purchased in 1989. "They were looking for a certain level of sophistication in the house," says Backen, who has been designing homes, restaurants and wineries in the area since 1990. "It might be a house in a vineyard, but they didn't want it to feel overly rustic."



## a California ranch house, but translated into this century.”

ter bedrooms; each of these, like the living (or great) room, has its own pyramidal roof, with the scale pulled down in linking transitional spaces. This change in rhythm obviates any danger of the building's seeming monolithic from below; it also helps vary the scale of the interiors.

When it came to materials, Backen remained sensitive to the setting while heeding what he knew about the way the clients lived. "They did not want a barnlike atmosphere," says Backen, who used re-sawn wood, subtle monochromatic stains on the cedar ceilings and cabinetry, neutral-tinted plaster and a chocolate-brown cement floor, a material that runs through the living room and continues out onto the loggia. The effect is contemporary, cool and practical.

There are, in addition, several softening touches. Backen is very fond of willow matting because of the way it filters light,

casts a pleasing pattern in shadow and suggests a rustic, handmade feeling. The custom-woven covering shades the loggia and provides privacy around patios. Since the living area, dining area and kitchen are all contained within one open run, Backen specified a steel range hood whose warm patina echoes the same material used for a fire surround at the other end of the room.

And then there are the interiors. "We conceive the interior decoration along with the architecture, right from the beginning," says Backen, who was assisted on the project by his in-house designer, April Powers, and principal architect, Loren Kroeger. "Kate Klein was a rare client who could take in all that information early on."

Kate Klein, for her part, says, "We wanted the house to be comfortable, obviously, and refined without being fussy. We wanted it to feel specific yet elastic

enough that everyone in the extended family could feel at home there." Backen and Powers anchored the great room with a seating area that could accommodate eight adults. They used sisal rugs, clean white upholstery fabrics and dark wood or rattan furniture that is a combination of the old (a workbench used as a buffet) and the new (dining table, chairs). Paintings by local artists and maps of the area personalize the space.

The house seems to be one of those rare collaborations where the architect and the clients were in perfect sync with one another—and with the setting as well. "It's my sense and my hope," says Tom Klein, "that as the landscaping matures, the house will virtually disappear. It will be known by the people who need to know it. The Alexander Valley is a simply wonderful place, and we wanted to do our part to keep it that way." □