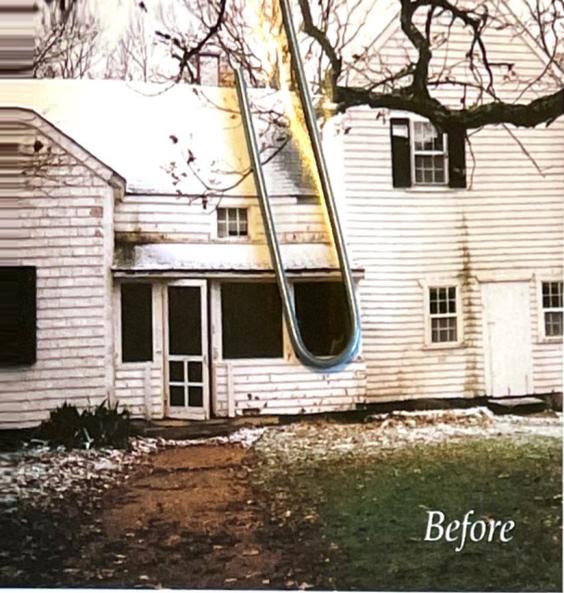


Architectural Digest
February 1993
pp. 194-202



BEFORE AND IN PROGRESS PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY KARIN BLAKE

"I wanted to restore it to its original shape," says Karin Blake (below) of Fair Oaks Farm, her 200-year-old property on Martha's Vineyard. "It's the feeling of history that I love." ABOVE: When Blake found the house, a porch had been added, a chimney was in ruins and the structure had fallen into disrepair.

RIGHT: The designer removed the porch addition, reshingled the roof and re-created the facade and the interior. Stone walls surround the house, which was built in the mid-18th century as part of a gentleman's horse farm.



Fair Oaks Farm Reborn

A Run-down Martha's Vineyard Property Shines Again

INTERIOR DESIGN BY KARIN BLAKE
TEXT BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA
AFTER PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN VAUGHAN

"THEY SAY YOU CAN'T go home again, but you can."

Designer Karin Blake is talking about her childhood in New England. She relishes the memories of the changing seasons, the verdant landscape dotted with farmhouses, and the plain, hearty food.

For more than two decades she has lived in the celebrity-crowded beach community of Malibu (see *Architectural Digest*, May 1992). But each summer she returns to the East. Five years

ago she bought Fair Oaks Farm, an eighteenth-century property on Martha's Vineyard, and restored it with all the passion she feels for the area.

"The East is something that is very much a part of me," she says. "I was born on Cape Cod, but I spent a lot of time sailing to the Vineyard as a child and knew it well. The Vineyard is what the Cape was thirty or forty years ago. You don't see McDonald's or shopping malls there. You go back in time.

"The front half of the house is over two hundred years old."

"Especially in the town I live in," she continues. "It has a historical society, and there are restrictions as to what you can build. For example, the walls around my farmhouse are historic and you can't move them."

There were plenty of walls that the designer did move in returning the house to something resembling its dignified origins. "This was a gentleman's horse farm," she explains. "The front half of the house is over two hundred years old. The back half and the upstairs were built in 1904.

"It was in terrible condition. People had gone in and mutilated and bastardized the interior by sticking in pantries and closets where they

didn't belong," she recalls. "An awful porch had been attached."

And worse.

Blake began by removing the offending porch and having the roof reshingled. One of the chimneys was about to collapse and was torn down. The house had to be rewired and mostly replumbed. The designer replaced half of the windows and removed all of the shutters.

Although there is a proper entrance hall, it is a summer house, and visitors tend to enter by way of the kitchen and congregate there. "The kitchen is my favorite room," says Blake. It was also her biggest challenge—an awkwardly proportioned space that she



"Many of the rooms had been divided," says Blake, who saw the farm as a setting for her folk art and American antiques. ABOVE: The west-facing living room before the renovation.



ABOVE: A painted fan shutter hangs over the fireplace in the west-facing living room, which Blake conceived as a "simple and comfortable" space with a painted wide-plank floor and white walls. "Since the room gets full sun later in the day, it has become our afternoon or evening sitting room," she says. Sanderson club chair fabric. Wing chair stripe is from Henry Calvin Fabrics.



made lighter and more open with French doors and three screen doors that stand open to let in the fragrant island breezes. "I took off the aluminum screen doors and the storm doors and added board-and-batten shuttered doors and screen doors that I designed and had custom made," she explains.

"I wanted a large country kitchen," Blake remarks. So she gutted, refloored and reconfigured the room to double its dimensions. She moved the old soapstone sink, which is some four feet long, to make room for the French doors. "I spent a lot of time stripping it to get the old black paint off. Then I put in a commercial faucet

ABOVE: The east-facing living room was completely reworked. A heater stands before a wall that concealed the room's original fireplace, which was uncovered during the project.



LEFT: "The floor, fireplace, walls, ceilings and windows all had to have major work," the designer recalls. "Now it's our morning room."



ABOVE: A 19th-century American portrait, from Sotheby's, is set beside an 18th-century-style tin lantern on the mantel. A circa 1850 American corner cupboard with its original glass holds English majolica. The blanket chest is 19th century. At right is a hickory armchair. As elsewhere, the wide-plank floor was painted.

that could reach both ends," she says. "For the way I cook, a large sink is the only thing I'm interested in. You can't get a lobster pot in a regular sink."

A barn on the other side of the wall prevented the designer from installing a window over the sink. She found a solution in an 1850 English plate rack. "It frames the sink as a window would. I love reaching for dishes rather than opening cabinets."

For storage, Blake built a pantry, and she now uses a circa 1870 standing cupboard to showcase the white English ironstone china she has collected from dealers on the Cape and the Vineyard over the years. It was purchased from Richard Mulligan in

Los Angeles, who shortened it to accommodate the low ceilings of the New England architecture.

Mulligan was also the source of the spare iron chandelier and the assembled set of ladderback chairs in various muted colors. The scrub-top drop-leaf table has a nineteenth-century base that retains its paint.

Blake conjures a typical setting at mealtimes. "The all-white dishes on the painted table with a vase of white cosmos look stark and beautiful, very pure." Thoughtfully, she notes, "That's something you see in most of the houses I do. The connection is simplicity and clean lines."

The light in New England is softer

and grayer than in California, and Blake indulged in plain, even "primitive," furnishings that wouldn't work in her Malibu house. "This is a look that I love," she says, "but it's too naive and too simple for most California architecture."

The floors downstairs were painted either gray or green, alternating from room to room like a grand checkerboard. The entrance hall leads to two living rooms, one facing east, the other facing west. Blake uses the east-facing room in the mornings. It had to be completely gutted, but there was one benefit. "In taking out a wall, we discovered a fireplace," she says. Peter Marzbanian, the contractor who



ABOVE: Midway through the restoration, French doors opening to the backyard were installed in the kitchen—Blake's favorite room.

RIGHT: The designer's collection of circa 1840–1920 English ironstone china is arrayed in a circa 1870 American cupboard that had to be cut down to fit in the low-ceilinged room. The scrub-top drop-leaf table is 19th century.





ABOVE: The dining room before the renovation. All the wiring in the house had to be redone and part of the plumbing system replaced. The dining room opens to seven rooms.

worked on the project, duplicated the design of the existing mantel in the west living room. Blake also filled in a missing wall, adding the original door, which she found in the cellar.

The east living room feels like a bright dawn—the sofa is slipcovered in a white fabric printed with cabbage roses; a chair is adorned with a pink damask. “The green cupboard is from around 1850, so the glass is all wavy. It was the perfect size for the room,” says Blake. A hickory chair with a woven bark seat is from the early twentieth century. She explains that this is a room where people often gather to talk.

In contrast, the west-facing living

room is more formal and the tones more somber. A blue-painted wood bin holds an ample supply of logs for the fire. The chairs are covered with dense floral patterns or blue-and-white stripes. “This is where people go to be separate, to read and be quiet,” says Blake.

Two small rooms are adjacent to each living room, but rather than remove walls and open up the spaces, Blake preserved the original arrangement. “I wanted to have as authentic a farmhouse as I could get,” she says. One of the rooms has been converted into a child’s bedroom, the other into an office.

All of these rooms adjoin the din-



ABOVE: “I copied the Shaker practice of hanging the dining chairs on the wall to keep the room simple,” explains Blake. The chairs are from the 19th century, as is the firkin. The fish weathervane is late 19th century.



Before

ABOVE: A heater in the dining room was formerly attached to one of the fireplaces. On the table is the iron chandelier for the kitchen.

ing room at the center of the house. "Eight doors open onto it directly," Blake points out, laughing at what now seems an eccentric, if venerable, layout. A pair of eighteenth-century shoe-foot benches flank an American sawbuck table. Over the mid-nineteenth-century dry sink hangs an architectural fan, which was used as a shutter in an older house. Blake collects them as accents in this and other rooms. To keep the space open and simple, she borrowed from the Shaker tradition and hung the chairs on the wall.

Upstairs, the designer planned dramatic renovations. Two rooms were combined to create the master bedroom. The chimneys from the two living rooms stand like brick pillars at either end. The lines of the roof billow upward like enormous sails, supported by rough wood beams brought from the mainland. They seem tethered to a quirky tin chandelier.

There is a personal history associated with the rope bed, which has four carved posts and finials; it belonged to Blake's grandmother, and the designer herself was born in it. "It's from the 1820s and is more ornate than the furniture I usually have," she confesses. Blake added electricity, as



RIGHT: A pair of 18th-century shoe-foot benches join an American sawbuck table in the dining room. Below the painted fan shutter is a dry sink from the mid-19th century.





well as new windows, sills and a closet, to the room. The only blinds in the house are on the window beside the bed. "You don't have to have window treatments when you're in the middle of the woods," she says.

What was once a guest bedroom was turned into the master bath. A closet became the shower, and an old pedestal sink was installed. The mid-nineteenth-century house cupboard in the room is from the designer's collection of American folk art.

Karin Blake sighs with appreciation for her island retreat. "It's hard to find a combination of forest, ocean and farm in one area on a quiet country road," she says. "Some people go to a spa. I come to this old farmhouse. You can stay up all night reading because you have no appointments in the morning. There are wonderful beaches where you can walk for miles without seeing anyone. Solitude is very important to me. This is where I come to unwind." □

ABOVE: "The master bedroom was originally two attic rooms," says Blake. "I combined them to create one large room. We had to put in beams for support and add new windows."

BELOW: The master bedroom is now an open space that reflects the roofline. A Shaker firkin is at the end of the 1820s carved four-poster, which belonged to Blake's grandmother. The early American chandelier has its original paint, as does the American rocker in foreground. Floral fabric on the bed and chairs is from Ralph Lauren.

