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Romancing the Stone

By Hunter Drohojowska-Philp
April 15, 2009 | 1:40 a.m.

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Villa by John Saladino
Frances Lincoln Publishers,
March 2009, \$95

I want to be Betty. Betty not only earned a dedication in the front of John Saladino's book, *Villa*, she actually gets to live in the villa itself. This is the Villa di Lemma that Mr. Saladino bought and renovated in the hills of Santa Barbara, a place of such paradisiacal appeal that I am willing to ask Mr. Saladino if he needs an additional life partner in case Betty takes ill or needs to be out of town.



I haven't discussed this with my husband, but once he sees photographs of the villa nestled among olive trees, with a reflecting pool and terrace offering views of the Pacific Ocean, he could hardly object. In fact, he'll want to live there, too. There is plenty of room. The place has five bedrooms, spacious grounds and an agave terrace. We might not run into Mr. Saladino or Betty for days on end. In any case, they don't mind entertaining. The book includes their own enticing recipes—lobster carpaccio with shaved fennel salad!—but, while they are prepared for company, things must eventually get awkward. What guest would ever want to leave?

The villa became something of an obsession for Saladino, who first saw the stone ruin in 1985, acquired it in 2001, and then spent four years rebuilding it and restoring the gardens. A Yale-educated architect who has designed a number of grand houses, Saladino admits, "It was one of the most all-encompassing projects I have ever undertaken." Like any artist pleased with his work, he wants it to be seen. In the book's sections on architecture, interiors, landscape and entertaining, Saladino shares his own process of discovery and resolution, and includes his renderings of architectural plans on translucent vellum. Some of the gorgeous photographs are infrared, which lends them a moody, spectral quality. Indeed, *Villa* is a publication of such heft and glory that it deserves the exhausted adjective "lavish."

An American of Italian heritage, Saladino says he was viscerally enthralled by the 17th-century Italian-style stone walls and tile roofs. He liked the villa's mix of

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grandeur and modesty. He decided to respect add elements of 21st-century comfort and technology. For the landscaping, he looked to the classically composed paintings of Poussin and Claude Lorrain. Soon, however, he recognized that "[e] very time you reach for a dream, reality can drag you back." Still, he clearly relished the challenge.

Originally built by Wallace Frost, an architect who had spent part of the 1920s in Italy, the villa was a wreck by the time Saladino bought it. He writes a compelling account of closing cracked walls, finding 14,000 antique tiles for the roof and threading electrical conduits through the load-bearing stone walls (three feet thick at the base and narrowing at the top). It took six men an entire year to sandblast through the peach and coral colors desecrating those exquisitely exposed walls, which are the soul of the villa. Saladino's design decisions never compete or distract from their soothing presence.

The rooms feature exposed beams, carved dark wood furnishings, warm velvet or crisp linen upholstery, muted patterned carpets and vases overflowing with white roses and sage. A Cy Twombly painting hangs in the living room. Even the dining room chandelier is spare and lyrical. Only in Saladino's own bedroom did he give in to what he calls "my most extravagant theatrical inclinations." That can happen if you have a Napoleonic bed.

Betty's bedroom is cozier, and Saladino thoughtfully installed extra heating units under the bathroom floor so that her antique marble bathtub will never be cold. (Sigh!) Each of the three upstairs bedrooms is soothing, quiet, and light. Since I still have not met Saladino or Betty, I must be content with the Primavera bedroom. The tiny former servant's quarters has a rough, angled ceiling with a skylight and, as important, a shelf overflowing with books to be read. Books like *Villa*. Make room, Betty.

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