

Country Style Elegance

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Welcome to a privileged insight into the MBA 2005 National Award winning prestigious Upper Hunter country estate home which our readers first glimpsed on the cover of Edition 14. The owners have opened their doors to showcase their home which will no doubt inspire and amaze. ►



Living along the long and winding driveway lined with stately Poplar trees throughout a vineyard you look at the hill above and glimpse “Winbirra”, a Denman estate residence which has come of age, as it sits perfectly into the landscape, as it was always meant to do.

Today the residence is surrounded by superb landscaped gardens, manicured lawns and commands centre stage over the picturesque valley views and has become a landmark property in the district.

In 1995 the city dwelling couple decided to find a place in the country and after much searching found just the right property near Denman. The land consisted of three titles comprising three old dairy farms, which no one had farmed for years and a working stone quarry. Also, there were two existing cottages and three hay sheds on the farm.

Owner Diane Quayle said, “We decided to call the property “Winbirra Estate” and set about creating the wonderful place it is today with the help of our business partner.”

Since acquiring the estate in 1996 the owners, John and Diane Quayle, have embarked on a journey of love to create one of the most outstanding rural properties in the region.

“We both grew up in the country, originally coming from the town of Manilla, some 45 kilometres northwest of Tamworth. We married 43 years ago and moved to Sydney so John could play football,” recalled Diane.

John began playing football with Manilla Rugby League Club as a boy, playing all his junior football with the local team.

He joined Eastern Suburbs Roosters in 1968 and in 1972 moved to the Parramatta Eels where he represented NSW and Australia before becoming Chief Executive of the Australian and NSW Leagues. John went on to be a part of the Sydney Olympic Games where he was in charge of all the Precincts and Venue operations. He then formed a business consulting company with two friends from SOCOG specialising in sport and the Olympic movement where he has spent the last ten years working internationally.

“We always thought we would come back to the country one day but John’s career, our two children Jason and Megan and an interesting life put that on hold for a number of years,” said Diane.

“We had a couple of homes in our early years at Maroubra before we built a new home at South Coogee which I enjoyed planning and decorating. We then moved to Centennial Park into a beautiful old Federation home which was so wonderful to decorate.

“In 1988 I purchased a beauty salon called “A Touch of Genius” at Maroubra Junction and ran it for fifteen years until it was acquired by my daughter.

The Quayles later sold their home in Centennial Park and decided to downsize purchasing a terrace home in Paddington. Diane said they had the terrace redesigned and she had great pleasure in decorating the entire place again. “We enjoyed living in Paddington Street and would commute up to the farm every chance we could.” ►





By now one of the original cottages at Denman had been decorated in true country-cottage style, a credit to Diane's creative flair. Home-style decorating magazines were a constant source of inspiration for Diane who over the years collected an ever-expanding scrapbook of decorating articles and images which played an important part in her final decorating choices. She particular loved the English Country publications and the French country style trend of decorating. These were ideas she wanted to use in every one of her homes. Even whilst living a full life in Sydney the couple always dreamt of one day returning to their country roots and living in a traditional country home which exuded elegance yet was completely liveable – a place where everyone could relax and feel right at home.

The property by now was being planted out and was bordered by 3500 olive trees along a 2.5km stretch of the Hunter River frontage with 160 acres of grapevines. Today 120 head of breeding Angus graze on "Winbirra".

"We had often admired a home when we passed through Broke that had been built by Stibbard Homes of Singleton and after meeting with David Stibbard we contracted them in 2002 to build a club house near the tennis court where John enjoys his Monday nights playing with a group of local friends," explained Diane. This was to be the start of our long and successful relationship with Stibbards and their designer Neil Albert.

"We confidently asked Neil to design us the beautiful dream country home we now live in as he knew exactly what we were

after – a warm country home that our grandchildren can use and one where you are not afraid if a pet jumps on the furniture and leaves paw prints – namely Zoe, the border collie; Estee, the gorgeous toy poodle and Bella and Jasper the two cats."

Stibbard Homes were faced with the challenge of using construction methods to manage the effects of potential future undermining. Photographs of the building stages of the homestead give the true picture of the residence's location which required the reshaping of the rocky hill top on which the foundations were laid. Today with the home surrounded by established gardens you could not imagine the challenge ahead of the Stibbard team when starting out on the building project.

Soon after the work was underway on the main residence, in 2003, the Quayle's moved permanently to live on site in their renovated cottage. Diane said she still has a particular fondness for that little cottage as she feels she really left her mark and style on the place after knocking a wall out, polishing all the floor boards and adding verandahs. Everyone loved it and we had so much enjoyment out of it.

After an initial consultation with an interior designer who had different thoughts to Diane, she decided to take on the challenge of being the interior designer herself and follow her instincts. "I decided to choose all the paint colours and do all the decorating myself realising it was a massive task because the house was so large, but I loved every minute of it," said Diane. ►



"I had my scrapbook for reference and Samantha Stibbard was such a great help with so many of the supply/install contacts. When the house was almost finished I was very stressed because I had purchase a lot of new furniture and soft furnishings and didn't know it if was all going to work but it all came together beautifully.

"Throughout the building project Neil Albert was like my 'security blanket' as he calmly understood what I wanted in the building of the home – it had to be liveable yet at the same time a traditional country home."

"I have used a lot of macro suede fabrics throughout the lounge furniture that is easy to maintain even though the colours are off white or French greys. A damp cloth will wipe away evidence that the dog or cat had curled up on a lounge."

The final floor plan is of a sprawling one-level residence with a verandah across the front side with views over the Hunter River and Great Dividing Range, rolling lawns and a olive grove which is now well established and trimmed to form a neat hedge-like border around the property perimeter.

High hedging now surrounds the main courtyard entrance to the residence which is graced by a number of stately Plane Trees which provide summer shade and being deciduous allow the benefit of northern sunshine in the winter.

There is a water feature at the entrance to a terraced walkway which is framed by white standard iceberg roses and leads to the commanding columned entrance porch.

It seems natural to gravitate to the sliding glass kitchen doorway rather than knock on the impressive front door.

The typically French-style timber kitchen is a dedicated homemaker's dream.

The flooring chosen for the majority of the rooms was Tallowood, which over the years has matured and changed colour from the original light honey shade to a deeper, richer colour which enhances the furniture choices made by the owner.

The kitchen features cream timber work, white marble bench tops, ornate timber trim, a French double sink and a blue and white tiled feature wall created to Diane's specifications and recessed into an alcove above the hotplates. The tiled feature is of a country theme; chickens, ducks, cows, vines and olive trees. Diane's prized collection of blue and white china is showcased in a matching glass door dresser.

The fourteen-seater restored antique timber kitchen table positioned just off the informal living space is perfect for casual meal times with the family. You can well image a large group of people sitting around the table enjoying meals of country-style Hunter produce, a glass of "Winbirra" wine and great conversation.

The room features a sandstone chimney with a double-sided wood fireplace. The stunning feature of this living area is the glass walled conservatory at the end of the kitchen with a soaring timber ceiling (featured on the cover of Ed 14).

This room commands a stunning uninterrupted view of the vineyard below, the olive grove, pool area to one side, the home garden and beyond to the hills framing Denman Village. ►



The inspiration for the colour theme came from the fabric Diane chose for the cushions on the cream macro suede lounges. They have an off white background with lavender flowers and were made by a lady in Sydney who edged them with a tiny pom pom trim. Mauve cushions were added to the setting where a wooden table is surrounded by chairs loosely covered in a French grey check material. This stunning room is a popular retreat for everyone who visits the home. "At the time I was sourcing French inspired furniture and décor pieces it wasn't the trend and I had lots of difficulty finding what I wanted. Nowadays the style is very popular and much easier to buy locally," said Diane.

In a side wing off the kitchen is a cellar, home study, the master bedroom suite and tastefully tiled en suite and laundry leading to the double garage with internal access.

The main formal lounge and dining room is a stunning space; a massive antique mirror overhangs a superb marble fireplace surround. The fitted parquet flooring chosen by Diane is simply spectacular.

"I was on a mission to find the right flooring for this room of the house and discovered uniquely designed parquetry flooring and realised the cost really wasn't in the budget. However, after a little convincing I was given permission to go ahead and order – the end result was well worth the effort giving the room that special touch of luxury," she said.

The commanding room has hosted many Easter and Christmas family celebration dinners, occasions that Diane enjoys especially laying the table with all the best china, cutlery and wine glasses. "Once I know the table is set I feel I am ready for the guests – the food is the easy part as John and I share the cooking and love to serve traditional country food especially at Christmas time," she said. On one occasion the couple hosted a family reunion for seventy to a formal sit down celebratory dinner in the room.

Along the corridor is the guest sleeping area with three double sized bedrooms, all spectacularly decorated in an individual style with private en suites and views through full length windows.

The annexe room next door is a quiet sitting room again with views and fitted with comfortable lounges. A spectacular feature of this room is the wall mosaic commissioned from Adrian of Mosaic Culture at Leichhardt.

"We sent him some photos of the property depicting the four seasons of the vines," said Diane. "It was designed then created in Jordan and Egypt with most of the marble originating from Italy. The blue marble for the sky and mountains was sourced from Turkey. To his credit Adrian put a lot of work into getting the colours right."

The mural arrived as one complete piece weighing 260kg and was fitted into a specially designed cavity so it sits flush into the wall and looks absolutely stunning as a featured art piece. ►





Above the underground cellar is a little stone house built by two young stonemasons from Cessnock. They used stone that had come out of the footings when the house was being built. Initially, the building had been intended as a garden shed however John decided it would be nicer if Diane used it as her art studio.

"When the boys were building the stone house they placed a traditional bunch of gumleaf in the gables for luck before the roof was put into place and discreetly etched the words "Gibbergunyah" into the stone meaning aboriginal for "Stone hut".

Diane has added her personal touches to the studio which commands a picture perfect view over the garden down to the olive grove. The walls are decorated with her own works which she paints at her local weekly art class. "It feels so good to be lost in my painting for hours in this peaceful studio," she says.

"I drew a fine line picture of my art studio surrounded by the garden which we have used as the label on the wine we make just for ourselves." The majority of the grape vintage is sold under contract to local and other wine makers.

The parks and rock gardens were designed by John and built by the estate staff recycling rock from the property. The gravel roads and garden paths around the house were crushed from Winbirra's own stone. ►



The house gardens were designed by Michael Bligh, a renowned garden designer from Goulburn and the Quayle's say they were fortunate to find the services of Dwight Geeland from Singleton who virtually took a full year to complete all concepts of the landscaping including the house steps, sandstone walls and brick paving.

The house is surrounded by Haddonstone pillars and pavers on all the verandahs and around the pool. When on a search for notable garden ornaments Diane uncovered two beautiful marble sphinxes from Anthony Healy Antiques in Sydney. They take pride of place on the steps leading up to the front verandah.

The third contract given to Stibbard Homes was the building of a pool cabana to house a completely mosaic tiled steam room, bathroom, gymnasium and lounge area which is sited alongside the spectacular in ground wet edged swimming pool and terrace area at the side of the home.

As the house progressed John decided to build an underground cellar modelled from his trips to Europe and working in Greece. Outside the brick paved semi circular area has a pizza oven and pit-style hot plate and grill built into the hillside with a grapevine covered pergola where you can sit and enjoy the views of the olive grove below and it is not difficult to image you could be somewhere in Europe.



There is no doubt when seeing John at work in the garden with his workers that he is at his happiest; creating a picturesque setting around the property. "Neither of us misses our exciting and committed lives living in Sydney and just enjoy the quiet and the colours of the seasonal changes and working together in further developments of the property," said Diane.

Finally the couple feel they have come back home!

Since moving to Denman permanently both John and Diane have fallen in love with "their little village" and the country people that have become friends. "I have joined the Red Cross with a group of ladies who do hand care at the Merton Court Aged Care Centre at Denman.

"This is a very rewarding service and so appreciated by the ladies and the men who enjoy a manicure and the time we spend personally with them," said Diane.

On the completion of "Winbirra", Stibbard Homes won the 2005 National Master Builders Australia Award for their workmanship and the 2005 National Residential Master Builder. The judges were overwhelmed by the grandeur of this home and its setting. Judges said the quality of the construction well and truly matched expectations for such a prestigious home. Having completed four building projects for the client the company has formed a unique lifelong association based on service and trust.

In the years to come there is no doubt that "Winbirra" will provide many happy times for its owners and all those who pass through their doors. 🏡



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