

A LIFE IN LAVENDER

When the rat race palled, they swapped city life for a fragrant French-style farmhouse in the Marlborough countryside

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THESE PAGES This breathtaking purple field provides the perfect setting for Ruth and Barry Struthers' home just out of Blenheim; once a flat sheep paddock, it was contoured to mimic the rolling fields of France and planted in seven different types of lavender to ensure the purple cloak remains in bloom for several months of the year; Ruth and Barry harvest the lavender to make products to sell in their gift shop.



THIS PAGE (row by row, from left) Barry and Ruth Struthers; the scent of lavender is released whenever a hand brushes the plants. The couple sell some of their French Fields products from the Stone Cottage Shop. The weathervane was a gift to Ruth from Barry and came with the couple from their previous home. Claude the Citroën 2CV is Barry's pride and joy; he bought it in Wales and shipped it home six years ago. The Romanian cart was designed to be pulled by dogs. A shady spot among the lavender. Pétanque is a favourite pastime for guests. Early morning in the fields.

OPPOSITE As morning light washes over the lavender, Barry, still in his pyjamas, throws open the Juliet balcony shutters. >

THIS PAGE Ruth lays the table for breakfast in the courtyard, serving home-made compote, croissants, omelettes and fresh juice; it's quite a change from the rushed toast and honey with which she and Barry once started each day. **OPPOSITE** (from top) The courtyard is pivotal to family living in France and is central in this home. Ruth and Barry's daughter Jessica (in the hat) eats breakfast under the vines with guests, enjoying the shadowed blue backdrop of the Richmond Range.



“We were trying really hard not to make it look like a new house. A home should look as if people have done things to it forever”



WHEN THE OLIVE crop is ready in Marlborough's winter months, Ruth and Barry Struthers join forces with their neighbours to work, eat, drink and celebrate the harvest together. And later, as summer turns the soft waves of lavender that surround their property – poetically named French Fields – into a purple sea, visiting family help to cut it back, infusing the air with its fragrance.

For Ruth and Barry, working days end with wine and food taken under a grapevine canopy in front of their French farmhouse, or in an upstairs clawfoot bathtub overlooking a rolling lavender horizon.

It's an idyllic existence a world away from their hectic former lives in Timaru, where he was a dentist and she a teacher. They had both reached the point where they knew something had to give. And when Barry asked Ruth what she would like to do, given the chance, she proposed a Provençal-style bed and breakfast in a paddock of lavender. >





“You are suddenly given a picture and you dare to speak it out loud,” she says. “It was quite spiritual. I just stopped and thought, ‘What would I love to do?’ It was that ‘nothing to lose’ feeling.”

Five years on, French Fields, a former sheep paddock just out of Blenheim, is beyond anything this Christian couple could have imagined. “We know we have been blessed.”

With its flat front facade, deep walls and tall ceilings capped by terracotta tiles, the home is quintessentially Provençal in style. Inside, uneven beams are exposed in the kitchen ceiling and staircases are steep. Small windows and Juliet balconies frame a borrowed landscape of vineyards, fig orchard and distant bruised hills.

Next to the main house is the “petite maison” for guests and both look down on a pool and an outdoor courtyard and table, key to rural French life.

The couple report that their builder dealt cheerfully with the challenges of the atypical build, including windows opening inwards, with working shutters beyond, off-centre chimneys and 200-year-old imported oak barn doors for the entranceway. >

THIS PAGE Ruth and Barry commissioned this replica of an old French cabinet after carrying around a photo of the original for years; a Marlborough artisan made it and Barry then applied layers of paint to age it.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) The kitchen table was to be a picnic table but, after using it inside during the build, the couple couldn’t part with it; the holes in the top are the perfect places for grandson Liam to hide his crusts, says Ruth. Lavender hanging to dry among the colanders and pans. Willow food covers are used for outdoor entertaining. This arrangement reproduces a scene in a favourite painting: “I couldn’t afford the painting so I created it with family treasures,” says Ruth.





Meanwhile the plasterer, who was supposed to be giving a rustic finish to the inside walls, was instead creating “hectic” seagull swoops, says Ruth. “So at night Barry and I put headlights on and stood up on ladders to frantically sand it back before he came back the next day. We had to un-seagull all the seagulls.”

They loved every moment of the build, including bashing the pristine recycled floorboards with snow chains. “We were trying really hard not to make it look like a new house,” says Ruth. “A home should look as if people have done things to it forever.”

Ruth reports that Barry would come home from work, apply texture to brickwork or put up roof tiles until dark, then rise at 6am “to play some more” before going back to his real job. “We had a fantastic time. We say this was our alternative to golf and bridge. Our attitude was, ‘This is going to be an adventure.’”

The interior has everything you would expect of a house with chain-smashed floorboards, mismatched window paint and hastily

sanded walls. Old, flaking blue French shutters hang on the living room wall and open to reveal a television. They’re beautiful, functional and also symbolic in that they come from the French town of Lille, which happens to be the name of Ruth’s mother.

The vanity top in one bathroom was once a Balinese rice pounder and an old armoire storage cupboard in the petite maison holds an entertainment system. >

THESE PAGES (clockwise from far left) The conservatory opens to the courtyard and links to the farmhouse kitchen. The entrance doubles as a formal dining hall, the perfect setting for a Bastille Day party: “Barry put barricades in the driveway then lit them, so guests, complete with berets and moustaches, had to come through the barricades to get to the party.” A wine barrel stuffed with ‘Grosso’ lavender, the traditional French variety. Ruth’s Uncle Hector made the chair – now placed near the hall bookshelves – for Ruth’s mother 70 years ago. French shutters from Lille hide the television in the living room.

THESE PAGES (clockwise from below) The French theme continues in the petite maison. Barry and Ruth upholstered the petite maison bedhead themselves, using toile fabric depicting a traditional French scene. Although the home is rich with soft Provençal colours, “we saved the Paris glamour for the bathroom,” says Ruth. The armoire in the master bedroom was found at World House furniture shop, just a few minutes from French Fields: “It was dangerously close to home,” says Ruth.



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Barry says the use of old things that retain a sense of family history – often for purposes other than originally intended – is a fundamental part of Provençal style. “Nothing feels new in the south of France.”

Much of the furniture that wasn’t naturally worn has been distressed with paint tricks and sandpaper to look that way. Other pieces have been handed down or collected during their 30 years in Timaru or discovered on trips to Europe. When the decision to build coincided with the impending marriage of one of their sons in the UK, Ruth and Barry took the opportunity to travel through Provence for two weeks, filling a weed sack with embroidered quilts, old spoons, taps, door handles and small pieces of furniture.

Stirring a rhubarb and strawberry compote made with fruit harvested that morning, Ruth looks back without regret on a former life in which she would bring home dinners from the boarding school where she worked for rushed meals.

Their new life revolves around evenings lingering with guests and friends under the grapevine and mornings fragrant with the aromas of fresh croissants and drying lavender. Says Ruth: “We know we have been given something special to share.” ■

Q&A

- Best money spent:** On the swimming pool. We thought it was likely to be an expensive accessory, but the very first summer it became the gravitation point for everyone, including the builders. *(Ruth)*
- Best piece of advice received:** Don’t pull up short of the dream. Go the whole distance. *(Barry)*
- Bravest thing we did around the house:** Take on finishing the roof tiles ourselves. Seven metres up is a long way in a northerly wind. *(Barry and Ruth)*
- I can always count on:** Never getting to the end of the day’s job list. It pays to expect that there will always be at least one left for another day and stressing about it helps no one. *(Barry)*
- A quote I often use:** Repeating mistakes doesn’t qualify as experience (Grandpa Struthers). *(Barry)*
- The most important thing to us:** To remind ourselves to enjoy the journey, not just hold out for the destination. *(Ruth)*
- Our happiest day in this house:** A long lunch to celebrate Barry’s 60th birthday, with 30 family and friends and six courses on a long table down the centre of the kitchen. *(Ruth)*
- One thing you must see when you visit:** The Omaka Aviation Heritage Centre. “World class,” say our guests. *(Barry)*
- Ruth and Barry Struthers*

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