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HOUSE & GARDEN

Festive Ideas from Decorators

Flowers for the '90s

Collectors' Classic Rooms



## Holiday Entertaining





# California Suite

One of rock and roll's coolest lawyers, John Branca strikes a traditional chord in Beverly Hills. By Peter Haldeman

Photographs by Oreste Gili Produced by Joyce MacRae





For the Brancas' kitchen, decorator Lynn von Kersting began with 1940s tablecloths from her Los Angeles shop, Indigo Seas, then added old yachting pictures and antique majolica. Details see Resources.





John Branca represents bands like Aerosmith, but there's nothing rock and roll about his house

**I**F HOUSES TELL STORIES, LOS ANGELES HOUSES are Scheherazades. On a corner in Beverly Hills, a photogenic Mediterranean villa presents to the procession of videocam-sprouting Alamo rentals a vast expanse of salmon pink stucco relieved by green shutters and the noirish shadows of oversize palms and banana trees. Despite the presence of a black Jeep in its driveway and the absence of its address from any star map, the place fairly oozes faded glam: the chiaroscuro surface insinuates dimmer recesses concealing, perhaps, the detritus of better times for a movie queen whose hairstyle and wardrobe alone remain undisturbed by the years.

In fact, the house admits an abundance of sunlight, light that saturates pastel shades on the walls and settles on the evidence of a rich and hardly moribund existence—orientalist découpage screens plastered with monkeys and clowns, English horse and dog paintings, Russian and Turkish carpets in mellowed floral and geometric patterns, Indian games tables draped with rich Kashmiri paisleys and brilliant Chinese tassels, heavy Venetian grotto furniture, a bust of Liszt on a Steinway concert grand, and chests lad-

John Branca, left, with his wife, Julie, and daughter, Jessica, in a Rolls-Royce given to him by Michael Jackson. Above: In the living room sofas and chairs from Indigo Seas ring an oversize ottoman used as a coffee table, under the gaze of Franz Liszt. Opposite: An 18th-century Venetian commode holds delftware and a French tureen.





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en with silver boxes, candlesticks, picture frames, seashells, and stacks of books. The imagination veers from actresses in decline to widely traveled expatriates of mysterious nationality.

But heed the Jeep. It hints at another scenario, one that can accommodate a forty-year-old music industry lawyer hunkered down in one of those grotto chairs, his shag haircut damp at the

tips from a late Saturday morning shower, blowing on his coffee and confiding, over the strains of Aerosmith that issue from a sound system no less powerful for being invisible, "My main idea was to put some furniture in it." John Branca's is a tale for our time and place, and it goes like this. He bought his first Elvis album when he was seven; learned keyboards and jammed in garages above the Sunset Strip until, at sixteen, he was slick enough to open for the Doors at the Aquarius Theater; and instead



Chinese pottery and 18th-century chinoiserie chairs, *above*, lend an exotic touch to the dining room. *Left*: A mosaic fountain, vintage florals, and wicker give the garden room an alfresco air. *Opposite*: The bed is draped in linen, a pale pink accent to the chintz curtains and slipcovers. The Portuguese carpet is from Y&B Bolour, L.A.



At first, says Branca,  
“my main idea was to put  
some furniture in the  
house,” but he proved to be  
an avid shopper, especially  
for antiques

of overdosing or taking a Mulholland curve too fast, went on to UCLA, picked up a law degree, and within a few years was representing both Elvis's estate and the Doors. His clients came to include Michael Jackson, who, along with his chimpanzee, Bubbles, was best man at John's wedding to Julie, a shy Stevie Nicks type he met in aerobics class. After the ceremony, performed by Little Richard, John and Julie shacked up in Beverly Hills, had a baby, Jessica, and called a decorator about fixing the place up.

This would be Lynn von Kersting, who was raised on a ranch in Arizona, who put her feet up in “fabulous funny old family houses” in Palm Beach, Paris, and Malibu, and whose efforts on John Branca's behalf provide the occasion for sharing her own L.A. story: Lynn, who used to act, came here to do a play, but then she met Richard Irving, a friend of John's who ran a chic and very successful bakery, and before long

Lynn and Richard had opened the Ivy, a little restaurant with a battered picket fence and plates on the walls and chairs on the ceiling and other suggestions of a fabulous funny old house somewhere between New Mexico and New England, a fairly unusual reference in Los Angeles at the time, and one that everybody loved, so when the Chinese health food restaurant next door lost its lease, Lynn took it over and turned the place into Indigo Seas, a showcase for all the hutches and ivory laces and seashells she had collected, and pretty soon everyone was heading over to Indigo Seas after lunch and Lynn was taking on decorating clients.

“For John we brought in these really cool 1940s tablecloths from the shop and made curtains for the kitchen,” says Lynn over an Ivy lunch of blackened redfish. “Then majolica for the walls and a couple of carved mantels from Savannah to serve as  
*(Continued on page 180)*





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## Despot of Decoration

(Continued from page 144) horrified.

When war broke out in 1939, Beistegui stayed on in France as a neutral with honorary diplomatic status. He had recently acquired the Château de Groussay near Versailles, and its aggrandisement was his answer to the challenge of war. Instead of an architectural gem he could not have touched, Beistegui settled on a nondescript neoclassical house where he could give his folie de grandeur full rein. Hostilities were never allowed to deflect him from his task or interrupt his way of life. His notion of a wartime disaster was a maid who had the impudence to have her hair permed.

Beistegui's transformation of Groussay owes much of its success to the ingenuity and imagination of his architect friend Emilio Terry, whose quirky neoclassicism and sense of theater were rooted in admiration for the eighteenth-century visionary architect Ledoux. Beistegui's astute sense of gigantism found its happiest expression in the chateau library formed out of four rooms on two floors. On one side of this lofty room a pair of faux mahogany staircases spiral past shelf after shelf of morocco-bound books to a gallery just below the ceiling. In the unshelved section of the room, vermilion walls are hung hugger-mugger with smallish old masters interspersed with classical reliefs. The atmosphere of urbane connoisseurship at Groussay is only faintly marred by the shrill carpets Beistegui commissioned from the royal factory in Madrid. I find them garish, his only lapse in taste.

Beistegui acquired few major works of art. For him, as for so many decorators, paintings helped fill a space, evoke a period, or compensate for a lack of ancestry. And although he acquired some important pieces of furniture, these often as not rubbed shoulders with things that were merely meretricious or copies. However, as befitted a man whose fortune came from silver, Beistegui had a superb collection of plate. He had a canny eye for porcelain, preferably monumental in scale. He also had a special penchant for delft tiles, which he used to decorate the interior of one of the more be-

## California Suite

(Continued from page 163) shelves. We painted the walls a funny old blue that was in the background of one of the majolica pitchers and hung some fabulous old yachting and ocean liner pictures. In the dining room I started with Creil plates and these really pretty West Indian engravings of plantation life and a bunch of nineteenth-century toile cushions. It was the same for the living room—I had a lot of toile and papier-mâché trays..."

In their pretty and exotic clutter, the Brancas' rooms have, in Lynn's phrase, "intellectual glamour," a seemingly unstudied and seasoned stylishness undiminished by either the deliberation or the dispatch with which they were assembled. Nearly everything in the house was bought locally, which is one reason Lynn was able to fill 10,000 square feet in three months. Another reason was John Branca, who'd hoped to have the job done in one month and who acquired many of his new belongings before they'd been unloaded from

the trucks behind Indigo Seas.

"The fun part of it was I love to shop," he says. "And Lynn likes to shop. So it was great to go out and buy just about anything you wanted, and if Lynn agreed that it could work, you knew she'd find a way to work it in." It's all, Branca emphasizes, about working it in. His fingers graze the polished burl surface of an *escritoire* in the bedroom: "Here's a very pretty French writing desk, Eighteenth century, original paint. By itself it would be gorgeous, but it's stuck in the middle of a zillion things, which is kind of great."

Late last summer, John Branca negotiated a contract between Sony Music Entertainment and Aerosmith which will make the latter the highest-paid band in rock history. Now and then, in a philosophical mood, he finds his own presence in the middle of a zillion things rather at odds with his rebel roots. "You know, there's this dichotomy," he says. "Here I am with a top decorator and a Corniche that Michael gave me. But then I also drive a Jeep." And then again, as they say in L.A., that's another screenplay. ♣