



Fox Hill

Jon Reiter's simple, French (\$5 million) country house

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PHOTOS ROBBI PENGELLY

Fox Hill, a sprawling European-style home on 12 Wine Country acres, is grand. It's gorgeous, maybe even glorious. With a guesthouse you could live in and a two-story garage, Fox Hill is not market-positioned for first-time buyers. Nonetheless, builder Jon Reiter perceives his project as simple. He insists—despite materials sourced from a virtual United Nations of supply—that at its core, Fox Hill is basic shelter. Surveying the sweep of the buildings and grounds, “basic” isn't the word that springs to mind. It may be that Jon Reiter's yardstick is different from yours. He seems to be calculating from a different rubric. “I just pound the nails,” he says teasingly of his company, Jon Reiter Fine Homes. In truth, Reiter has built 14 multimillion dollar Wine Country homes in the past decade.

This one went on the market in May. Priced at \$4.9 million, it sold to the first person who saw it. Yet, when you look at the project through Reiter's eyes, he's right. Fox Hill is the essence of simple beauty. Almost

all of the building materials are natural, and many of them are old. Ancient doors from France, new Italian windows that speak of the past, a fireplace of archaic Sonoma fieldstone, a facade of rock dug from Montana mountains. The floors are hay-stained concrete, ancient cobblestone and Hungarian white oak reclaimed from retired wine vats. Douglas firs felled for the home's footprint were milled and used for the portico, and rocks found on site were hand-placed into expansive landscape walls.

The house is like Reiter. Strong, with an authenticity that comes from life experience. At 46, he's survived cancer to pursue the fabled seven summits, climbing the highest mountain on each continent despite losing two-thirds of his right lung. A Texas native raised in Healdsburg with nine siblings, he returned to the Lone Star state after Marine Corps service and found work framing houses. There he met his wife, Susan, who's deeply involved in the design process for the projects they build. Smitten, he speaks



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Jon and Susan, partners in love, life, dreams, and designs, inside the great hall at Fox Hill.



Jon puts the same photo of Robert Duvall, in a scene from *Lonesome Dove* in every house he builds.

fondly of her in what seems like every other sentence. He's also proud of Zack, their 21-year-old son, and confesses affectionately that 9-year-old Agustin "runs our life."

This bedrock of family love is evidenced in the homes he builds for other families to cherish. While Fox Hill was something of a gamble, built on spec, Reiter usually builds custom homes for clients with cash-in-hand. It's a uniquely personal process. He and Susan actually take their clients with them to Europe to rummage French salvage yards and Italian quarries, so they can unearth their own treasures. Reiter finds the hands-on experience builds affection for the houses he so wants his clients to appreciate.

"If you look at the great houses of Europe that we're all are so drawn to, it's their simplicity we love," he says. "I always start with the simple idea of building shelter." Fox Hill is a straightforward U-shape—a main living area with a master wing and a children's/guest wing jutting off each end. In the center is a lush lawn quartered with gnarled olive trees, and bordered by an elegant pool plastered in dark hues with a

natural stone surround. From the detached spa, the view from the hilltop reminds you that you're in one of the most scenic places in the world. You're in Wine Country; life is sweet. "This house is all about family and friends, lifestyle and simplicity. That's what they are coming to the country for," Reiter says, acknowledging that this, like almost all the homes he builds, will be the owner's weekend place.

While the design ethic is clean—high, high ceilings and wall-sized windows, with hand-plastered showers absent tile (and troublesome grout) and light fixtures made of plow discs and massive French barn beams—luxuries are tucked in, too: the iPod-activated stereo sound systems in every room; a deep, decadent soaking tub; a seven-burner Lacanche stovetop with warming drawers; a massive Subzero fridge. There's a butler's pantry and an underground stone wine cellar that could table an intimate dinner for eight. The master bedroom has its own fireplace and a closet the size of a studio apartment.

Then there are the outbuildings. The cozy guest cottage has one bedroom and a



full bath. At 840 square feet, it feels like an intimate escape from the contrasting scale of the main building. Its great room has a bucolic, airy ambience with a fireplace that makes you want to pick up a fat book. Pickled-cedar shelving and a very retro (and very pricey) Bill Chill refrigerator gives the place humble charm. All of the doors in the cottage once hung in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Outside, the fox for whom the estate was named shambles at the perimeter, watchful and curious.

The two-story, six-bay, 2,400-square-foot structure meant for cars can hardly be expected to answer to the plebeian word "garage." Reiter says the lower level, with its separate driveway, could easily be converted into a gym if the new owner doesn't happen to have a fleet of transportation. The singular nod to this building's lowly purpose? It's the one place on the property you'll find sheetrock.

"We want this house to look like it's been here a hundred years," Reiter explains. He and Susan travel to Europe twice a year, returning with five 40-foot containers of tiles,

sinks, fountains, and other old, interesting detritus to incorporate into their construction projects. Fox Hill has wrought-iron exterior light fixtures that were once Parisian window cages, a patio fountain made of a cast stone wellhead, a veranda planter box that was an animal trough and a 200-year-old cottage-style kitchen sink carved from a single piece of Carrara marble.

The roof is zinc and the siding is red cedar. Stained for protection and then painted, the paint was eventually stripped off to invoke an aged patina. The complicated process took four months. Reiter calls it "instant history."

Quality materials are paramount, but preeminent craftsmen are the true key to the perfection of the homes Reiter builds. He praises and treats his project manager, Federico Anguiano, like a brother, grabbing his shoulder and saying with conviction, "This is the man that makes it happen." He holds his go-to architect in equal esteem. When Reiter first came to the Valley, he looked for someone who could expertly conceptualize what he and Susan envisioned. Someone who knew everything there was to

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know about building codes. (Something they are not overly bothered with in Texas.) Fittingly, he found Vic Conforti, a respected architect with extensive Wine Country credentials who has some of the area's finest residential and commercial structures in his portfolio.

Twenty-five years ago, when Reiter was a young man working construction and wooing Susan, he went with her to church. As luck would have it, the sermon that day leaned heavily on the theme that life is short/the time is now. When Susan asked him afterward what he wanted to do with his life, he answered without hesitation, "I want to build my own houses." She looked at him squarely and said four magic words: "So, just do it."

The rest plays out like a hokey movie. The kicker, of course, is it all happens to be true. Reiter dreamed of stumbling across a hunk of land with a hand-painted sign reading, "Lot for Sale by Owner." When he found one, he admitted to the seller he had no money. Incredibly, he was given permission to build a house anyway, with the idea that he'd pay the guy for his land when he sold it. So, he bought a set of plans from a magazine

for \$300. Out clearing the lot one hot day, worrying that all he really knew how to do was some framing and a little trim carpentry, a builder happened by, bored by his recent retirement. Observing Reiter's lack of skill but admiring his enthusiasm, the builder said, essentially, "Let me show you how to do this." Then he did.

The star-crossed partners went on to build and sell three homes on that site, and Reiter parleyed that into more homes and more homes until eventually he had 30 going at a time. "Land was cheap and ignorance is bliss," he says now. "I was just a stupid kid, but I was a believer. If you believe and have faith that it will all work out, you can do anything you set your mind to." He took his proceeds, moved back to California to be near family, and cranked the whole concept up a notch. Well, several notches.

The people who come to own the substantial houses Reiter now builds tend to be from the financial world—hedge-fund managers, investment bankers, venture capitalists, and the like. People with not only the means to purchase such places but also a clear understanding of return on investment. Real estate appreciation aside,



Reiter examines every detail with lead finisher Armando Alvarez as Fox Hill nears completion.



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when a house starts out seeming 100 years old, it doesn't become dated as most homes do. It just gets better.

It's the lucky few who can afford a Jon Reiter Fine Home now, but you don't have to be a Reiter customer to experience the Reiter philosophy. He has an office in Kenwood, right on Highway 12. Stop by. Inspiration is free. \$

Antique tile with paw print came from France, as did the centuries-old stone sink.