

CHATEAU DOMINGUE

When building a home in Houston fifteen years ago, Ruth Gay very much wanted to recreate the spirit and the history of the European homes she had been surrounded by in her childhood homes of Belfast, Ireland (her mother being of Irish descent and her father a missionary), Belgium and Germany. "I've always loved the European way of life," says Gay, "especially the 'joie de vivre' that we as Americans tend to overlook in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives." But she and her husband, Jack, quickly noticed a lack of sources for authentic European materials and architectural elements like old doors and fireplaces.



Ruth Gay peeks from behind Chateau Domingue's grand 19th-century wooden gates.



Not one to accept defeat, Gay traveled to Europe and found not only what she needed for her own home, but the seeds of an idea to help others get the same authentic flair she craved. “I realized that this was the beginning of something that could be very fulfilling,” she says. While the idea simmered (and her young children got more on their feet), the idea finally started coming to life in the early 2000’s. “I told Jack to hang on because launching my own store was going to be very expensive!” Top of Gay’s list of needs besides capital, was Al, her husband’s treasured handyman from his workplace and a forklift. After cinching all three, she was on her way.

An assortment of 18th-century faience sits in an 18th-century painted amoire from Bordeaux. 19th c. stone urns are from the Luberon region.



An early 19th-century Tole lantern from Provence hangs over a pair of 18th-century stone carved corbeilles and a 19th-century Table de Service with a Belgian blue limestone top.



Newly quarried limestone, Bars de Beaune, is showcased with a 19th-century Alsacienne armoire and a 19th-century meat hook from a boucherie in Provence.



A pair of zinc cow heads from boucheries in Provence are displayed along an 18th-century marble double sink.

When she returned to Europe (with her boys happily ensconced at summer camp and her little girl and nanny in tow), Gay was now the official proprietor of Houston's "Chateau Domingue" (from a family name on Jack's side), and she scoured the hills and valleys until she had filled three shipping containers with 18th-century rustic stable and processional lanterns, old farm tables, a monumental 17th-century buffet deux a corps, Provençal cheminées, 15 pallets of fabulous reclaimed French limestone, terracotta and colored cement, stone door surrounds, iron gates, and one huge water fountain from a bastide outside of St. Remy. "My only overriding criteria," says Gay, "was that the pieces not only be authentic but downright monumental."

Her next task was finding a big enough space to fit her titanic treasures but with her typical aplomb, that too was hers before long. “A dear friend of mine, who is a designer, was driving down West Alabama Road and saw a warehouse on three acres for lease,” says Gay, “and she told me to get over there pronto. It’s a hole-in-the-wall type of place, in the heart of town and reminded me of a stone yard in Europe.” The 5,000-square-foot space had another 5,000 next door, which she soon acquired as well. “The scale of the business has exceeded any expectations I had when I opened the shop,” says Gay. “We now have yards with over 200 pallet racks filled with wonderful old stone alongside the 10,000 feet of showroom space. In addition, we also have a blossoming workshop with full-time welders and master carpenters.”

But the essence is always the genuineness of the pieces, many culled from her 7AM flea market trips from her summer home of Provence but she doesn’t limit herself to a particular time or place. “My buying trips are 12 hour daily marathons by plane, train and automobile, I scour the countryside, meet with my vendors, and try to eat good food in between. I look for grandness and simplicity,” says Gay, “I don’t like anything glitzy.” But that doesn’t mean not spectacular. Case in point: Gay’s coup de foudre — and subsequent purchase — of an 18th-century French chapel in its entirety. “I just thought it was the coolest thing I had ever seen and so I took a chance,” says Gay. “I sold it before it even arrived in the States and is now being reconstructed as we speak, in Houston on property overlooking a golf course.”



An 18th-century stone basin and stone Pot au Couvet both from a Provençal Bastide with a pair 18th-century Tuscan gates and 19th-century French columns.



A mélange of architectural and garden pieces welcomes visitors at the shop's entrance.



Ruth Gay pores over the details with her colleague Daniela Fishburn.

She's also purchased all the components to a 17th-century Provençal mas (or farmhouse), a 16th-century two-story spiral staircase (now residing in a Houston wine cellar), and a 14th-century Tuscan fireplace that once resided in a villa built by the Strozzi family, complete with the Strozzi crest. An 18th-century *orangerie* was rebuilt as the pool pavilion at a client's home and an 18th-century painted ceiling from Sicily found elegant reincarnation in Gay's own home. "I had to have it," she admits. "To find a completely painted ceiling is close to impossible, much less such a beautiful one."



An assortment of Italian mirrors, the earliest dating back to 1700.



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Exterior of Houston showroom

And while Gay believes in top to bottom old world authenticity, sometimes it's not possible. When the real thing isn't possible or is too costly, Gay offers lines of stone and wood flooring that authentically reflects the character and feel of the reclaimed counterparts. She admits that while it has not been an easy task to find new flooring, what she has come up with is just as splendid. "I also offer reproduction fountains," she says. "And the reasoning is that reclaimed fountains are very rare, mostly because it was only the chateaux and wealthy estates that could afford such a luxury."

Old or new, every piece Gay buys or recreates has been visualized into its new surroundings. The only qualifier is that it mustn't look too perfect. "Our world is already filled with so much of that," says Gay. "I try to bring authenticity and history over here. That's part of its charm. I love rustic luxury."