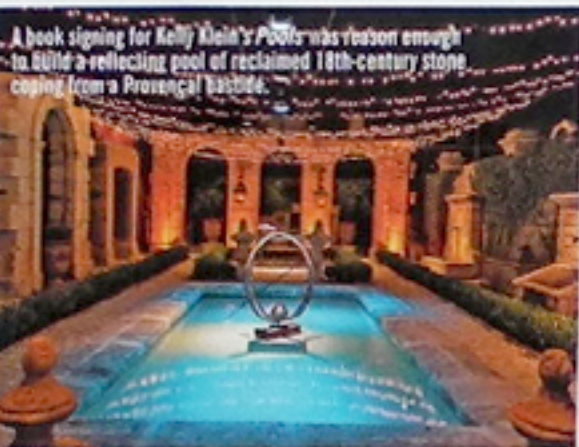


IN THE BEGINNING ...

Several years prior to starting Chateau Domingue, my husband and I were building a house in Houston. It was the first house that I'd built and had creative control over, and I wanted to incorporate a very European and authentic feel. We took a trip to France to find architectural elements, but unfortunately we couldn't find what we were looking for and came home somewhat empty-handed. It was during this trip that I had the idea to start a business after my kids were older. I knew that I needed to do a tremendous amount of research to discover where to actually find the product I was in search of.

THE ROOTS OF A PASSION.

My father was a missionary, so we traveled and lived all over Europe. My mother is Irish, and my summers spent in Belfast with my grandparents, aunts and cousins are most prevalent in my mind. It was there that I really started to appreciate antiques. I realized that belongings were items passed from one generation to the next. And I absolutely loved that the next generation would use and cherish them as much as the generation before. I also remember loving the sense of history in old castles we would visit, with their beautifully worn stone stairways, and appreciating the quaintness of the thatched-roof cottages we would drive past. It all made a huge impression.



AN ACQUIRED ADORATION OF THE AGES.

I find myself daydreaming about the people who climbed the set of 16th-century stairs that I purchased. I think of

the monks who made goat cheese on the 17th-century kitchen counters and sink (which are now in my home kitchen) in the monastery that was supported by selling the cheeses to the surrounding villages; of the women who washed clothes in the 17th-century *lavoire* that at one time was in the center of the village; of the couple who had their initials and year 1816 carved into the trumeau of a wedding mantel; of the guests who went through the 18th-century doors of an important villa on the Grand Canal in Venice ... The history and backstory of each piece we have at Chateau Domingue is endless. One of our mantras is "Each piece has a story." It's true — if only they could talk!

ON INSPIRATION.

Besides history, texture, drama, simplicity and, of course, authenticity are inspirational. I'm also inspired by the French and Italian lifestyles. My husband and I cherish our summers in Provence with family and friends — when I'm immersed in the little village that we return to every season, I truly slow down and smell the roses. The local people never cease to remind me of the beauty in simplicity and their reverence for the way things have been done over hundreds and hundreds of years. My childhood in Europe was very formative. I was exposed to too much during my youth to feel satisfied with the new and unused.

DID YOU EVER HAVE A DESIRE TO SOURCE OTHER AREAS — i.e., ASIA OR AFRICA?

No, not really. My time in France and Italy is so special to me. It's who I am, and who we are. As much as other continents are fascinating and have much to offer, they are not what we are about when it comes to lifestyle.

STYLE DNA

The PURVEYOR of PERMANENCE

BY SETH VAUGHAN
PHOTOGRAPHY JENNY ANTILL



Ruth Gay, Houston's resident reclamation savant, scours Europe for architectural treasures to fill Chateau Domingue, her unparalleled relic repository. With a coveted inventory of Gallic chapels and orangeries, painted Venetian doors and Delft tile, she is the obligatory first call for imbuing architecture and interiors with a sense of history and humanity. Seth Vaughan sits down with the stylish scavenger.



YOUR FIRST BUYING TRIP.

My first buying trip was in the summer of 2001 and was as much about discovery as it was actual buying. Having just dropped our two sons off at camp, I took my 3-year-old daughter and my nanny to France and spent three weeks driving through the countryside, digging around stone yards and meeting all kinds of interesting, helpful people. My childhood years spent in Belgium and France paid off — I could speak the language! During that trip, all kinds of things fell into place ... I developed a true sense of what the shop's product mix would be, thought of the perfect name for my business and met someone who would become an immense part of my effort: my friend, confidant and team member Robin. Not only has he been instrumental in establishing and maintaining relationships, but he's a wealth of knowledge, from product authenticity and provenance to shipping/taxation, etc. Until a recent stroke slowed him down, there wasn't a transaction that took place for Chateau Domingue that Robin wasn't involved in. His wife, Marielle, has taken over where he left off — she is my new hero!

HOW DO YOU ORGANIZE YOUR BUYING TRIPS?

I travel to Europe every other month for two reasons. The first is that it's important for me to be the one to see and source product first-hand. Secondly, I have a very good network of sources and connections in Europe who make sure that I am the first to know what building they are getting ready to take down, the latest load of incredible flooring they just reclaimed, the tiny chapel that they were told would eventually be available. I can't ask my contacts to hold these items indefinitely until I can get over there to see them, so I have to be ready to move quickly. Once I'm there, I hit the road running. I still have one daughter at home, so one week away is my limit. I have my architectural product sources and what I refer to as my "normal" sources (furnishings, lighting, art, etc. — what I think of as the "sexy stuff"). My architectural buying consists of many hours on the road (rain, shine, freezing temperatures to burning hot ones), most of the time out in the middle of nowhere, whether it's in France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Holland, England — lots of driving. I try to plan my travel and buying around the country or countries that will provide the right mix that Chateau Domingue needs at that specific time.

HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHAT MAKES THE CUT?

Authenticity is probably the primary consideration. I also like to think "grand" or "monumental" ... To envision a piece or item in its original setting is really helpful to me. Do I see it in a chateau, villa, palazzo? Even if it's small, I like to determine if it has the quality of something that would have been collected during that time. I'm also drawn to items that possess an element of whimsy and charm, so a little enchantment is part of the mix.

MOST UNUSUAL FINDS.

I found two complete private chapels, both of which I bought, brought to the U.S. and sold. Both have been rebuilt as chapels, one on the grounds of a private residence and the other on the property of a private club. It's exciting to see these structures be given new life, and it's incredibly satisfying that I was able to save them prior to complete deterioration and ruin. Also, a pair of 15th/16th-century Tuscan life-size frescos of St. Barbara and St. Giovanni, taken off the walls of a private chapel in the 18th century (we can date it by the museum-style bracing that was used to support the plaster) and hung in the villa on the same property. I had goosebumps when I discovered them in a tiny gallery in one of the most quaint Tuscan villages I've visited.



A LIFE LESSON LEARNED SINCE STARTING CHATEAU DOMINGUE.

If you have an idea, dream or vision and are willing to put your all into it, you have a chance of great success. Yes, you need a practical approach. And yes, there has to be some luck thrown in. I've definitely learned that it takes certain sacrifices in the way of time and freedom. But, if you feel truly passionate about your idea, I say, "Go for it!" I am so glad I did.

WHAT ABOUT CHATEAU DOMINGUE BRINGS YOU THE MOST PRIDE?

Our reputation for providing the unusual — we have a unique product mix. I am also proud of the quality we offer, both in product and service. I know of no other company in our line of business that actually looks at each crate of stone in a dusty yard in the middle of nowhere, just to make sure it will be as it should when it arrives for installation; instead, they pick up the phone and place an order. This is another reason we get the best product out there — my vendors know how discriminating we are. It gives all of us an enormous sense of confidence at Chateau Domingue.

WHAT'S IN A NAME: THE ORIGIN OF "CHATEAU DOMINGUE."

"Domingue" was my mother-in-law's maiden name and is our daughter's middle name. It seemed the perfect fit for my business.

REGARDING THE CHATEAU EXPANSION AND THE CREATION OF TWO SISTER COMPANIES.

We recently turned half of our warehouse into additional showroom space. We opened with 5,000 square feet and are now spread across three acres. Additionally, we recently started two sister companies: Atelier Domingue and Bastide Domingue. At Atelier, we are manufacturing metal windows and doors that complement the European look that Chateau Domingue offers. They are low profile and simple in style, and they can work with any type of design, from contemporary to old world. At Bastide Domingue, we create new stone flooring new stone flooring that looks authentically old. We are so excited about our prototypes and are in the process of sourcing the machinery, which will allow us to mass-produce.

