THE WELL

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The *thrill* of the HUNT

After restoring an old property, an equestrian-loving couple has brought a sleek European aesthetic into the heart of Virginia

INTERIOR DESIGN BY NATASCHA FOLENS PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIGUEL FLORES-VIANNA
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Opening page: Designer Natascha Folens rides on a Virginia country lane. Preceding pages: The entrance hall features black-and-white cement tiles. The pine mantel in the foyer is original. Maxime von Blumencron's *Open Your Eye* hangs above. Celestial Pebble chandelier is by Ochre. Benjamin Moore's Geddy Gray is used on the walls. This page: In the kitchen, elmwood cabinetry and brown leather Giron barstools contrast with walls painted with Ralph Lauren's Stucco White. The range is Miele.

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Belgian-born interior designer Natascha Folens and her Belgian husband and business partner, Luc Dejager, run their successful interior architecture business from the Washington D.C. suburb of Great Falls, Virginia. But they retreat on weekends to the heart of Virginia hunt country.

Although they didn't know each other when they were growing up in Belgium, both were avid competitive equestrian riders and their love of the sport has endured. So when the couple decided to look for a weekend house, they focused on the pastoral epicenter of Virginia's fox-hunting country around the small hamlet of Middleburg, population 600, just an hour from Great Falls. They quickly joined the Loudon-Fairfax Hunt, but the search for the right house took longer.

"We looked for two years, for a little hunt box, a cottage, that was the idea," she says. As they commuted on weekends for regular hunt meetings, Folens scoured the local real-estate listings. Then, the right house popped up. Just five minutes outside town, the home, portions of which date back more than a century and a half, was set on twenty-two acres of rolling pastures and forest along Goose Creek, the land interlaced with the area's stacked-stone fences. "Just two hours after viewing it, we put in an offer," she says. The couple was also taken with the property's stone barn, which has become a guesthouse, and another picturesque stone building that houses a spring.

"The house was in good shape architecturally and we loved the setting, but it was hard to get inspired by the kitchen with its dark wood floors and cabinetry and a sink backsplash that cut off half of the window," she recalls. Meanwhile, the only bathroom in the three-bedroom home was the size of a closet, so they sacrificed one bedroom to make a bigger bathroom.

"Those were the two most important rooms to address first," Folens says. In the kitchen, she introduced a flood of natural light after she lowered a counter to reveal that concealed window. She further brightened the space by replacing a dark wood door with one in steel and glass, lightening the cabinet wood, and laying limestone flooring.

The entry hall is a decidedly traditional space, in keeping with it being part of the original house. There black and white cement tiles and a classic banister and wooden staircase establish the tone. Elsewhere, traditional original elements were preserved, including the beamed ceilings in the kitchen and foyer. But apart from those areas of the home, Folens' decorative scheme is a definite departure from those of her neighbors, many of whom reside in Colonial houses.

"Everyone here decorates with rich colors, blues and greens, ornate Victorian-style furniture, patterned fabrics, and hunting prints on the wall," she contends. "I like antiques with simpler lines, not much pattern, and not a lot of color in the furniture. I like to play with textures instead," she says, pointing out kitchen cabinetry made by the local carpenter using 300-year-old elmwood that she sources from a supplier in France.

"I tend to play with the textures by working with a lot of materials," she adds. "I use wood with very little finish on it, sheepskins, hand-woven things, old wood paneling, leather that attains a patina and textiles. It's simplicity, but not bland or boring."

Rooms throughout the home are kept bright and fresh with a palette of neutrals — whites, beiges, and grays. "These are timeless hues and they make for timeless rooms," says Folens. She favors artworks, too, with similar tones.

American equestrian painter Joe Andoe's 2013 oil portrait of *Andy* dominates a corner of the family room. Brown leather safari chairs by the Danish designer Arne Sørensen and a carved vintage Ethiopian stool accentuate the casual ambiance of the room and the house as a whole.

What might be called "Virginia hunt country contemporary casual" is spelled out in Folens' eclectic tableau of an antique wooden Senufo daybed serving as a coffee table, a white linen-covered Martha four-seater Flamant sofa, a Snug rattan armchair, and a vintage kilim. Wall paint is Ralph Lauren.

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"When we got engaged, Luc asked me what I wanted as a ring," she recounts. "I said that I would rather have a piece of art." The artwork she had in mind was a long admired and desired painting by the noted equestrian artist Joe Andoe. Called *Andy*, it is a stunning head-on portrait of a pale white horse against a dramatic black background. "This painting is my engagement ring," she says. "It's the first thing you see when you walk into the house."

In sync with their equestrian lifestyle, the house is designed for casual living. Along with Andy in the family room — there is no formal living room — there is a Senufo daybed from Africa that serves as a coffee table paired with leather Safari chairs, a white linen-covered sofa, and an unusual sculptural rattan armchair. "All the furniture is imported from Belgium, Italy, or mainly France," she says. "I wanted to create a cozy, down-to-earth atmosphere with no fuss."

The foyer is a central pivot point of the downstairs, with doors leading to the entrance hall, family room, and the kitchen. The centerpiece table, a smaller copy of a Maxalto design, is equally handy as a depository for riding helmets as it is as a support for a buffet when the couple entertains. Summer and winter, they use the heated enclosed glassed porch with its pastoral views of horses and fields.

"We go out hunting three times a week during the season from September to March," Folens explains. "The hounds pick up a scent and the hunt begins." But their foxhunting is all about the thrill of the chase and not about the kill because there is none. "When the fox goes to ground in a hole and the dogs are all barking, we stop."

Social life is a given in this part of Virginia. Middleburg weekends begin on Friday, when Folens says, "we normally entertain – ten or twelve guests. I love cooking European meals. My specialty is rabbit with chocolate and beer sauce." In summer, the meal moves outdoors to the patio with a cookout of burgers, sausages, or fish filets.

"On Saturdays, we'll go to an event, this weekend it's a cattle auction. I take my son for a riding lesson and we might work on the property, the horses or fields — anything that needs fixing," she says. "Saturday night we'll go to a party or out with friends to the local Red Fox Inn or the French Hound to eat."

There's no lazy lying abed on Sunday mornings. "In winter, we're up at 5 a.m. to get the horses ready for the hunt," she says. "In the summer, we are up early to ride before the sun gets too hot." Post hunt is the hunt breakfast — which may come around 11 a.m. or as late as 6 to 7 p.m. Or there might be a tailgate when riders bring dishes to share.

"It's amazingly easy to get to know people here," Folens says. "There is a very special blend of extremely friendly and welcoming people. Everyone loves horses and all the talk is that. The horse is the common denominator in Middleburg."

Now that the task of transforming the property is complete, Folens is able to say, "Everyone underestimates renovating an old house. An old house is idyllic and charming, but there is a lot of work involved. Afterwards, though, you are rewarded with a phenomenal home." ■

In the master bedroom, Folens has combined elmwood stools, a rustic console, an ultra-soft Icelandic sheepskin rug, and Boho linen duvet cover and sheets. Walls are painted with Ralph Lauren's Stucco White.

The heated porch with an oak architect's table and rattan chairs, both from Flamant, is the couple's favorite spot to view their horses and pastures. Following pages: Left: The property's stone spring house; Right: Folens with her horse, Adventure.

"Here in this part of Virginia, you are in a ***whole different world.*** *You go* ***back in time.****"*

— Natascha Folens