





An Edwards & Plunkett  
Classic

# Restoring Ranchito Bendito



**It was love at first sight when Sue and Roger Kritz first spotted the “blessed little ranch” known as Ranchito Bendito.**

Overlooking Romero Canyon, Montecito Valley and the sparkling Pacific Ocean on three acres of what was once a 40-acre ranch, the home was designed in the late 1920s by renowned local architects William Albert Edwards and Joseph Plunkett.

Its classic Spanish Colonial Revival style echoes the architectural duo’s romantic designs for the Fox-Arlington Theater, the National Guard Armory, Rockwood Women’s Club, the Santa Barbara Airport Terminal, the El Presidio complex and Cold Spring School, among other commercial and residential buildings in the area.

(See our story about Edwards & Plunkett in this issue.)

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Story by Leslie Dinaberg ■ Art by Frank Serrano



The home was originally built in 1929 for Ernest Eloy Duque, Jr., a prominent Los Angeles businessman and civic leader who used the property as a horse ranch and weekend getaway where he and his wife, Louise Fleming Duque, could relax and socialize.

Today, a long driveway leads to an impressive circular motor court and the meticulously restored hillside home, constructed from California redwood with a Spanish tile roof and multiple balconies. Like many Edwards & Plunkett designs of the period, it features wood beam ceilings, custom floor tiles and wrought iron work throughout.

Although the architecture is stunning, when visitors step into the spacious living room they are more entranced by the breathtaking views of the Channel Islands framed by the room's expansive, floor-to-ceiling arched windows. "When I first saw the view of the coastline through the picture windows, it took my breath away," recalls Sue of her first visit to the house. "It felt like home." It's no accident that the house is perfectly situated on the hillside to provide both ocean and mountain views and take advantage of morning sun and afternoon shade.

In the living room, which has also been used as a ballroom over the years, exposed wood beam ceilings support an elegant chandelier that once illuminated the Biltmore Hotel and now showcases an open staircase with wrought iron balustrades. The custom tile stairs extend gracefully up to an indoor balcony that frames three sides of the room—all reminiscent of the El Paseo Restaurant, which has hosted decades of Santa Barbara celebrations in the historic downtown area.

It's not hard to imagine Fred Astaire making a dapper descent down that timeless staircase, and perhaps he did! His stepson, Eliphalet Nott Potter IV (known as Peter) was the third owner of the house. A former Santa Barbara County Sheriff and rancher who now resides in San Luis Obispo, Potter told Roger and Sue that Astaire—who danced and sang in films with Hollywood lovelies such as Ginger Rogers, Rita Hayworth, Audrey Hepburn, Leslie Caron and Cyd Charisse—would often lead guests for a spin around the living room.

Janet Lux Ford, the matriarch of the Ford family (who bought the house from the Duques), wrote about her exciting family life at Rancho Bendito in 1965: "We have acreage in the foothills. Kenny [preschool age] climbs up one knoll into the cactus, or gets too close to a steep downhill slope, or finds some doubtful substance to eat. We have killed six rattlesnakes close to the house. We have had a scorpion sting (close to harmless).

And I have picked up a tarantula with a handful of clothes from the laundry sorter."

Despite the critters, glamorous history and architectural pedigree, the house was designed, at its heart, to be lived in, says Roger Kritz, who has owned it for the past 34 years. "It's a family house," says Roger. "It was designed for a family with five kids. The Fords had nine children, the Potters had five or six, and we have three children" [Tracy, Brian and Jennifer, now grown].

Although the home is about 7,000 square feet, it's not overwhelming. The rooms are designed like spokes off the central living room. "It's like the courtyards in Seville," laughs Roger. "It feels like it's a very small house. We raised three kids here and nobody could keep any secrets. And now that the kids are grown, my mother, Martha, who is 100, lives with us."

Originally from Chicago, the Kritzes first came to Montecito in 1976 to visit friends. "One look at this place and I said, 'We have to move here,'" chuckles Roger.

They fell in love with the area and immediately went on a real estate hunt. "I think we saw about 40 houses in one day. We went everywhere and then we saw this," says Sue.

"We bought the house in one day," says Roger. "It was the best decision we ever made, but it was bold. I had 11 electronics stores in Chicago that I had to dismantle."

While the bones of the house were intact, it needed repairs immediately. "It was falling apart; the plumbing didn't work," says Roger. All of the repairs and renovations were done with an eye toward keeping the look and feel of the original design intact. "What we did here was to make it the way it was intended to be rather than take it down.... It was just so classic and lovely," says Sue. "It's almost as if the house tells us 'don't do that, do that,'" adds Roger. "So we wanted to make all the little changes totally in keeping with what the house was."

"It is a labor of love, doing what's right by a house; the house was nice enough to let us live here so we want to treat and respect it for keeps. I thought that was very poetic. We came to Montecito and knew we had to live here. And this house actually courted us and identified us as people who would take care of it," says Roger, who once considered becoming an architect.



Romantic living room arched windows frame the panoramic ocean views.



Every year since they bought the house in 1976, the Kritzes have done some sort of restoration or renovation project, scrimping and saving in the early years to be able to afford essential repairs, and later scraping layer upon layer of orange and blue paint off the walls. “We have totally restored the house,” Roger explains. “We stripped everything down and put back original hardware on most of the doors, just the way it was.”

Both Sue and Roger were trained as chefs locally and in Paris, and they cite the kitchen—which was originally designed for use by a staff and has been left largely intact—as one of their favorite rooms in the house. There is also a butler’s pantry between the kitchen and the dining room where the maids and butlers waited to be called to service. Next to the kitchen were servant’s quarters

and a bathroom that the Kritzes converted into a den for their children to use while Roger and Sue were busy in the kitchen.

They kept all the original wooden doors, including a distinctive front door with a peek-a-boo window that is sketched in great detail on Joseph Plunkett’s original architectural renderings. Plunkett was considered to be a master at sketching, and according to *Santa Barbara: A Guide to El Pueblo Viejo* (Capra Press, 1986, by Rebecca Conrad and Christopher H. Nelson), he was able to give clients an immediate plan on paper and received many large commissions due to his rapid sketching and re-sketching of ideas.

Indeed the revised drawings, circa 1931, are so detailed they specify using caulk with hot lead to create “wrot” iron banisters and other

Original wooden front door, crafted from Joseph Plunkett’s architectural sketch.



decorative elements in the house. Many of them still survive, including an outdoor tile painting of a Fiesta-style celebration that may be a likeness of Duque, as well as mahogany countertops in the pantry and kitchen, and colorful tiles in the bathrooms.

For items that needed to be replaced, such as the dining room lighting, the Kritzes worked with Steven Handelman Studios to choose 1930s-style fixtures and decorative wrought iron screens to cover the heating and ventilation ducts. "We tried to have him do these as close to what would have been here originally," says Sue. Handelman, a Santa Barbara-based designer whose work is found in historic homes all over the country, explains that "the way I design the fixtures and the way they make them are the way they were made originally, so they look like the originals. Using really high quality materials is the key to making things look pretty convincingly like they were originally there."

The distinctive staircase and indoor balcony balustrades are original. A few years ago the Kritzes cut down a hedge that lined the outdoor

patio and had an outdoor fence installed that echoes the staircase balustrades.

Like much of Santa Barbara's distinctive Spanish Revival architecture, the Kritzes' home was built shortly after the big earthquake of June 29, 1925, when the movement for architectural reform and unification around a Spanish Colonial style, spearheaded by Pearl Chase, was already underway. In addition to the design style, the construction of the home was also influenced by the quake in that it was built so it could withstand another one if it had to. "It is double walled construction," explains Roger. "There are two walls here with a hollow space between." In addition the large living room windows have springs underneath them for earthquake safety.

Fire safety and water conservation are primary concerns in Montecito. Recently the Kritzes worked with landscape designer Eric Nagelmann to make a transition from large grassy areas on the ocean side of the house to a dramatically different, drought-resistant succulent landscape. Eric used cuttings bought from Lotusland, a historic 37-acre



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BUT WHAT YOU WANT.**



estate and botanic garden situated a few miles to the west in the foothills of Montecito. "It was really a win-win for both the Kritzes and Lotusland," says Nagelmann, who created a completely new cactus garden for the Ganna Walska Lotusland Foundation in 2003. "Using the cuttings from Lotusland was a great way to support our local nonprofits and get some great plants for Roger and Sue."

"It's not in keeping with what was there, but we wanted to redo the orchard and plant new trees," says Roger. "By taking out the lawn we were able to put in more than 100 avocado trees using about the same amount of water."

Affection and respect for their home and its history runs deep in the Kritz family. On a recent visit their son Brian, who is now an attorney and lives in Washington, DC, told his father, "You can't ever sell this house."

Roger relates this story with evident pride. "So our feelings for this house definitely transcend the value of the property itself.... It's more than a house, it's more than a home, and it has kind of become a way of life for us. We love this house." ♦

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