

MANSION

INSIDE STORY

A Ghost Town, Dressed in Vinegar

Steve and Jane Darland revived an authentic adobe village in New Mexico, then tackled authentic balsamic



THE GOURMET HOME ISSUE

BY KATY MCLAUGHLIN

IT'S AN UNLIKELY SIGHT in a traditional New Mexican adobe village, 150 miles from the nearest airport: an aging room for authentic balsamic vinegar. The two-story, amber-colored Apache pine building with a steep exterior staircase could almost be mistaken for a Swiss ski chalet. Inside, however, on waist-high wooden racks, sit eight batteries of seven fruitwood casks in diminishing sizes, handmade in Modena, Italy, by a family of master coopers.

Here, in the shadow of the shrub-and-gravel-covered butte that backs up to their property, Steve Darland and his wife, Jane, produce an award-winning balsamic, aged 16 years to syrupy thickness. Price: \$150 for a 4½-ounce bottle.

The couple spends a few months each year traveling the world to promote their prized vinegar to chefs and consumers. But their home and production base is in the remote village of Monticello, N.M., where they have built or renovated a total of 10 structures, including their own 19th-century restored adobe home.

The Darlands' properties sit on roughly 50 acres of land in and around the village. Travel guides refer to Monticello as an Old West ghost town, though the village is still occupied, however sparsely. It was settled in 1856, according to the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division; census data show the population peaked in 1910 at 573. Today, there are fewer than 50 people, some part-timers. Cellphones don't work in the canyon. The nearest supermarket is 26 miles away, in Truth or Consequences.

The couple now owns seven structures in Monticello, including their home and guesthouse, the *acetaia*, an office with a screened-in porch, a commercial kitchen and two rental houses, let out to writers and artists looking for a few days of isolation to work. Beyond the rented *casitas* are fields of lavender, heritage rose and lemon verbena, which they distill and sell to International Orange, a San Francisco spa co-founded by their daughter.

The Darlands weren't always in the lavender and vinegar business. Mr. Darland, 68 years old, spent his career in marketing—15 years of that in various roles at the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, including executive vice president of the West from 1992 to 1997. Ms. Darland, 63, worked as a freelance designer on diverse projects from restaurant construction to furniture-catalog shoots. For years, the two lived in Marin County, Calif.

The Darlands bought their first parcel in Monticello in 1992, paying \$75,000 for 1¼ acres and two rundown adobe structures with no water or electricity. They had traveled throughout their lives to the Southwest and knew about the village through Mr. Darland's sister, who once owned a house there. They turned the original 556-square-foot house into a 3,390-square-foot, one-bedroom, one-bathroom home with a family room, screened dining porch, dressing room and pantry—with the other building attached as a guest suite.



GOOD TASTE Jane Darland with her paella, left; her husband, Steve, examines the grapes to be harvested for their balsamic vinegar; the living room of their Monticello, N.M., house, which dates to the 19th century. An old hotel the couple helped transform into a private home.



COMING OF AGE The Darland property includes an *acetaia* for aging vinegar, left; the family home was rebuilt with historical accuracy.

Ms. Darland traveled back and forth from Marin County to oversee reconstruction, hauling items such as cast-iron, claw-foot tubs in her pickup truck. Determined to rebuild the house with historical accuracy, she researched building traditions at the Preservation Division archives in Santa Fe and hired a family of adobe masons from northern Mexico who spent the spring and summer making and drying bricks from clay, manure and sticks found on the property. Building and stuccoing began in the fall.

Ms. Darland was able to date certain parts of the house by their construction details. Some early rooms, dating to around 1870, feature ceilings made of *cedros*, or rough-split juniper slats, supported by *vigas*, or round beams. Other rooms have milled plank ceilings that could only have been made after 1890, when the first portable mills came to the valley, she said.

Throughout the 1990s, the couple bought land and built several structures, spending \$750,000 in total, they estimate. They moved to Monticello full-time in 2001 and have devoted themselves to reviving the town through myriad endeavors. When they restored "a ruin" that was once the town store, Ms. Darland said, they found

a deed and ledger from 1908, written in English and Spanish. They turned the building into a commercial kitchen with a large dining area where they host a holiday crafts fair for local artisans. On their property, they raise crops—including pomegranates, quince and squash—that they sell at a local farmers market they helped launch.

Part of the decision to buy in the region was a long-held desire to grow grapes, which flourish there. However, Mr. Darland's marketing instincts told him that "the world was flooded with wine" and a small

label would be a hard sell. Instead, with counsel from their friend Paul Bertolli, a Bay Area chef with expertise in balsamic-vinegar production, they purchased balsamic barrels in 1997 for about \$60,000 and built the *acetaia*.

Every September, the Darlands begin the process of crafting their vinegar. They host about 20 young people from around the country—

mostly the friends of their two grown children—who harvest up to 5 tons of organic, white Trebbiano Toscano and Occhio di Gatto grapes grown on their land. Then, Mr. Darland carefully oversees 70 hours of steady simmering to reduce the liquid by more than a third. The juice is fermented in tanks on the ground floor of the *acetaia* for four to six weeks, when it is moved to the

upper floor, where it spends a minimum of 12 years aging and evaporating through a rectangular opening at the top of each fruitwood barrel. As the product concentrates, the Darlands gradually move it from larger to smaller casks. Production is limited to a maximum of 1,000 bottles.

Their adobe house is comfortable year-round, Ms. Darland said. In summer, the home's 16- to 18-inch walls are so effective as insulation that air conditioning isn't required. In winter, they crank up the under-the-floor heating system until the walls are warm, then turn it way down as the walls retain the heat.

On one warm evening in

May, Ms. Darland served a meal of Moroccan couscous and local roasted lamb on her screened-in porch. A breeze rustled through the spruce and cottonwood trees, uninterrupted by man-made sounds.

Lifting a juice glass of New Mexican Viognier, Mr. Darland chuckled over the observation that his hands looked like those of a lifelong farmer, not a self-described former "Mad Men" executive.

"I'm proud of what I did in my career, but it was all collaborative and conceptual. What we are doing here, our balsamic, we can point to it and say, 'That's me. I created that,'" he said. "You can think of your life as a work of art."

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