



Estate of

# Grace

An Orange County Tuscan mansion in distress gets a new lease on life as a luxurious country-house hotel

By Lynn Hazlewood

"It was really our midlife crisis," says Alan Stenberg, standing on the terrace of Glenmere, a once-rundown mansion in Chester, Orange County. "If we'd bought a sports car, it would have been over in 20 minutes, but instead..." He trails off, gesturing at what is now the Hudson Valley's new (and possibly only) luxury boutique hotel — the result of a three-and-a-half-year, multimillion-dollar makeover. His partner, Daniel DeSimone, looks equally bemused. "It was kismet," he adds.

Glenmere was built in 1911 for real-estate scion Robert Goelet, who commissioned the illustrious architectural firm Carrere and Hastings to design a country retreat for his vast property. The firm obliged with a 35,000-square-foot, 35-room Italianate villa enclosing a central courtyard, with sweeping marble staircases, columned porticos, terraces, balconies, and plenty of no-expense-spared decorative details like ornamental trim and hand-forged railings. When it was complete, Goelet hired Beatrix Farrand, one of America's foremost landscape architects (and the first female one), to design the grounds. Farrand created a park-like setting framing views of Glenmere Lake (then part of the estate) as well as formal plantings, which included a 6,000-square-foot Italian walled garden with pools and statuary. Thanks to the racetrack in nearby Goshen, the area was a hotbed of high society in those days, and the Goelets put their lavish retreat to good use, entertaining homegrown elites as well as a sprinkling of British nobility. (In the fashion of American heiresses of the time, Goelet's sister, May, had bagged a hard-up, titled Briton — the Duke of Roxburghe.)

Fast forward to 2005, when DeSimone — an orthopedic surgeon with a penchant for fixing up old houses — was driving through Chester's winding, leafy lanes and spotted the neglected salmon-pink building on its hilltop. Intrigued, he called a real estate agent who happened to have the place secretly listed. The owner had purchased the mansion and 100 acres at auction

**Valley villa reborn**  
Designed by Carrere and Hastings, Glenmere's 35,000 square feet include 35 rooms, a central courtyard, marble staircases, terraces, balconies, and myriad decorative details

from Orange County, which had seized it as a tax lien in the 1970s. (The county reserved 1,200 acres, including the lake, which serves as a reservoir.) Most locals knew it as a wedding location-for-hire, although the owner was still in residence and eager to sell.

DeSimone and Stenberg had recently finished a lengthy renovation of their home in Tuxedo Park, which Stenberg says was "a complete wreck" when DeSimone found it. "Same thing with a townhouse in Philadelphia," recalls Stenberg, the more outgoing of the two.



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"A wreck. But he had to have it — he doesn't think about whether it's feasible." DeSimone had to have Glenmere, too — although for months, Stenberg, who owned a P.R. company at the time, refused to go to see it. "An Italian mansion in Chester?" he says. "I thought he'd lost it." Finally he relented, and was immediately won over. "One look, and I was in. Then we just had to think of what to do with it. We quickly realized it would be a great hotel."

DeSimone, who had taken a sabbatical from his practice to study at the French Culinary Institute, "found the lure of a hotel and food irresistible," as Stenberg puts it, and decided to leave medicine. When the pair began searching for other investors, DeSimone contacted Alison Klein, a childhood friend of Stenberg's who was living in Ger-

many with her husband, Peter. "I wasn't happy about it because it was like getting a family member involved," Stenberg recalls. "Very risky and scary. But Alison said, 'Peter's a businessman; he knows what he's doing.'"

The Kleins agreed to be partners, with two stipulations: The hotel should showcase some of their modern art collection, and the renovation should include state-of-the-art green technology. Thirty-eight wells were dug for geothermal heating and cooling. ("They're 499 feet deep — 500 feet and we would have needed a mining permit," notes Stenberg.) New electric and plumbing systems were installed. One hundred and twenty exterior doors and windows were replaced with energy-efficient duplicates. Interior doors with their decorative hardware were refurbished.

Original details — like the crackle-glazed ceiling in the entrance, ornamental plaster, and hand-forged railings — were painstakingly restored. The stuccoed exterior was lime-washed in a shade called Ointment Pink, with shutters, once green, painted a vivid light blue. "It was a bit startling at first," says Stenberg of the color scheme. "But it's a folly in Chester — why hold back?"

"No holding back" seems to have been the motto. The partners paid \$8.5 million for Glenmere, and the renovation reportedly cost \$30 million. "More," Stenberg says, wincing. "But don't ask. It makes me weep." The result is a small, luxurious hotel modeled along the lines of Wheatleigh, a much raved-over country-house hotel in the Berkshires. "We didn't create anything new," Stenberg cheer-



**Tuscan taste** At left: Glenmere's renovated courtyard includes Roman columns with Tuscan capitals, and wrought-iron accents on the stairway and windows. The mansion's foyer (above) boasts decorative moldings and a painting by American artist Charlie Hewitt. Inset: A photo of the estate's lower entrance gate and rose garden, circa 1921

fully admits. "We basically lifted whatever we've loved in hotels on our travels. We're all about details. The big things are a given, but it's the details that people remember." There are details aplenty here, ranging from big ones (Charles, the butler, is one) to ingenious, subtle lighting below the beds to guide you if you get up in the night.

The public spaces are inviting and stylish. "The idea was to decorate the way the first owners lived," says DeSimone. "They'd have taken the Grand Tour and brought back antiques and curios from all over." Scott Snyder, interior designer to the well-heeled in New York and Palm Beach, did a masterful job of combining vintage pieces with edgier, contemporary ones, and incorporating art from the Klein Museum by such luminaries as

Motherwell, Rauschenberg and Frankenthaler. "Scott took everything three steps further than we would have done," DeSimone says.

Charcoal walls, ornate moldings, and casually stacked books make the library warm and atmospheric. Matching English marble fireplaces anchor each end of the large living room, where diners can have a drink before dinner. If there's nobody to play the grand piano, it can play itself. For elegant dining, there's the stately Supper Room, with French windows and beautiful reverse-painted, silver-leaf panels (see review on page 137). Paisley walls, a fireplace, and a mahogany bar create a snug mood in the more casual Frog's End Tavern. The intimate China Room is for private dinners, where you choose your own china from among the 30 patterns that

Stenberg and DeSimone have collected over the years. When it's warm, you can dine in the courtyard, or on the terrace overlooking the lake.

Most of the 19 guest suites have fireplaces (there's even one in the master bath in the penthouse suite), and many have terraces or balconies. Each is decorated with the same soothing, neutral palette forming a backdrop for different colorful accents. All 20 guest bathrooms are clad in pale Carrera marble, from ceiling to heated floor. "We set aside a mine's worth of marble so that it would all match," Stenberg says. "Then we got bids from six local companies to install it, averaged the cost, and offered each of them part of the work. They all accepted. We thought there might be rivalry and slashed tires in the



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parking lot, but they outdid themselves, looking over their shoulders at the competition in the next room."

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The spa will open at the end of the year, if all goes as planned.

Of course, the work did not go off without a few hitches. One significant hitch came in the form of intervention from the DEC. Jay Westerveld, an environmental activist from nearby Sugar Loaf, was concerned that the construction was disrupting habitat of the northern cricket frog. "The DEC required us to stop work and do tests to show whether there was habitat on the property," Stenberg explains. "We chose a scientist from the list the DEC gave us," who found no frogs. "Then the environmentalist said that because we'd paid the scientist, the study wasn't impartial... Work was shut down a number of times. We did a study in summer and fall, and then they asked us to do the other two seasons, as well.

We proved that the frogs weren't coming and going, and they weren't over-wintering. It turned out we don't have them at all. It was an exercise in futility." It was expensive, too, as the DEC imposed fines amounting to some \$36,000 for violations regarding construction without necessary permits — in one instance, says Stenberg, after giving a verbal okay for work to proceed. Part of the fine is still in dispute, but the partners elected to pay the rest rather than engage in a protracted court battle.

Stenberg is exasperated at the memory. "I respect [Westerveld's] passion for the environment," he says. "I have it, too. But I believe in smart growth, in use that protects our environment. For anybody to refer to us as developers is ridiculous. We saved a neglected



**Luxury defined** At left: One of 20 guest bathrooms, all of which are clad in Carrera marble. A typical bedroom (above) features an overstuffed armchair and antique accessories. The 1921 photo of the southern garden (inset) shows a walled pool and statuary, all part of Beatrix Farrand's original design

to protect it from development. But instead of being joyful while we did this, we were constantly being beaten up. We spent a great deal of money and downtime to prove these frogs weren't here." And what if they had been there? "We would have done whatever we needed to do to work around them," Stenberg replies.

Because of the battle with the DEC, plans to restore Farrand's walled garden have been shelved. "Right now, we're too dispirited to attempt it. It's a daunting task, and it's closer to the lake," Stenberg says, meaning the issue of frog habitat would likely come up again. But they cleared away the overgrowth and trash, leaving the skeleton of the garden visible. No surprise, the statuary and ornaments were pilfered over the decades. But one orna-

ment remains: a stone basket of fruit that once sat on a pier. The partners adopted it as Glenmere's logo, and put the real thing in the new courtyard garden, a Farrand-inspired space created by Boston landscape architects Morgan Wheelock, with pergolas, fountains, statuary, and a columned loggia.

The hotel and dining rooms opened early this year, with chef Mike Foss heading up the kitchen and DeSimone acting as expediter. Foss was formerly a private chef to Hollywood celebrities, "which makes him more amenable if you throw him a curve," notes Stenberg. "He's really engaging and funny. Of course, he has an ego, too — I think it comes with the hat." Are they enjoying the fruits of their midlife crisis? "It's certainly a life change," he replies. "We're a good team. Dan

can be warm and funny, but he's an acquired taste. So he's in the background, and I'm out front."

Glenmere almost immediately caught the attention of *Architectural Digest*, *Robb Report*, and other glossy favorites of the moneyed set. "It's exciting," Stenberg says. "My only fear is being put on a high level so quickly." With room rates running from \$550 to \$3,400, the hotel is aimed at high rollers — but the rest of us in nearby towns can enjoy the restaurants. "The greatest surprise for us was how the local community embraced us," Stenberg says. "Farmers from Pine Island, neighbors — they came to our doorstep to say thank you. They want us to succeed. They're proud to have this in their backyard." ●