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MEET ROCKSTAR INTERIOR DESIGNERS JOAN BEHNKE,
MARTYN LAWRENCE BULLARD, KATIE RIDDER AND MORE

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DESIGNERS OF 2018



FAME AND

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Designer Joan Behnke crafts interiors for an elite clientele but her talent emits a star power all its own

BY JENNIFER SPERRY

FORTUNE

Bennke infused comfortable luxury into a set of exclusive villas dotting Sardinia's Costa Smeralda.

Opposite page: Art and custom furnishings flourish inside the Malibu retreat of wine country power couple Ann Colgin and Joe Wenger.



SHE'S AN INTERIOR DESIGNER TO THE PROVERBIAL RICH AND

famous, and was aptly dubbed “The Billionaire Whisperer” by Forbes. Joan Behnke began her career with palaces and residences for Saudi Arabia’s royal family, and has achieved notoriety by designing for Tom Brady and Gisele Bündchen. Then there’s the music producer who bought Brady’s LA home for \$40 million (Google it), Sylvester Stallone, and billionaires Alec Gores and Thomas Barrack, among other moguls.

Her success is well-deserved and her talent well-documented, which is why Behnke is not quite what you’d expect when you first meet her. Soft-spoken and warm, she listens and connects on a personal level that is instantly soothing. And she tells great stories, too.

At the LA office where her eponymous firm

employs a staff of 22, her new standard poodle puppy, Otis (named after Otis Reading), is everyone’s favorite mascot. Born in San Francisco, and having lived, worked, and studied in New York City, Tokyo, and Italy, the entrepreneur took to the City of Angels slowly. “I found myself always apologizing for living in LA up until a few years ago, but there’s a lot of cool things going on here now; I’ve adopted it finally,” she says with a laugh.

An enthusiastic globetrotter who religiously takes two personal trips a year on top of heavy work travel, Behnke inhabits different cultures with ease. One minute, she’s collaborating with world-renown architects and walking sites with her A-list clients; another minute, she’s connecting with little-known artisans and craftspeople—sometimes communicating with drawings and hand gestures—in all corners of the globe.

With her web of makers and doers, she can source virtually anything from any-

Top and Opposite Page: For the Malibu home of billionaire Alec Gores, Behnke kept the interior light and airy. “You don’t want anything too formal or precious near the ocean,” says the designer. “You have to think about kids running in with sand on their feet and wear and tear from the elements.”





Joan Behnke

where: a light fixture from Paris, hand-made terracotta roof tiles from Italy, marble quarried in Tuscany, furniture from a small village in Myanmar. She treats the world as one giant design showroom, and encourages her clients to come with her to shop and meet the artisans making their furnishings firsthand.

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Design and space planning are in her blood—"My Barbie dolls always had great houses," she jokes—and Behnke received a design degree from UCLA. But her early interests were varied: after studying art history and dance as an undergrad, she continued with dance and worked in advertising in New York before trying out set/production design (her husband worked in the film industry) back in Calif.

After splitting with her husband, and with two boys to support, the self-starter decided it was time to hustle and ultimately landed a job with design maven Erika Brunson. "Her client base was the royal family of Saudi Arabia," recalls Behnke. "It was a foray into a very rarified world. Everything was custom made and resourced."

Post-Brunson, Behnke worked on The Mansion at MGM Grand in Las Vegas with Wilson Associates before setting out on her own in 1999. The first person she hired to work at Joan Behnke & Associates, architect Cris Felizardo, is still on staff.

THE APPROACH

Behnke's interiors express the essence of the people living in them, versus any sort of



Shifting easily between residential and resort work, Behnke outfitted exclusive villas at two Sardinia hotels with all the comforts of home plus expectant luxuries.





50,000-square-foot home in the Hills. “They wanted to walk around barefoot and have their blood pressure drop as soon as they entered,” describes Behnke, whose design team scoured Europe for elements that evoked the South of France.

“We kept everything casual, light, and bright and were very playful,” says Behnke. Her favorite details include an artwork of small birds sitting on delicate branches sprouting right out of the plaster walls and a collection of cobalt blue bottles lined up on decorative shelves over a custom bench. “Each one has a different adjective; people can make their own haiku,” she notes.

Outside on the deck, a custom bar doubles as a sushi counter. Since Nobu Matsuhisa is a good friend of Gores, it’s not unheard of for the celebrity chef and restaurateur to make an appearance at a party.

In 2011, opportunity knocked for Behnke once again when billionaire investor and regular client Thomas Barrack purchased a 36 mile swath of Sardinia’s Costa S’meralda. Barrack’s wife, Laurel, supervised the update of two existing hotels, the Pitrizza and Romazzino, and Behnke worked on private villas for both, which in season fetch up to \$25,000 per night.

“The two projects were very different: Pitrizza’s villas are earthy, organic, and filled with sculptural shapes while Romazzino’s are bright and light, with beautiful, bright turquoise and blues set against a backdrop of white plaster,” says the designer. “Overall, everything was Bohemian chic. These are places for people with jewels and Pucci caftans—it’s not about impressing; it’s about unwinding.”

Sourcing everything from Italy was a challenge that Behnke embraced wholeheartedly. “I was in Sardegna ten days out of every month during the project. I was always jetlagged,” she recalls fondly.

handicraft. Virtually every piece is custom designed: in other words, never seen before or duplicated again.

“Joan doesn’t have a signature look,” observes renowned architect Richard Landry, who’s collaborated with Behnke on the LA home of Brady and Bündchen (now sold) and the 23,000-square-foot “Villa del Lago” chateau of Bob and Audrey Byers in Thousand Oaks, Calif., which Robb Report named its Ultimate Home of 2013. “She’s creative and wants to keep creating and bringing fresh ideas to the table.

“For both of us, it’s always about the clients,” continues Landry. “We know that the goal is to work together to try and create something amazing for them. Plus, with Joan there’s no drama; if a client doesn’t like something, she simply moves on to a new idea. She has a great demeanor and really cares about people.”

THE BILLIONAIRES

For well over a decade, Behnke has worked with investor Alec Gores on a total of 11 projects, ranging from his private plane to his daughter Rochelle’s home in LA. When the billionaire set his sights on Malibu, building a new home in the style of southern France, with a Moroccan twist, he looked to his favorite design collaborator once again, asking for a relaxing getaway that would be equally comfortable for two or a large family crowd.

For the interior, the family desired something diametrically opposed to their

“stamp” that she as a designer might apply. “Our approach is to honor both a project’s architecture and our clients,” she contends. “We want to explore the possibilities of how best to connect their home with their life.”

Business interests, travel, artworks, collections, awards, memorabilia, kids, staff, friends, parties: every detail of a client’s life is meticulously considered. Then, the Architectural Design darling applies her acclaimed eye to the developing style, infusing profound beauty into both indoor and outdoor spaces through art, hand-picked materials, and bespoke furnishings. In a Behnke design, adventure mingles with restraint, formality with whimsy, and high art with





Behnke worked her magic inside the Malibu home of Ann Corgin and Joe Wender, deftly interweaving the couple's art pieces with distinctive furnishings while ensuring a master chef-approved kitchen.



chef-friendly kitchen to the poolside loungers, materialized under Behnke's close supervision.

Sustainability was at the forefront of the couple's decision-making: "Giselle is very down to earth and very conscious of the environment," explains Behnke, who shopped with them in Paris. "She is also very giving," adds the designer, who was touched when the supermodel took the time to help her with a personal matter for a friend.

When Sylvester Stallone and wife Jennifer Flavin wanted to refresh their family home in Beverly Hills, they sought out Behnke. "It was a transitional time for them," recalls the design ace. "He had been dominant in terms of the home's design, and after raising their three beautiful daughters, Jennifer wanted to simplify and achieve a cleaner look."

Behnke connected with Stallone over his love of art: "He's a big art collector and was always willing to check out different ideas and take big chances." Holding a couple of his awards and culling through his memorabilia was a highlight for the designer: "He has amazing photographs from when he was a young star, meeting presidents, and so many wonderful mementoes."

THE DANCING

Besides her two sons—one is an architect and the other works at her office as her office manager—Behnke's personal focus is always on art and travel, dual passions that continually and deliciously intertwine. She lives a very low-key lifestyle sans flash—and still dances a couple times a week. Mostly ballet plus some contemporary jazz, Latin, and hip-hop.

Currently the firm is working on projects in Montecito, Santa Barbara; Big Island, Hawaii; Seattle; and Scottsdale, Ariz. No matter the locale, seeing the fruits of her team's efforts never gets old. "We recently worked with one couple who were so gracious; they were self-made and the project was truly their dream home. After the final install, the wife burst into tears as soon as she walked in," relays the veteran designer. "Of course, I cried as well...it was the best reward." ♦

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT joanbehnke.com

THE CELEBRITIES

After working with Tom Brady and Giselle Bundchen twice—first on their LA home and more recently on their estate in Chestnut Hill, MA—Behnke felt like an honorary part of the family for a while.

"I only have really wonderful things to say about them both," she relates. "We first met when they came to see my work at Alec Gores' Malibu home and they couldn't have been sweeter. Tom's oldest son was a baby back then and Giselle was a natural with him."

In collaboration with architect Richard Landry, Behnke worked with the power couple to create a kid-friendly home in the hills of Brentwood where the family could unwind during Brady's off-season. Every detail, from the home gym to the personal

philanthropists, and art collectors was no chore, she admits. "They have some really fun art," says Behnke, who added her own whimsical touches, like standout light fixtures by a French designer in the living room that look like exploding driftwood.

Much care was taken in the kitchen's design, particularly in light of Wender and Corgin's connection to Napa chef Thomas Keller. "He caters dinner parties for the couple so the layout and function had to be Keller-approved," Behnke adds.

Unlike their homes in Bel Air and Napa, the couple wanted the Malibu getaway to feel like a perpetual vacation. Entertaining spaces abound, from the dining room, where beach balls adorn the specially finished walls, to the back deck, where the lapping Pacific is a mesmerizing backdrop. And of course, there's a knockout wine cellar.