

# MODERN *Villa*

DESIGNER ELIZABETH VALLINO CELEBRATES EUROPEAN FORMALITY GONE BAREFOOT CASUAL



by TRISH REYNALES photographs by LUCA TROVATO





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ATHER than forcing a project to come together within a time frame, I'd rather see someone living with good artwork, a great rug—leaving a room empty until the right thing comes along,” says interior designer Elizabeth Vallino. That way, she notes, if you happen to be in, say, Barcelona or Marrakech or Rome or Paris and come across an incredible table, a one-of-a-kind chandelier, a sublime painting, that perfect chair, your treasure can find a place in your home. “You can work with it—it gets folded into the mix.”

At once practical and romantic, Vallino’s creative approach to space underscores her belief in process over product, in decor as life collage—a philosophy well expressed via her work on this Montecito home. “For a long time, we just bought things we loved, knowing we would find a place for them eventually,” she says, recalling the finds she and the client stockpiled.

Their collaboration began nine years ago as a simple living room redo—that is, until Vallino pinpointed the “white box problem.” Built in 1995, the Mediterranean-style manse was constructed throughout with modern materials. “The architecture speaks to a period and place that the materials in no way reflected,” Vallino explains. With its high square ceiling, the living room in particular felt inordinately stark and blocky—a far cry from the sensual ambience of, say, an Italian villa. For Vallino, 47, who specializes in incorporating architectural elements, bridging that gap was a challenge tailor made.

“We started by building the stone fireplace and wood mantel,” she says. She then coffered the ceiling, which anchored and formalized the room. Rapport firmly established between home owner and designer, herself an inveterate traveler, the stage was set for further modifications: upgrades for the kitchen; the addition of a motor court, gates, a garage, a family room—all resonant with such details as reclaimed grills, grates, handmade tiles, and handcarved doors. “We did it together,” says Vallino. “It was at that point that the

Custom grillwork, a Moroccan door, and Xue Song’s 2004 lithograph, *Work makes you free* embellish the study. Lamp by Gianni Vallino. OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Antique floor tiles contrast with the family room’s modern art; a chandelier lights up the foyer. PREVIOUS PAGES: The living room revamp included the cozy fireplace.



A Vallino must: C&C Milano linens for the bedroom. John Ransom Phillips painting. OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: 1930s images by German artist Karl Blossfeldt adorn the kitchen; dining room accents include portraits by West African photographer Seydou Keita and 1940s leather chairs from Lucca Antiques in Los Angeles.

house finally made sense.” She also turned her attention to the client’s burgeoning art collection, much of it acquired at artists’ studios in Europe and Asia. At once vibrant and refined, the resulting look—Vallino dubs it “modern villa”—exudes something between classic old-world elegance and 21st-century globetrotter.

“Some people think that in Italy and France, there are these period homes,” says Vallino, who lived in Rome during her two-year curriculum with Istituto Pantheon Design & Technology, then spent another four years shuttling between New York and Europe in a post-college position as market editor for the fashion center of the Italian Trade Commission. “But a real Italian country house is going to be more like this house in the sense that the owners travel, they bring their finds back from India, from Africa.... It’s very eclectic, very “This is my life.”

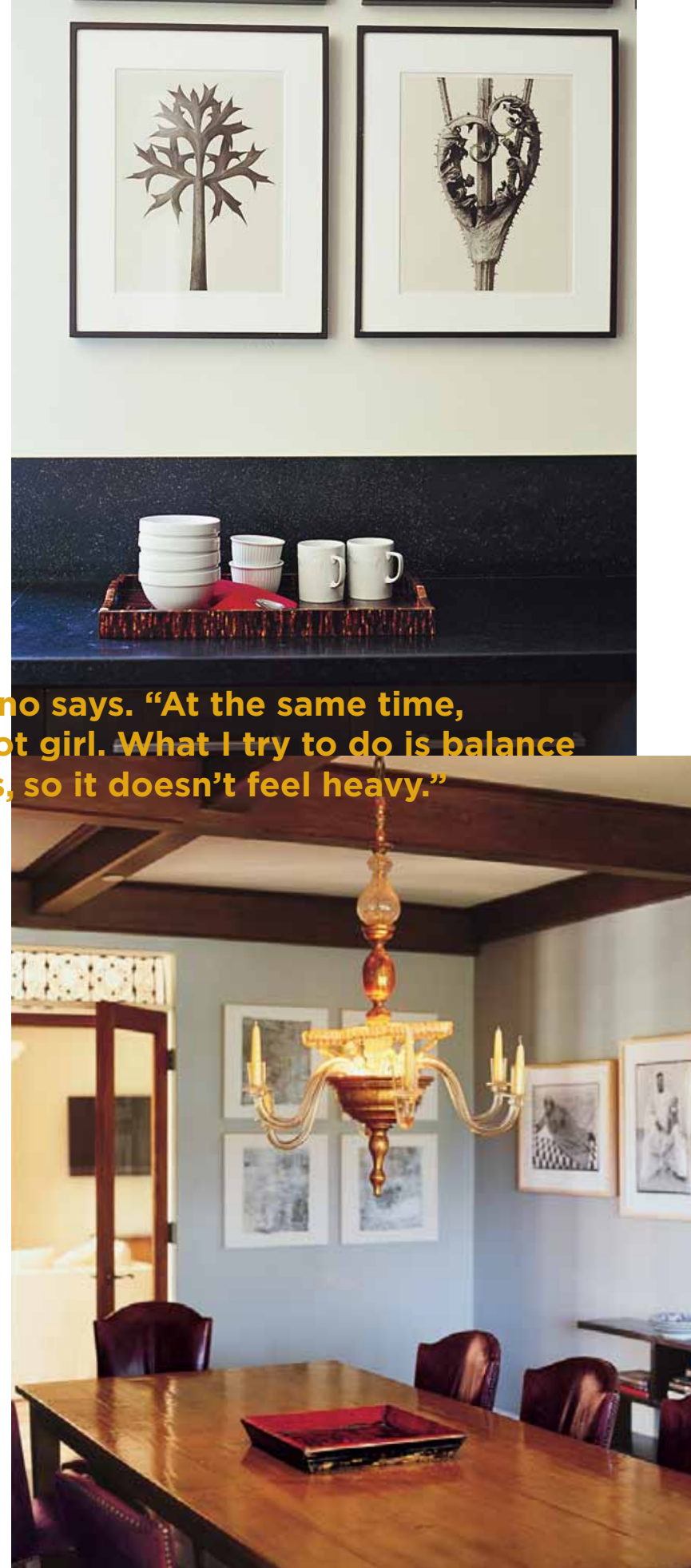
Additional appointments to the living room included a vintage crystal chandelier from France, plush sofas in ecru

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linen from C&C Milano, and a wall-size abstract work by the Chicago-based painter Von Kommanivanh. Equally fresh in ambience but decidedly more casual, the family room features an antique Spanish screen from Europa in Summerland, a Moroccan door and reclaimed Spanish floor tiles from Berbere Imports in Los Angeles (to Vallino and the client’s delight, complete with *perro* paw prints), and a 17th-century stone fireplace bought at auction in Houdan just outside of Paris. Modern complements: the sofa in a pretty Suzani print from Manuel Canovas.

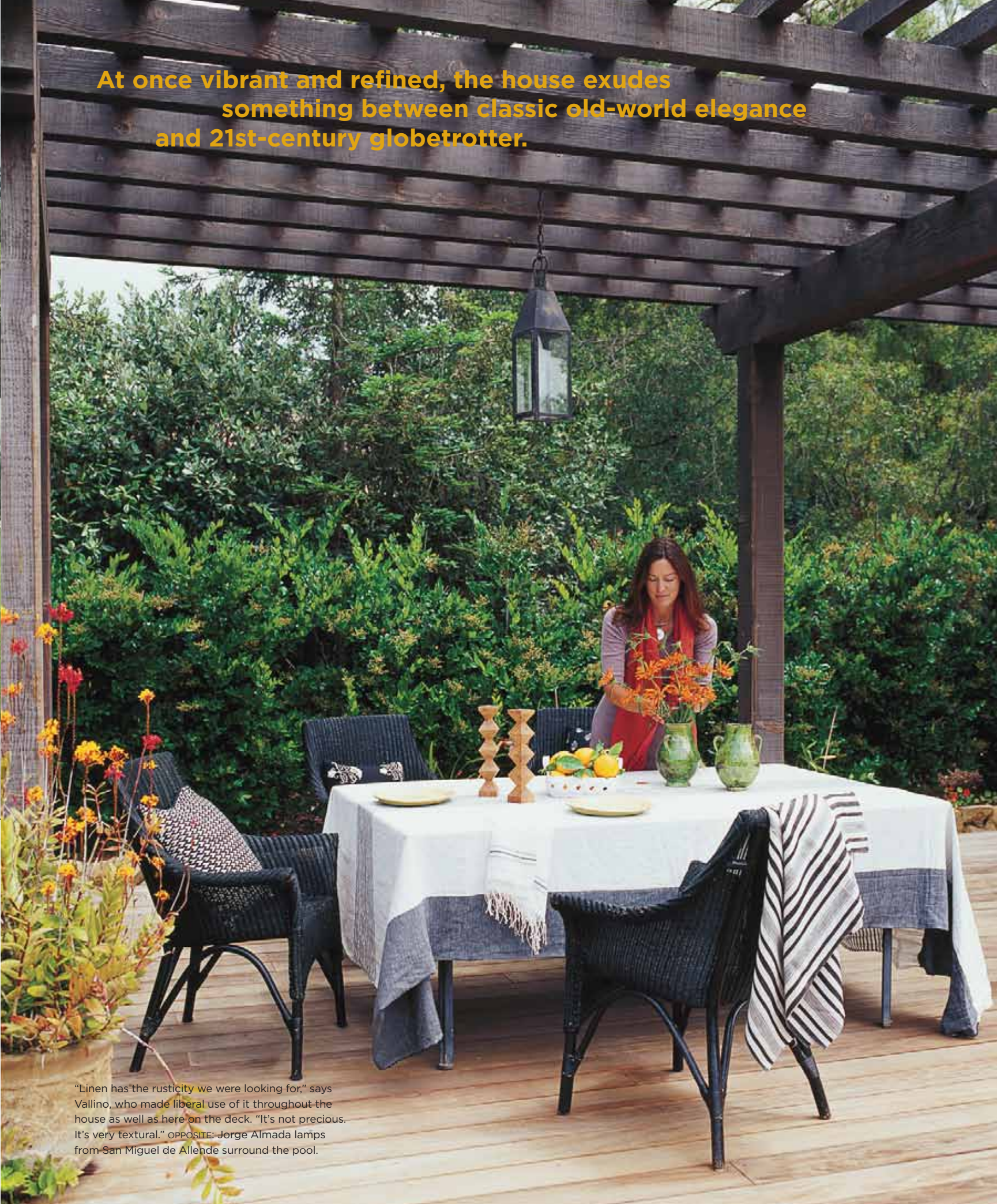
“I love what the passage of time does to materials,” Vallino says. “How good things are when they get old.” She credits her education in Rome for the latter sentiment; her light hand and sense of placement and proportion to an interim career as a stylist for fashion photographer Dominick Guillemot in Santa Monica. “One vase and one modern chair and—boom!—the mood is established by this very rarified language of the objects,” she says. “You have to know when to stop. When too many things start talking, you just get cacophony.”

For someone so articulate and passionate about her profession, the role of decorator was, for Vallino, something of a fluke. Born and raised in Ventura, she majored in comparative literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder, then traveled to Italy in 1983 for a post-graduation holiday. It was





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love at first sight—she took on design studies initially just to prolong her stay. “I don’t know why I loved Italy,” she says. “I’m Irish! I just had an arrow go into my heart!” In fact, she eventually married an Italian—lamp designer Gianni Vallino—then living in Los Olivos, which brought her to Santa Barbara in 1996. Shortly after the birth of their son, Luca, now 11, she launched her interior design business. Today, she commutes from their home in Painted Cave to her Anacapa Street studio.

Which is not to say that she limits her focus to any one style. “I love European formality,” she says. “At the same time, I’m from California, I’m a barefoot girl. What I try to do is balance that—it’s formality but effortless, so it doesn’t feel heavy—to bring that to whatever the client’s love is aesthetically.” Vallino has worked in everything from English country to what she describes as “100 percent modernist,” though the “modern villa,” graciously realized over time, remains something of a pet project.

“That’s a great thing about this client,” she says. “They’re fearless. They don’t need to be clear about what’s going to happen next. If only everyone understood that—that rather than having it all in a little outline, when you leave space for things to come together, you get much better results.” ■

“Linen has the rusticity we were looking for,” says Vallino, who made liberal use of it throughout the house as well as here on the deck. “It’s not precious. It’s very textural.” OPPOSITE: Jorge Almada lamps from San Miguel de Allende surround the pool.



The view from the motor court leads into the family room. "Everything is sort of quiet," says the designer of the structure's overall color palette. "It lets the big artwork talk the loudest." OPPOSITE: Vallino transformed a deco gate from Europa in Summerland into graceful doors for the front entry.

