

MY FAVORITE ROOM | NOVEMBER 12, 2011

Monastic Fantastic

Los Angeles decorator and entertaining expert Kathryn M. Ireland revisits meals taken in the luxuriously spartan dining room of an Italian country estate

By JEN RENZI

Kathryn Ireland already costars in a television show, "Million Dollar Decorators," which documents the madcap process of designing for Los Angeles's rich and famous. But allow me to propose a spin-off, in which the British-born textile maven and author would walk us through the grand European manors and chateaus she's frequented. (And in whose well-appointed environs she learned her trade by osmosis.) One episode would tour Edwin Lutyens's Deanery Gardens, where she played hide-and-seek as a 12-year-old.



Roberto Schezen / Esto

IT TAKES A VILLA | The simple dining room at La Rocca Pisana in Lonigo, Italy, has inspired Ms. Ireland since she spent a summer there as a teenager.

Another would be devoted to Wynyard Hall, where Ms. Ireland spent holidays with her childhood friend Cosima. "Her mum, Nicolette, Marchioness of Londonderry, hired David Hicks to transform this fuddy-duddy estate into an extraordinarily groovy house with an incredible sense of color," the designer marveled.

The season finale would have our protagonist jetting off to La Rocca Pisana in Lonigo, Italy, where Ms. Ireland lived for a memorable summer at age 17. She taught English to the daughters of the house, and got schooled herself—in 16th-century Italian design. The sublime villa, built in 1576 by Vincenzo Scamozzi (a protégé of Andrea Palladio), has elegantly proportioned rooms that surround a central rotunda. An innovative air-conditioning system circulated cool breezes through grills in the ceilings and floors. The decorating borders on the monastic, with a judicious selection of clean-lined wood furnishings arrayed like sculptures. "Living there was when I really became aware of architecture," Ms. Ireland explained. Indeed, she gave herself a crash course in period style after being enlisted to give tours of the property to VIP visitors including Paloma Picasso and busloads of Japanese vacationers. "Everyone who comes through town wants to see that house; it's so beautifully kept." (And, alas, not open to the public.)

She particularly loves the villa's dining room. "I have such fond memories of all the generations sitting together at mealtime; it was a very old-fashioned and magical experience," she said. Daylight flooding in through casement windows set off creamy stone floors and richly patinated woodwork. The table and chairs are almost Medieval in their simplicity, with flattened ornamentation and rough-hewn lines. The high, vaulted ceiling gives the dining vignette breathing room, Ms. Ireland added. "Whether you live in a tent or a Palladian villa, a great room is all about having the right proportions." And the right company, too.



Keep it simple

"If I were throwing a dinner party here, I'd do something very spare. I hate fussy, over-decorated tables. One too many ingredients throws the whole thing off. I think food always looks best on pattern-less white or cream plates—something like Countryware from Wedgwood. The shape is incredibly simple but the china has a weight to it."

'Food always looks best on pattern-less white or cream plates.'



Reuse, revivify and be local

"With dining tables, I prefer antiques or recycling a client's existing piece. I'm a believer in restoration whenever possible. A can of paint does wonders—I particularly love Gustavian grays and dusky greens—but I also like stripping old wood pieces and treating them with beeswax.

'With dining tables, I prefer antiques or recycling a client's existing piece.'

When building homes in the 16th century, architects used all local materials. I think we should go back to our roots—whether adobe walls or regional stones. It drives me crazy when someone builds a house in, say, Tucson, and uses imported marbles when we have such

wonderful indigenous materials, like Arizona flagstone. I usually source directly from stone yards, but you can find amazing options at Exquisite Surfaces." xsurfaces.com

Add a hint of softness

"Some rooms in the villa had simple velvet window treatments. I think the only way you could improve the dining room would be to add curtains here, too. Just a touch of fabric would be perfection. You'd want to use very, very simple upholstery, like a heavy, hand-dyed linen." Moroccan Weave, an Italian linen-wool fabric, is from Ms. Ireland's most recent collection.



Heavy, hand-dyed linen

Put dining on a pedestal

"Over those gorgeous stone floors they set up a kind of wood platform under the table. I love that you step up and it sets the stage for dining; the height adds a bit of drama. I'm dying to try that idea in a project—I'd use my friend Martyn Lawrence-Bullard's new hardwood flooring line." Available at Nathan Turner, Los Angeles.

Pair odd chairs

"Notice that the chairs pulling up to the ends and sides of the table are different. I like that mismatched look—it's something I often do in my own projects. One reason is that it's so difficult to find great sets of antique dining chairs. But I also think touches like this make a house feel less 'decorated'—more like a home than a designer showplace." Ms. Ireland has been coveting this English circa 1830 chair from Obsolete in L.A. (obsoleteinc.com).



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Declutter, declutter, declutter

"The simplicity here is appealing. There are no knickknacks or tchotchkes—just that marvelous old doge looming over the fireplace. The look is beautifully minimal, which makes it feel modern. I loved that

they lived in such a spartan way. A clean, restrained space like this lifts your soul and allows your brain to think.

Even though the architecture is rather grand, the furniture is informal, even peasant-like. It is very true to the period, but you can achieve a similar simplicity with pieces from other eras as well. The early-to-middle 18th century is my favorite period." Galerie Half (galeriehalf.com) and The Melrose Project (themelroseproject.com) are two of Ms. Ireland's go-to places for this look.



Kathryn M. Ireland

Bio in Brief: Kathryn M. Ireland

Her résumé: The British-born decorator, based in Santa Monica and the South of France, launched her own firm in the early 1990s and debuted her textile line shortly after. Before becoming a designer, Ms. Ireland logged stints in acting and filmmaking—experience she's put to use as one of the stars of Bravo's "Million Dollar Decorators."

Her clients: Steve Martin, Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Arianna Huffington are among the boldfaced names who have enlisted Ms. Ireland to outfit their homes in

her signature aristocrat-gone-boho style, which juxtaposes clean-lined antiques and beautifully aged natural finishes with boldly colored global-chic textiles.

Her goods: Ms. Ireland's fabrics are distributed in showrooms across the globe. Her London and West Hollywood storefronts carry her full product line, which has expanded to include wallpapers, pillows, lamps, rugs and beds. She will soon launch a diffusion line of one-color prints. For more information, read her latest book, "Summers in France," or visit kathrynireland.com.

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