



: heritage

History at Home

Disney executive turns the former site of General Hap Arnold's house into a tranquil family retreat

by CAROLE KELLEHER photography by CHRIS HARDY

ON A SHELF OF honor alongside the fireplace at El Rancho Feliz sit symbols of two owners who have called this property home. The first is a thick autobiography, “Global Mission,” written on-site by Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, the leader of the Army Air Corps during World War II. Arnold retired to these 40 acres with his wife, Bee, when his military years ended.

The second is a Grammy for the soundtrack of the movie “Frozen,” awarded to executive music producer Chris Montan, who with his wife, Barbara, built a new home on this Sonoma Mountain land they purchased from the five-star general’s grandson.

The welcoming front porch of El Rancho Feliz, the home the Montans built on property originally owned by WWII Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold.



The Arnolds lived in a 2,000-square-foot modern ranch-style home on the property, spending much of their time out on the patio, enjoying the seclusion and the quiet, natural setting. The Montans have built a stunning yet unassuming 4,000-square-foot farmhouse-style home that sits gently on the exact footprint of the general's original abode. They say they are honored to be here, and have made every effort to keep Arnold's spirit alive. A framed, enlarged Time magazine cover of Arnold in uniform hangs in the wine room, and redwood siding from the original home was saved, painted and reused in the guestroom.

(left) Chris and Barbara Montan with their Havanese dogs Rufus and Layla. Their grown sons Spencer and Nils are frequent visitors. (above) A framed, enlarged Time magazine cover illustration of Gen. Arnold in uniform hangs in the wine room.

Redwood panels from the Arnolds' original house were saved and used in the guest room, painted to match the natural hues of the Montans' home. The window seat is a twin-size bed.

The spacious side patio has views of the owners' Cabernet vineyards and Sonoma Mountain.





The Montans' architect, Luke Wade, also designed an above-garage freestanding guest studio. Earthtone Construction was the builder, and interior designer Jennifer Macdonald of Jennifer Robin Interiors created a home that is elegant yet still invites relaxation. Landscape designer Paul Rozansky fashioned a lawn area surrounding the pool with pathways that wander among the park-like native plant gardens. There are 6 acres of Cabernet and Cabernet Franc vineyards,

[clockwise from top left]

A stairway leads to an entry to the master suite and its private patio. The landscape design by Paul Rozansky enhances the views and honors the native trees.

The rear of the house looks out to the swimming pool and gardens beyond.

The pool and fire pit offer views of the Valley of the Moon, with the Mayacamas Mountains in the distance.



Montan says his favorite thing about living here now full time is "the peacefulness, the beauty, the quiet."



General Arnold's autobiography "Global Mission" and Chris' Grammy for "Frozen" sit in a place of honor alongside the fireplace.

A Bosendorfer, which Chris plays almost every day, graces the entry hall. When the Montans entertain, friends frequently gather around the piano and sing along.

the bounty of which winemaker Richard Arrowood uses in El Rancho Feliz Sonoma Valley Cabernet.

Until only months ago, Chris Montan was the president of music at Walt Disney Music, and he's the man behind the music in "Toy Story," "Aladdin," and "The Little Mermaid," among many other movies. At age 64, he retired early because when he was responsible for all music in the animated films, Broadway shows and Disney theme parks worldwide, he wasn't spending as much time at Rancho Feliz as he wanted. He remains a Disney consultant, and is the executive music producer of the Broadway version of "Frozen," set to open in early 2018.

Echoing his predecessor on the land, Montan says his favorite thing about living here now full time is "the peacefulness, the beauty, the quiet." You can see both sunrise and sunset from the



Their home is designed with open sight lines, for ease of using sign language.

home, which overlooks a vast expanse of vineyards, towering oak and bay trees and the Mayacamas across the Valley.

Barbara is equally thrilled with their Wine Country life. Natives of New Jersey, the Montans lived in Southern California for most of their 39 years of marriage, where they raised their sons, Nils, 29, and Spencer, 26. Spencer is deaf, and Barbara has been a diligent advocate for the hearing impaired, including pioneering the use of open captioning in first-run films. Their home is designed with open sight lines, for ease of using sign language.

The Montans discovered Sonoma at the invitation of their friends John and Nancy Lasseter, who live on an estate in Glen Ellen where they raised five sons.


The privacy and subtle hues of the master suite on the second floor invite relaxation.





John, chief creative officer of Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pixar, became friends with Chris in 1992 while directing “Toy Story,” and they worked together on many films to follow. Chris remembers the night, sitting outside in the Valley of Moon with the Lasseters and Tommy and Marcy Smothers, when he suddenly knew, “We’re going to live here someday.” And now they do.

Barbara says she’s heard that some in their new community worried they would be too Hollywood for Wine Country. “We left Hollywood. We came here for a different life, not to bring it with us.” They do entertain, but mostly casually. Chris plays the Bosendorfer in their entry hall, and friends gather round and sing. Their Havanese dogs, Layla and Rufus, are always underfoot.

“The word I use to describe what it’s like to live here is ‘magic,’” Chris says. “It’s all about the land and the view. It pulls you in.” Just as it did Gen. Arnold, some 70 years ago. 

The white wood kitchen features Calcutta Oro counters and subway tile behind the six-burner-with-griddle Wolfe range.

An informal seating area to the left they call the Morning Room is perfect for coffee. The kitchen is open to the great room and more formal dining area.

