

summer

# a·bode'

*inspirations for your Sonoma County home*



Featured in this issue:

rammed-earth  
architecture  
backyard retreats  
restaurant recipes  
summer wine events

*An advertising supplement to The Press Democrat*



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## Welcome to Abode,

The Press Democrat's new home and garden magazine highlighting the essence and benefits of living in Sonoma County.

Abode is your link to the finest local interior design and landscaping sources from all over the county — all in one slick, colorful and inspiring publication.

Abode features the latest trends in interior design — the newest lines, colors and textures from local home furnishings and design shops. And it gives you a rare peek into the county's most beautiful backyard havens filled with creative and inviting garden ideas.

You'll also find cooking tips, recipes and wine pairing suggestions from the area's most celebrated chefs — delicious ways to bring the Wine Country's wealth of good food and award-winning vintages to your table.

Take a close-up look at fine furniture and upscale home accessories handcrafted by local artisans in a special column titled "By Hand." Learn about growing unusual and not-so-unusual plants from local nursery owners and master gardeners.

Abode also profiles local interior design experts and horticulturists, spotlighting their latest successes, including best-selling books and award-winning home and garden designs.

Find details on the season's best home, garden, food and wine events happening throughout Sonoma County and beyond. And follow the home design and gardening challenges of Abode's editor in "At Home," a column about creating a home that is a reflection of you.

Abode features all local resources and is filled with fresh ideas to help you create the Sonoma County home and garden you want.

Read on... and be inspired.

*Susan Carmody*

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The Sonoma home of Bruce and Edna Needleman, owners of Salsa Trading Company in Sonoma Valley as well as experts in interior designs with Spanish colonial, early ranch-style, Native American and Mexican influences. See page 6.

photo by Duncan Garrett



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# Made of earth and filled with handcrafted treasures



BY SUSAN CARMODY

High atop an oak-studded knoll on the outskirts of Sonoma, where hawks ride the air's thermals and deer drink from rain-swollen creeks, Bruce and Edna Needleman have created a home that is not only an extension of its tranquil surroundings but is actually made from them.

The Needleman family live in a rammed-earth house built from the soil on which it stands. Not a spanking new construction form, but an environmentally friendly one requiring little or no timber and, in their case, one that is perfectly suited to their tastes in home furnishings.

The couple owns Salsa Trading Company, a Bay Area chain of upscale home furnishing shops specializing in pieces that are a mix of Spanish colonial, early ranch-style, Native American and Mexican influences. These furnishings, which they love and have used to furnish their own abode, lend themselves beautifully to the architectural grandeur and feeling of strength that — contrary to its name — a rammed-earth home exudes.

## Elegant, yet livable

"Casual elegance is the look we wanted to achieve," says Edna, who previously worked as a director of retail stores for Jessica McClintock and as a merchandiser for Espirit de Corp kids collection. (Bruce also left the corporate fast track, having worked for fine jewelry manufacturers as vice president of sales for many years.)

And to match their new slower-paced lifestyle, the couple wanted their home to be very livable — a place where guests feel they can put their feet up — as well as simpatico with the sun-soaked days and warm nights indicative of the Valley of the Moon.

The Needleman family have carried out this elegant-yet-livable theme, literally, from floor tiles to roof tiles.

The actual design of the home, which the couple created with San Francisco architect Michael Bauske, has a truly Spanish flavor, borrowing style elements from old haciendas and missions. Over 15,000 ceramic tiles in warm burnt sienna, imported to the building site directly from Mexico — a find on one of



PHOTOS BY DUNCAN GARDNER

the couple's many trips in search of unique furnishings to feature in their stores — cover the home's 4,000 square feet. And the roof is topped with another 15,000 Mexican tiles — handmade, red ceramic "barrel" tiles, which get their name from the rounded shape they develop while being hand-formed atop the knee of their creator.

There is also a little southern charm. Wooden French doors, painted black to match the wrought iron elements used inside and out, are in every room, opening to the covered porch that wraps around the entire house, adding 2,400 square feet of outdoor living space. Flanking each of these doors are usable,

black-painted shutters that can be closed from the outside to keep out sun or heat or cold and provide privacy — there is no need for interior window coverings in the home's secluded location.

The interior is spacious with 10-foot, beamed ceilings. High enough to provide a roomy feeling but not so high as to eliminate the home's intimate, cozy appeal, says Bruce. And the interior walls have been hand-waxed to a soft patina which provides a rich backdrop for the handcrafted Mexican wall hangings the couple has collected on their travels.

This hand-waxing process took three months, says Edna, and made for some very tired arms and lots





broken trowels, but it creates walls that are virtually maintenance-free. It's like a furniture finish; you merely wipe clean.

### Adding 'old world' charm

The exterior coffee-with-cream-colored walls hint, from far away, at the stucco of traditional mission-style homes but actually have a smoother finish. The couple had their builder, Steve Burlington of Burlington Construction Inc. in Sonoma, sandblast the walls to make them less rough and to reveal the compacted earth's strata, providing a look generally found only in very old buildings.

The roof tiles were also given this "Old Country" look. Instead of being laid evenly, mortar was placed beneath them in uneven amounts, explains Bruce, to create the look of an old hacienda roof.

### Newer rammed-earth technique

The *Pisé* method was used to build the Needleman's home. *Pisé*, based on the French term for rammed earth, *pisé de terra*, is coined as an acronym for "pneumatically impacted stabilized earth." It's a newer rammed-earth building technique — rammed-earth dwellings date back to 1700 B.C. in Mesopotamia — that involves spraying the earth mixture from a hose horizontally against a rigid, one-walled form — a method similar to the gunite technique used to create concrete retaining walls and swimming pools.

The massive walls of a rammed-earth structure — the Needleman's walls are 18 inches thick — are made of mineral soils rich in sedimentary rock with a little cement added as a stabilizer. Burlington used 12 percent cement for the Needleman's home — brown-tinted to give the walls their beige tone. Color varies, depending on the soil used, from a peachy rust to a soft gray.

After the earth and cement mixture has been moistened and sprayed into reusable wood forms, it is rammed down to half its volume using pneumatic tools. Once dry — in a couple of hours — it becomes concrete-strong, molded sedimentary rock.

### Benefits of a rammed-earth home

One of the many benefits of a rammed-earth home is that it stays about 20 degrees cooler inside on hot days, according to Bruce — a plus during Sonoma Valley's scorching summers. And on cold days, there's little need for heat. The thick walls create a "thermal lag," slowing down the penetration of cold in the winter and heat in the summer and providing an almost constant temperate interior climate.

During the few days a year it is necessary, radiant heating, installed beneath the tiled floors, warms the Needleman's home. One boiler system heats the floors and the domestic water, explains Burlington.

To circulate the air, no matter the temperature, the couple has had 18 fans installed. They're black to match the wrought iron fixtures throughout the home, which even include wrought iron switch plates.

Other benefits of rammed-earth structures: They are fire-proof, termite-proof, rot-proof, almost sound-proof, hold up like concrete walls in massive rains and flooding, and are engineered for earthquake safety.

The materials used to build a rammed-earth home are dirt cheap, but the process is labor intensive and

requires a lot of heavy equipment. The cost is not equivalent to conventional construction, says Burlington. It is more costly, on par with very expensive, high-end custom home construction.

### A home to accommodate its furniture

Building a custom home provided the Needleman's with the opportunity to design rooms to accommodate their own collection of salsa-style furniture and handcrafted Mexican art. They had half-walls in their great room — which separate the main seating area from the den and the dining room but still provide an open feeling — made the exact

length of the couches that were to sit beside them. The gargantuan cupboard in the dining room, made of centuries' old wood, is the exact length of the wall behind it, and its oversized shelf-style drawer perfectly accommodate the couple's large, colorful, hand-painted ceramic dishes, created especially for them by a Mexican artist they met on their travels.

Small alcoves have been carved into the walls of the main hallway, providing niches in which to showcase their collection of hand-carved wooden sculptures from Mexico.

And just like the furniture they sell in their shops, the pieces in their home are made from reclaimed wood,



including old hacienda doors and other salvaged architectural elements.

The Needleman's passion for the furnishings they sell and live with is partly a love of the lifestyle the pieces allow. Bearing the natural wear inherent in old wood, they are "all very forgiving," says Edna. "You don't have to worry about them."

And in keeping with the "less is more" philosophy the couple emphasizes at their shops, the oversized stature of the pieces in their home lends itself to a simpler decorating approach: Size makes enough of a statement; there's no need for unnecessary clutter.

Collecting furnishings to sell at their shop is an enjoyable aspect of the business, adds Edna. "The families we work with are wonderful and so are the stories behind their handmade pieces."

Salsa Trading Company is located at 20490 Broadway in Sonoma. The phone number is (707) 939-1710. There are also locations in Marin County and the East Bay.