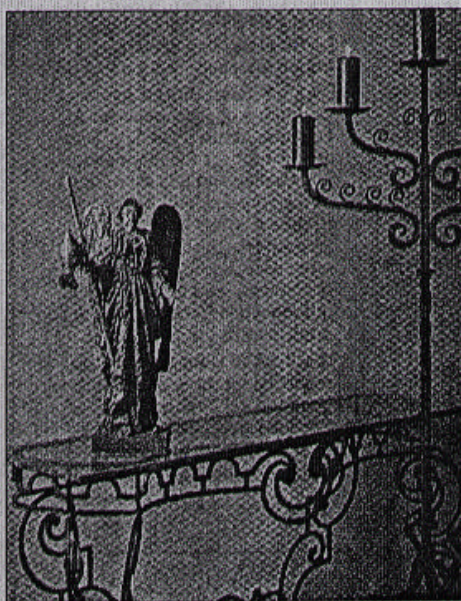


Mexican Country



Blue denim slipcovers (far left) give this classic-lined sofa from Salsa Trading Company a dressed-down, comfortable look and feel. (At left) A sculpturally curved wrought iron base gives this glass console table from Salsa Trading Company a Mexican Country flavor.

Photos provided by Salsa Trading Company

Popular look combines comfort with style

By Susan Carmody

Southwestern style — with its pink sunset and powdery turquoise hues, and its overuse of ceramics — is dead.

The interior design world's new darling, a look born out of Southwestern style and actually centuries old, is Mexican Country. It was time. We've already

done American Country, French Country, English Country, the "cottage look" (a combination of the latter two), even a more rustic Southwestern approach,

spurred by Robert Redford's *Sundance* catalog bristling with rugged furnishings and accessories screaming of the Great
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American Frontier – a look still



Photo provided by Iguana Ameramex

Mexican Country-style furnishings from Iguana Ameramex in Santa Rosa. Many items are one-of-a-kind, says co-owner Richard Burge.

holding its own, and complementary to Mexican Country style.

A relative of Spanish colonial style, Mexican Country is about

comfort. Upholstered and wood pieces boast hearty proportions – seats to sink into, tables to spread out on. Yet, it's not lacking interesting details, finishing touches include hand-forged hardware, fine carving (decorative cutouts and scalloped skirting boards), and tile on table tops.

Country pieces are usually simplified interpretations without the heavy, ornate carving and appliqué details found on the more formal colonial styles, according to Karen Witynski, co-author (with Joe P. Carr) of *Mexican Country Style* (Gibbs Smith, \$39.95).

Ecology buffs will be pleased to note that Mexican Country uses reclaimed architectural elements: old hacienda and barn doors as well as old shutters, which are transformed into dining tables, end tables, and headboards. Old doors are also incorporated into decors, either functionally or standing alone (literally) as simple design pieces.

Accessories include hand-tooled leather lamp shades, pewter lamp bases, mirrors framed in pewter or punched tin, wrought iron chandeliers, *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) figures, which are classic mementos of Mexico's October 31st holiday, hand-carved and brightly painted animal figures, *morteros* (mortars), large, shallow, wooden bowls once used to grind corn, wheat, and coffee, and *molcajetes* (stone grinders) used for the same purposes.

Until recently, finding pieces with a Mexican Country flavor in Sonoma County was a challenge, requiring stints – though enjoyable – to various "boutique" furniture shops, which may carry a few such furnishings, or to larger furniture stores with one small section featuring the look.

However, in the past couple of years, availability of this popular look has boomed with the opening of three Sonoma County shops offering an abundance of Mexican Country style pieces: Iguana Ameramex, which opened a little over a year ago in Santa Rosa, Salsa Trading Company, open only a few months on Broadway in Sonoma, and Worldly Goods, which opened in bucolic Duncans Mills (west of Guerneville) about three years ago.

Iguana Ameramex, on Santa Rosa Avenue (in the Cost Plus/Toys 'R' Us shopping center), is a direct importer of Mexican furniture, pottery, glassware, ceramics, folk art, and wrought iron, and specializes in Mexican Colonial and Colonial Rustica decor – mainly wood furnishings – obtained primarily from smaller, cottage industry producers.

"Many of the items are one-of-a-kind," says co-owner Richard Burge. "Many are 'few-of-a-kind'. We also deal in traditional 200-year-old styles crafted not too far afield from the historical way they were made. You're not going to

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find a computer desk but you will find a large table that can be used as one.

"The price of everything," Burge adds, "is of a tremendous value."

Californians draw to Mexican Country style makes a lot of sense to Burge. We have a "more casual lifestyle," he says, and are more inclined to seek furnishings that suit it. The look is also a familiar one, a kin to the state's historical Spanish influences.

Iguana Ameramex's offerings, which include tables with tops made of reclaimed barn and hacienda doors, are rustic, durable, and suitable for families with young children, says Kathi Bart, manager at the Santa Rosa store. Customers include homeowners of all ages — shopping to furnish primary homes and vacation homes — as well as restaurants, hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, and wineries, even homeowners with designers in tow. Many customers are well-traveled and knowledgeable about Mexican culture, she adds.

Mexican Country furnishings have an electric look which goes really well with antiques and other rustic styles, says Bart. These include French, Moroccan, Italian, and Spanish. It also complements folk arts and crafts as well as various ethnic pieces.

In its 20,000-square-foot Santa Rosa showroom, Iguana Ameramex carries an extensive selection of dining sets and armoires, mostly crafted in pine from Mexico's northern forests. Although, tables made from reclaimed hacienda doors are predominately mesquite. There are also handcrafted and hand-painted trunks, used as end tables, coffee tables, and night stands; dining chairs made of wrought iron; *equipali*, (pigskin-covered tables and chairs); dressers and bookcases bearing traditional Mexican detailing; hand-carved screens; old barn doors (to be used as desired); indoor and outdoor plant pots in many sizes and textures; a very large collection of *Dia de los Muertos* figures; glassware from Guadalajara; decorative papier-mâché fruit; and glass gazing balls in a multitude of colors.

These are furnishings "that have soul and culture," says manager Kathi Bart.

At Salsa Trading Company in Sonoma, you will find many Mexican Country pieces, comfy and oversized, and indicative of the look. Yet, owners Edna Hayes and Bruce Needleman have dubbed this look *salsa style*, and have also incorporated — throughout their 9,000-square-foot showroom — other pieces reflecting what they feel fits this style.

"It's a style inspired by the character of California's heritage," explains Hayes. "It's a mixture of Spanish colonial, early ranch-style, Native American and Mexican influences." So, in addition to the traditional Mexican Country look, customers will find pieces complimentary to it: overstuffed couches upholstered in hand-waxed leather or fitted with denim slipcovers; bench-style sofas made of hickory branches and filled with cushions uphol-

stered in Pendleton blanket wool; glass coffee tables with bases crafted from a profusion of discarded elk antlers; aspen log beds (complete with mattress and all beddings) from Colorado; wool rugs in rich earth tones from Xapotec; steer skulls decoratively covered with leather or turquoise inlays; wrought iron chandeliers; hand-painted pottery and vases; and cobalt blue wine glasses with pewter stems.

The couple also sell cupboards sporting reclaimed, multi-paned glass doors from the Presidio in San Francisco.

Dining tables and armoires are their biggest sellers, says Needleman, and are primarily made of pine, cedar, or reclaimed barn wood.

Hayes and Needleman enjoy scouting throughout the United States for *salsa style* pieces. The Mexican Country-style pieces they carry are handpicked from small, family owned businesses in Mexico; these include gargantuan dining tables made from reclaimed barn doors; pine armoires with hand-carved detailing; tables and chairs covered in pigskin; indoor/outdoor benches made of *sabino*, a northern Mexican hardwood; and mirrors framed with copper and silver inlays. Also, they have recently brought in Mexican antiques.

Salsa Trading Company will take custom orders. "If you see an armoire on the floor, but want it in a different wood," says Needleman, "we can do that."

Also, the couple will search for a particular piece a customer is seeking.

In addition to homeowners, Hayes' and Needleman's clients have included local wine makers and wineries, bed-and-breakfasts,

restaurants, hotels, and the local cooking school Ramekins. They offer all customers decorating services free of charge.

"There is a personal element to each piece (we sell)," says Needleman. "People enjoy furniture with a background, a history to it, and with *salsa style*, you can put your feet up and not worry about the furniture."

At Worldly Goods in Duncan Mills, owner Michael Richardson mixes rich ethnic crafts from over 40 countries with the rugged simplicity of Mexican Country-style pieces. The shop is filled with the works of artisans from faraway lands: traditional antique masks from Africa and the Ivory Coast; hand-painted Oriental screens; hand-carved boxes from Indonesia; wrought iron candle holders from Bali; and, a real find — round, hand-painted boxes in rich earth tones, which Richardson handpicks during his travels to Lombok, next to Bali.

Mexican Country-style furnishings featured at the shop include night stands, coffee tables, trunks, bookshelves, credenzas, trestle tables, and benches. Customers may also order from an extensive catalog.

Mexican crafts featured include hand-woven, wool rugs with bold geometric patterns created from vegetable dyes, hand-painted, wooden animal figures, and hand-blown glassware shaped like old bottles, for use as candle holders.

The appeal of Mexican Country, says store manager William Thaete, is that "it's a 'friendly' style; you can rough it up, spill things on it. It's comfortable."