

Up-Island *Sophistication*

A VINEYARD HOME OFFERS
CASUAL ELEGANCE
FOR A YOUNG FAMILY.

text by katie hutchison | photography by eric roth

MEALS

Ellie Wise and youngest daughter Lily sit on the ottoman "stage" between the kitchen, dining, and living spaces.





As an architect, I relish the first visit to a property to consider how best to site a new home. When my colleague, architect Geoffrey Koper, and I initially walked the West Tisbury lot with owners Ellie and Steve Wise, Ellie's parents, and contractor Chas Deary, we marveled at their neighbors' foresight. Twenty-five years before, they had planted conifer seedlings from a Felix Neck sale all along the north and east property lines. Living nearby, Ellie's parents had watched those seedlings grow into tall, dense evergreens that beautifully frame two sides of the bowl-shaped parcel. We all agreed the house should be located toward the rear of the lot, removed from street activity where it could benefit from the privacy the trees provide while maximizing the meadow view across the slope to the west and south. Geoffrey remembers, "We needed to put something there that would complement the site."

And so it does. Ellie and Steve's Vineyard retreat is rooted in its site and generously accommodates numerous guests and the Wises' growing family when they visit from their primary residence in Manhattan for holidays, for off-season weekends, and in the summer. It marries an informal, shingled exterior, inspired by the Island vernacular, with roomy, urbane interior furnishings and finishes



Clockwise from top left: Ellie asked Molly to weave a little blue into the mostly neutral palette, so Molly chose a soft blue antique cupboard as an accent for the dining space. The entryway mirror reflects a painting Steve Wise commissioned for Ellie by local artist Kara Taylor, which depicts the meadow before the Wises' house was built. The eat-in kitchen includes a generous work space. Ellie notes, "We've had as many as four people cooking at the same time, and it's worked out great." Molly, shown here taking a break, "knew where all the furniture was going to go before the house was built," marvels Ellie.



in a warm neutral palette. “I wanted the clean lines, not a lot of clutter, very simple, but comfortable,” explains Ellie. The result is a casually sophisticated home.

Early on, Ellie and Steve joined forces with Ellie’s mother, interior designer Molly Finkelstein, and then with Geoffrey Koper, who in turn asked me to join the team. Molly co-owns Nochi, a Vineyard Haven fresh flower, antique, and linen shop, and previously worked with Geoffrey when renovating her own home. Geoffrey and I often collaborate on Vineyard projects, having each lived and worked there. “It was a team effort. Everyone put in their two cents, and it came out well,” recalls Geoffrey.

The challenge for us, the architects, was threefold. How could we make a large house look less large? How could we take best advantage of the sloping site? How could we do both using the unassuming language of Vineyard architecture? The answers involved combining simple forms in direct response to the context while incorporating the enduring materials of the region.

We decided to tackle the size issue by breaking up the owners’ wish list into smaller pieces, divided across three primary gable volumes of different heights with additional basic shed roof elements. We carved off four bedrooms in the northwest wing to form one gable. Then we placed the master suite and nursery above the open living space and kitchen toward the southeast to form the tallest gable. Lastly, we

tucked a smaller gabled room off the main level to the east and wrapped the building perimeter with ground-level one-story shed roof porches and a dining space to the south.

“The thing I really like about the house is that there’s good shared spaces and good getaway space. You really get your own space and your own privacy, but you also have a lot of great places to hang out,” says Ellie.

To incorporate the site slope, we designed floor levels that step up with the slope as the grade height increases from the front of the house to the back. This kept the house from becoming overly tall and meant there could be short stair runs between the stepped levels. It also added variety and different degrees of separation to modulate privacy. Geoffrey notes, “There are pieces of that project that really turned out quite intimate despite the size of some of those rooms.”

For the interior, Molly chose rich brown, muted gray, and creamy beige furnishings in keeping with the weathered gray color that the exterior cedar shingles acquire with age. The soothing earth tones overlap in the open living spaces against milk-white walls, providing subtle variations in color which remain cohesive. Molly’s selection of oversized, spare, deliberate pieces echoes her daughter’s taste for quiet functionality. The overall feel is serene. “If you have a pretty space and a beautiful view, it is kind of a shame to distract yourself with a



Opposite: Bedding from Nochi and a custom headboard complement the warm tones of the furnishings and finishes in the master bedroom. Below: His and her vanities flank a deep tub, all topped with marble, in the master bath.



Left: Three gables border a rear deck, facing southeast, which welcomes outdoor living off the kitchen and dining space with shed roof. Lower left: Set back from the road, the Wises' house nestles against a dense evergreen tree line, presenting a wraparound porch to passersby.



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busy interior,” elaborates Molly.

One of Molly’s best finds from ABC Carpet & Home, Inc., in New York (where she and Ellie discovered many of the home’s furnishings) was the nearly 6-foot-square low ottoman that occupies the central space in the open living area between the kitchen and fireplace seating area. “It’s been renamed the stage,” says Molly. Ellie and Steve’s three small children love to climb it, dance on it, and enjoy story hour atop it. Ellie adds, “This truly is a kid-friendly house. Any surface can have anything on it; there are lots of soft rugs and lots of climbable stuff, so I’m really, really happy with it in terms of having young kids.”

Since the Wises knew they would be doing plenty of entertaining on Island, they asked the design team to plan accordingly. The open kitchen, dining, and sitting areas encourage easy flow yet offer spatial differentiation. Elegantly functional couches, armchairs, and banquettes provide ample seating. Custom slate-colored painted-wood tables for the kitchen and the dining area seat 20 or more when put together. Two refrigerators, two dishwashers, and a sizable pantry meet the high-volume demand on the kitchen. A wine cellar, media room, billiards area, bar, bathroom, and sizable playroom round out the amenities in the basement.

Of course the outdoor living environment was critical to them, too. Hefty Adirondack chairs, wood tables, and commodious chaises populate the decks and porches. Molly did the landscape design, too. Ellie notes, “I wanted something simple, low maintenance, seasonal. So when we’re here—June, July, August—everything is in bloom.” Long foundation borders of hydrangeas, rectangular stone patios, and stone footpaths around the whole house fit the bill. As with the rest of the home’s design, the landscape intertwines the familiar with a pared-down simplicity to refreshing effect.

Ellie sums it up this way: “I think one of my friends who came over described the house as warm and dry, and I kind of like that. While it does have some sophistication and modern aspects, it also feels very warm and not harsh or anything like that.” [h](#)

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