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# LA DOLCE VITA

American expat Eileen Holland has created a modern version of “the sweet life” by converting an old Umbrian farmhouse into a luxurious boutique homestay.

Words Michele Koh Morollo Photos Eric van den Brulle



High above the Tiber valley, near the medieval village of Collazzone in the heart of Umbria, La Segreta Farmhouse embodies everything that is charming about contemporary Italian country living.

Set in 28 hectares of hilly woodland, olive groves, and cherry and walnut orchards, near a small vineyard, La Segreta is the passion project of American expat Eileen Holland and her Italian husband, Lorenzo De Monaco. They bought an old farmhouse and converted it into a contemporary holiday home, available for rent through design-focused agency Boutique Homes.

Born in Massachusetts, Holland’s love affair with Italy began as a student, when she moved to the country to study Greek and Roman classical art and history. She had been visiting Umbria for more than 20 years before she found La Segreta. A local from the nearby town of Todi tipped her off about the farmhouse – part of a small borgo, a cluster of traditional Italian-style family homes in a farming area – which previously belonged to Italian actor Massimo Troisi (of *Il Postino* fame).

“We had owned a bicycle touring company in Umbria and for years, every spring and fall, we would cycle by the

road that leads to La Segreta without ever knowing the property existed,” she says.

Holland and De Monaco, who now live in a house five minutes down the road from La Segreta, bought the 3,500 sq ft farmhouse and transformed it into a luxury homestay that marries the best of traditional and modern Italian design.

The couple kept the farmhouse’s exterior structures and supporting walls intact, but altered the interiors. Comprising two buildings connected by a shaded outdoor walkway, the house now includes an open-plan living, dining and kitchen area with a soaring, 16-foot-high ceiling, a TV room, four guest bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms, and four outdoor terraces. Not wanting to alter the gorgeous rustic feel of the property and site, Holland chose simple, earthy materials – terracotta, broad chestnut beams, river stones, wrought iron and lime-washed walls – throughout for a clean, unfussy and modern aesthetic.

A good friend, Umbria-based US artist Lucy MacGillis, had created her own version of lime-wash paint with earth pigments in unique colours, which Holland used in many areas of the farmhouse. >>

To complement the natural palette of the surrounding countryside, warm, neutral tones were used for the walls. Pale sage-green paint was used in the kitchen, dining and living areas to reflect the white wisteria and sage growing on the terrace outside. Cement tiles and hand-laid Tiber river stones add interesting textures and colours to the walls and floors, along with a touch of 1960s Fellini-esque cool.

Each of the four bedrooms has a different colour scheme. One room has a light mustard lime wash, with a light poplar bed and white, grey and light taupe accents. Another has plenty of browns with exposed stone walls, resin floors and an acid green occasional chair. The third room is green, with a shallow fireplace and grey cement tile walls, and the fourth is covered in grey and beige octagonal cement tiles. Local artisans made many of the furniture pieces, accessories and finishings.

“Umbria has many incredible craftsmen. I showed my carpenter a few pictures of beds I liked, and together we came up with the designs for baldacchino, or canopy beds, with a very clean, contemporary look,” Holland says. “We have also re-used plenty of elm logs. Over 30 elms on the property were diseased and we had to cut them down. I hated to do that. We cut them up into big logs and use them as bedside nightstands, living-room coffee tables and even by the pool. Each year we paint them funky colours to freshen things up.”

Holland hired a local blacksmith to make table legs and large metal braziers with the La Segreta logo. Even the terracotta pots on the terraces were custom made by an Italian family in a town nearby.

“We had another carpenter make our doors, windows and shutters to fit the measurements we had in mind. This carpenter’s sister is a wonderful seamstress, so we asked her to help make our linen drapes and cushion covers,” she says.

She complemented the artisan workmanship with 21st-century Italian designs. For the bathrooms, she chose Artemide lights, and in the kitchen, a Carrara marble island counter is decked in Alessi trays and bowls and an array of old Moka coffee pots. Throughout, Holland and De Monaco take a less-is-more approach, allowing their carefully selected colours and materials to imbue the space with a magnificent modern Italian feel.

“I don’t use a lot of decoration,” says Holland. For artwork, she keeps things natural and uncluttered, with only a few photos of the nearby olive grove and vineyards blown up to poster size, promos from a local music festival, and a copy of an old road sign.

**“I have always admired how Italians can harmonise simple furniture, modern lighting and clean lines with the historical character of ancient palazzi and villas. They respect traditional materials and colours, but can create something wonderfully current while keeping heritage alive,” she says.**

And Holland has certainly succeeded in bringing this spirit of Italian design to La Segreta. ■

