

À LA MAISON

This month: How one couple lovingly created a stylish guest house in Picardy, a recipe for *confit de canard* and the grandiose gardens of Chenonceau





NORTHERN DELIGHT

Fashion designer Clare Howarth and her husband Carlos have turned their elegant home into a chic guest house in the Picardy countryside. A blend of comfort and style, it is proving a hit with their guests, as **Deborah Curtis** discovers

Her two children growing up and starting their own lives was the push Clare Howarth needed to turn her much-loved family home into a luxury guest house in the heart of the Picardy countryside.

She and her Chilean husband, Carlos, spotted the potential of La Maison et l'Atelier as soon as they saw it, but it was 20 years until they had time to bring those early plans to fruition.

"Our first thought on seeing the house was: 'This would make a great guest house,'" says Clare, who opened for business last September. "We were just too busy and it took us until now to get around to it!"

The property in Crouy-en-Thelle is built in the traditional brick and stone that is typical of

Turning the house into a guest house has been a natural progression in the labour of love, which Clare and Carlos have put in to creating a beautiful family home for themselves and their son and daughter: Hippolyte and India.

Clare's background in art, design and fashion has been instrumental in the realisation of the stylish interiors while Carlos, who is a craftsman by trade, has a deep affinity with wood, and this has led to the creation of some stunning and unique pieces of furniture.

"Almost all of the furniture is vintage or made by Carlos precisely to our needs," says Clare. "He made the table in the kitchen from a single solid plateau of tropical hardwood; you can imagine the size of the tree. They are, of



A relaxing moment at La Maison et l'Atelier guest house

its evolution and respecting the contributions made throughout time, which have their merits and give a truer idea of what those 200 years have looked like."

The interiors she has created are light and airy with an eclectic mix of the furniture, fabrics, artwork and artefacts that she loves. "Nothing much here is new, but it doesn't stop it from feeling resolutely modern and at the same time timeless. It's important to mix the vintage with the new, and many of the things here I've had for so long, and yet they always find their place. Avoiding fashion, ironically, helps to make something more timeless and personal."

One of her favourite rooms is her laundry room. Here rows of white cupboards stand against a dark-red wall. Items which Clare has collected over the years offer a distinct contrast, such as the woven baskets from the Ivory Coast, which soften the strong lines of the functional storage space, and her handmade brushes and cleaning utensils, which are displayed like a piece of sculpture on the wall by the French doors to the garden.

"I'm a pretty conscientious anti-consumer," says Clare. "I'm really careful about what I acquire, and before I buy anything, I'm sure I really love and need it, and that it will do for a long time."

This is certainly true of the two Falcon chairs, which are a recent acquisition, by Norwegian furniture designer Sigurd Resell, and now take pride of place in the living room. Designed in the 1970s, Clare tracked them down in the UK. "I went chasing them all the way to Margate where two Danish brothers import them from all over Scandinavia," she says. "They are so comfortable."

The beautiful hardwood kitchen has

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the Picardy region, and dates back to the 19th century. Bordered by fields and only 27 miles north of Paris, it overlooks the ancient forests of Senlis and Chantilly.

So far, Clare and Carlos have created two guests rooms in the house but have plans to make two more on the upper floor of the *atelier* in the grounds where, in the future, they also intend to run workshops in cooking, wine-tasting, painting and cabinet-making, and in how to produce polished concrete.

"I just want to take things slowly to see how things develop," says Clare. "I only started doing this a few months ago and I'm loving it, but you need to see how things work before you can decide what to do next."

course, protected now and the grain of the wood is so beautiful!"

Clare's philosophy has been to pull together all the original features and the later additions to the structure and *décor*, to continue the story of the house in a harmonious way. In the living room, for example, the pink and grey marble floor, the huge brick and stone fireplace, and the cast-iron radiators all arrived at different points in the property's long history but now all sit together in complete accord.

"There was never any intention to strip the house back to what it was originally," she says. "How would we have done that anyway? The house is 200 years old. What would we have stripped it back to? It is more about accepting



Previous page: The elegant hallway
This page, clockwise from top: La Maison et l'Atelier is built in Picardy brick and stone; Clare Howarth with two of her quirky finds; the living room looks out over the garden.

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“I just love being out in the garden. I completely lose track of time. I forget to eat!”

also been built to last. Handmade by Carlos, there is an emphasis on simplicity and clean lines. “There is a real wood orgy in the kitchen,” laughs Clare, “with the oak butchers’ blocks we made, the table, the cupboard and the sculpted mango bowls. I repaint the kitchen every couple of years taking a colour from the works of Erin Lawlor that hang in there. The way Erin’s work is evolving – with so much colour – I may get to paint the kitchen yellow!”

And it is Clare who does all the painting; creating the exact shade she’s looking for by mixing colours from the assortment of tins she has amassed over the years.

“I never use paint straight out of the tin,” she says. “I have a huge number of different paints and I mix my own. It’s not unusual for me to paint a whole wall, and then if it’s not right to start again. I can’t ask anyone else to paint for me, they’d kill me if I did that to them. I’ve painted the whole of the inside of this house many times.”

The colours she has chosen for the guest rooms are a restful pale grey and white, with black wood and metal work as a strong accent colour. The beds are both king size and the linen and towels are beautiful quality.

One of the rooms has a window at both ends so, to keep the light and airy feel, Carlos built a glass wall to screen the bathroom from the bedroom area. He also made the headboards in both rooms and worked with a local metal worker to create the wood and metal console tables.

In the rooms, Clare has hung original paintings by Maibritt Uldeval Bjelke and drawings by Howard Dickinson. As with pieces of art on display throughout the rest of the

Both pages clockwise from top left: Two Falcon chairs take pride of place in the living room; Clare’s favourite room is her laundry room; the huge fireplace; one of the two guest rooms; a hearty breakfast; Clare designed the garden from scratch

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guest house, many of these have been left with Clare by the artists themselves and are available on enquiry.

Outside, a mature garden extends over an acre, out to the boundaries of the property, and which Clare created from scratch.

“When we first came here, there was no garden. The land was a paddock for horses, and the outbuildings were stables. I didn’t know anything about plants then, but I was inspired by the work of Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf. I just started by planting trees. I brought a lot of them home in the back of the car!”

The plants she chose provide structure as well as colour and this has been achieved with evergreens and trimmed box in pots. Many of the flower arrangements in the house are dried grasses and dead flower heads that have a beautiful ethereal immortality, which contrasts

beautifully with the vivid green of the living house plants.

“I wanted the garden to look good in winter so I have planted a lot of things that look good when they are dead,” she says. “I don’t cut the garden back till February. It looks fantastic especially when it’s covered in frost and snow.”

“The trees also look fabulous in autumn, and the garden is now lit beautifully too. I just love being out there. I completely lose track of time in the garden. I forget to eat!”

So far, most of her guests have been Parisians escaping the city for a weekend in the countryside, and she has been enjoying introducing them to a full-on English breakfast.

“It’s lovely to see people lingering at the table,” she says. “A lot of them don’t finish breakfast till around noon; they all relax and chat, and have a great time.”

Her guests love the style and design of La Maison et l’Atelier and it has been wonderful for Clare to have the opportunity to share what she has created with like-minded people.

“So far everyone gets what I’ve been trying to achieve,” she says. “The fact that they really enjoy themselves is really satisfying.” **LF**

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