

HGTV Dream Home comes to Wine Country

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Interior designer Linda Woodrum stood in the central entry hall of the Sonoma house and swept her arms dramatically to encompass the family room, with its leather couches and large-screen TV adjoining a huge kitchen, the formal dining room with an alcove set up for wine tasting, and the living room with its Ethan Allen furniture and decorator touches.

"This is a living structure, not a stage set," she said. "If people can't let their children in, then I feel like I've failed. If people don't feel like they can put their feet up on the table or couch, then it's not a real house."

Not only is the home Woodrum was demonstrating "a real house," it is one that any U.S. resident has a shot at owning.

This brand-new, Victorian-style residence in the heart of Wine Country is the HGTV 2009 Dream Home, a custom-built, state-of-the-art house tricked out with decorator furnishings and complete with a GMC vehicle in the two-car garage.

The television network will give away the entire \$2 million package through a random drawing in March in one of its most-watched specials.

For 12 years, HGTV has given away dream homes in locations from Florida to Colorado to Texas, drawing 41 million entries last year. This is the first time the prize home has been located in California.

"The top of the list criteria (for the prize home) is that it's in a dreamy location, not in a downtown nowhere," said Emily Yarborough, a spokeswoman for HGTV in Knoxville, Tenn. "A lot of our viewers have written in and let us know they would like to see it in California; a lot of employees have thought so too. We all dream, Wouldn't it be nice to live in California?"

The Wine Country measures up to that vision, she said. The 3,700-square-foot house, with three bedrooms and an office, is smack in the middle of an existing neighborhood, not a brand-new subdivision.

It is part of Armstrong Estates, a 35-acre parcel that developer Steve Ledson has been developing for 22 years. His own home, an 1870 Italianate Victorian a block away, was the main setting for "Tucker," Francis Ford Coppola's 1988 movie.

Ledson said that, as with the other homes in Armstrong Estates, he tried to make the dream home reflect the character of the old town of Sonoma.

"The HGTV house is in the style of a Victorian farmhouse, which isn't as overly detailed as some Victorians with a lot of gingerbread trim," he said. "This is the type of house you'd typically see if you drove around Sonoma County out on farms and ranges. It sits under some beautiful oak trees that have been there as long as I can remember - and my family has been in this town for 150 years."

Santa Rosa builder Bruce Lee, who handled the home's construction, said he met all the home's neighbors during the build, which lasted from April through September.

The actual giveaway is done in an Ed McMahon Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes-style stakeout, where the hosts show up on the lucky winner's doorstep with a camera crew in tow.

"Oh, people go crazy," when they find out they've won, Yarborough said. "One year, the winner was a teacher, so we went to her school and all her kids were around and got to see her presented with the key."

Despite the allure of the dream, the reality is that most winners never actually occupy the dream house. Out of 12 previous contests, only two winners ended up living for a while in their dream home, and even they eventually sold it. Winners are responsible for all taxes on the prize and usually they have to sell the home to pay Uncle Sam. Or the house's "dreamy" location may be too far from work or relatives.

But still, Yarborough said, most winners have ended up with a nice nest egg that they used to buy a dream house closer to their current home (and perhaps more realistically sized for their budget).

Kathi Nakao of Sacramento was the 2004 HGTV winner, landing a home in St. Mary's, Ga., which she kept for about 18 months before selling it.

"It was like a Victorian beach cottage for someone who had money," she said. "I love beach cottages and I love that era."

So Nakao ended up using the proceeds from the home sale, as well as some of the furnishings, to remodel her own three-bedroom home in Sacramento in a similar style to the dream house.

"We've done the whole inside in the same white beadboard," she said. "I kept a lot of the decorative items - the tchotchkes- and some of the furniture."

Nakao, who is retired as a legislative assistant in the state Department of Finance, said her economics background helped her be realistic about the prize from the start.

"That was one thing I knew from being in financial circles: It would be a real tough cookie to keep," she said. "It was a little above what we expected to do in our lifetime."

One of Nakao's sons lived in the house - it needed to be occupied for insurance reasons - and she took some long vacations out there. But in the end, besides the financial burden, the location didn't work for her.

"I didn't like the weather; it was too humid," she said. "I don't like critters, and we had alligators and these gnat things they call no-see-'ums and wild boars and armadillos. I didn't see any snakes but I was told they were there."

"Critters" shouldn't be an issue in Sonoma, hopefully.

Woodrum spent several weeks in Sonoma working on the dream home's interior (guest decorators designed the office and a children's bedroom).

"This is the first place we've been (for the contest) that I wanted to stay," she said. "It's so rich in this area - the wine, the cheese-making, the outdoors; it goes on and on."

She tried to reflect some of that California lifestyle in the design.

Of course there's a wine cellar, already packed with bottles that will come with the house. From the family room, two symmetrical sets of French doors open to the landscaped patio and yard to facilitate the indoor-outdoor connection.

The tub in the master bathroom, big enough to hold two, is in an alcove framed outside by a magnificent oak tree.

Books about gardening overflow the coffee table in the master bedroom's sitting area. "As you sit up here, you can see outside and fantasize about what your garden will be," Woodrum said.

"The house has some fantasies built in," Woodrum said. "I love vignettes, like having a wonderful bathtub. Little special spots that put a smile on your face."

HGTV Dream Home

Entries to the HGTV Dream Home giveaway are free. The prize package - the furnished Sonoma home plus a GMC Acadia - is valued at \$2 million. The contest runs Jan. 1 to Feb. 19; people can enter once per day. The winner will be selected by random drawing; results will be announced on air March 15 at 8 p.m. Eastern time.

To enter, go to www.hgtv.com/dreamhome

Guided tours of the home will be offered for several weeks as a fundraiser for a local charity. Price and hours will be announced on the HGTV Web site.

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