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ALMOST EVERYONE who goes house-hunting in California's Santa Ynez Valley seems to have a Cliff May ranch or a Spanish Colonial Revival hacienda in mind. The place my husband, Tom Dittmer, and I bought is the opposite of those favorites. Though it was designed in the 1990s by an architect inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright (think Imperial Hotel meets Taliesin West), its plastic laminate and painted stucco possessed none of Wright's refinement. There were masses of Vermont slate too. California produces some of the most desirable stone and wood on the planet, so I could not imagine an odder choice. I guess no one else could either because the house languished on the market until we stumbled upon it, in search of what Tom described as "a home we can eventually retire to: a ranch, a vineyard, a little land to ride some horses on."

Ultimately it was the site and the views that took our breath away. At 1,500 feet above sea level, and with the rugged San Rafael Mountains to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west, we probably would have bought the land even if it had nothing more than a pup tent. We moved in six months later, making it livable in a day, thanks to a mattress store that guaranteed delivery within 24 hours and a Target shopping spree that resulted in a dozen inflatable

silver chairs, which we used four at a time, saving the rest to replace the inevitable blowouts.

Fernando Santangelo and Cristina Grajales arrived for a design consultation within the week. I had worked with the former when he helped decorate my house in Manhattan, so I knew he was a quick study with impeccable taste. I knew of Cristina, an eminent 20th-century decorative-arts-and-contemporary-design dealer, because of her reputation as a George Nakashima expert, and it seemed to me that the earthy quality of Nakashima's furniture was just what our stark house required.

Classic ranches and Spanish revivals are perfectly suited to this area because of the way they brilliantly cope with extremes of light, shade, heat, and wind. This house was a fishbowl. The great room, for instance, is the only space besides the kitchen that is not a bedroom or a bathroom—and it serves as entrance hall, living room, dining room, library, and screened porch. Tom and I love having friends over for dinner, and the valley—with its excellent climate, rich social traditions, and wine-making renown—merits turning every night of the week into a special occasion (this would become the topic of my book on entertaining, *Fandango*, published last year). But even before the giant Nakashima dining table had

Facing page: Sandy Hill with her horse Gunsmoke. This page: The Santa Ynez Valley home of Hill and Tom Dittmer, with interiors by Fernando Santangelo and Cristina Grajales; the landscape design is by Art Luna. See Resources.