

Italian Rustic

MINCHILLI

"This book is a sumptuous dream of Italy, broken down and translated into pragmatic detail. I loved every delicious, seductive page of it."

—ELIZABETH GILBERT, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

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HOW TO BRING TUSCAN CHARM
INTO YOUR HOME

From Walls Glowing with Natural Pigments
to Terra-Cotta Floors, Wood-Burning Ovens,
Outdoor Pergolas, Swimming Pools, Gardens,
and More

ELIZABETH HELMAN MINCHILLI

with DOMENICO MINCHILLI *photographs by* SIMON McBRIDE



SALVAGE YARDS | LACOLE

CITTÀ DI CASTELLO, UMBRIA

Many Italian farmhouses, left to the elements for centuries, often are nothing more than four crumbling walls. To find authentic materials, Domenico's first stop is always a salvage yard. He has found full sets of steps, weathered terra-cotta roof tiles, and collections of glazed majolica tiles. One of Domenico's most reliable sources is Lacole, in Umbria. "Since they export, working with them is a way for me to inject a bit of authenticity into projects outside of Italy," he says.

Lacole was started by Dante Radicchi about fifty years ago. He began by stockpiling salvaged wooden beams from dismantled buildings in Umbria and Tuscany. He eventually traveled throughout Italy and amassed a collection that now includes roof tiles, flooring, fireplaces, sinks, and garden statues. His daughter, Velea, took over the business a few years ago and has expanded it to include a 320,000-square-foot (30,000 sq. m) warehouse.

Lacole carefully removes any damaged or cracked elements before batching items for shipping. Another plus is that they tamper with the antique materials as little as possible. "We try to leave the pieces exactly as we find them," Velea says. "Even if they have a little dirt on them, I would rather err on the side of doing too little. When you are buying old tiles, or a fireplace, I think you're partly paying for a bit of age and wear, no?"



Left: Lacole's ever-changing offerings include a vast array of salvaged fireplaces and mantelpieces.

Right: Architectural elements, like corbels and stone slabs, can be assembled to create new fireplace designs.



BRINGING IT HOME: FIREPLACES

For an antique fireplace, seek out dealers in architectural artifacts and antiques (see resources, page 226). Many offer mantelpieces imported from Italy, from hand-carved Baroque versions to quieter statements in dark gray *pietra serena* from Tuscany. Alternatively, you can design your own hearth. Try mixing reclaimed timbers with handmade or vintage brick, or any materials that have patina and soul.

If you already have a hearth, and just want to dress it up a bit, *all'italiana*, you can shop for handmade or antique wrought-iron accessories. Many companies export made-in-Italy fireplace implements, from andirons to pokers, tongs, and shovels.

Above: Look to local salvage yards to find stone architectural elements with an Italian feeling.
Opposite: Dan Blagg and Francesco Bianchini discovered this black marble mantelpiece at a local antique shop and installed it in their living room, adding a vintage Victorian electric fire to provide warmth.

HAND-CRAFTED DOORS | PORTE DEL PASSATO

PISTRINO, PERUGIA

When we restored our Umbria home in Todi, we decided to incorporate antique doors in our design. But doing so wasn't easy: finding fourteen doors took a lot of time and effort. Then, each opening in the wall had to be made to fit each door. It was like a jigsaw puzzle consisting of door-size pieces. Fortunately, in recent years, skilled artisans have responded to the rising demand for antique doors and now craft new doors using aged wood, making the process much easier.

Porte del Passato is a family-run business in Umbria that specializes in providing doors for farmhouse restorations. When people started buying old homes to restore in Tuscany and Umbria in the last twenty or thirty years, they needed doors. Even if they could reuse some of the original doors, restoration work meant opening up new doorways, especially on the ground floor, which had originally been animal stalls. Enzo Belli started Porte del Passato twenty years ago to meet this need. The firm was already in the salvage business, and so began offering not only original antique doors salvaged from other buildings, but also newly made doors, crafted from old wood.



Left: At Porte del Passato, near Citerna, in the province of Perugia, antique salvaged beams are cut into planks. Right: The wood is then assembled into doors, which look antique and are difficult to distinguish from the real thing.

Although Porte del Passato has a collection of more than fifteen hundred antique doors for sale, its real business is the creation of reproduction doors. Using salvaged beams and flooring gathered from demolished houses throughout Italy, Belli and his team of carpenters craft doors using ancient techniques. "The end result is extraordinary," says Domenico. "It is almost impossible to tell the doors Belli makes from old ones."

The starting point is the wood itself. Chestnut, pine, and old poplar beams and flooring are cleaned up a bit, without removing their original patina. The doors are then crafted according to ancient designs. Once the doors are constructed, the wood is finished, or aged, using a process that is a carefully guarded secret. The door is then polished with *gomma lacca*, or seed lac, and natural beeswax.

While most farmhouses had simple, rustic wooden doors, Belli also reproduces a range of beautiful painted doors of the type more commonly found in villas and palaces. For these the wood is covered with a layer of gesso, then painted by a skilled artisan. Once the design is finished, the door is aged and then waxed.



Left: New wood can be treated for an aged appearance, then used to create doors.

Right: Some doors are hand-decorated using natural pigments and gilding.