



BY ELISA URBANELLI
 PHOTOGRAPHY BY
 ALEC HEMER
 STYLING BY
 RACHEL CLEAVELAND

family style

Architect Mark Becker designed this Southern California house for weekend living, every day.



On the morning after the last day of eighth grade, Stevie Farmer tried out for the high-school surfing team. After several tense hours, the results were phoned in—he made it. Now a freshman, Stevie routinely rises at 5 a.m., hops on his bike, and cruises down to the beach to catch some waves before homeroom. Such is the life of a kid with the good fortune to grow up in Newport Beach.

Stevie's parents, Jeff and Karen Farmer, were born into the fabled Southern California lifestyle. For





them, there's no better place to raise their family, which also includes daughter Carly (a high-school senior) and two dogs. "We live in a great community," says Karen, who grew up in Corona del Mar. Jeff spent his childhood on the beach nearby.

When they decided to build, the Farmers knew they wanted to stay in their beloved Newport Heights neighborhood, and having a view was at the top of their wish list. Serendipity came into play when they stopped by an estate sale and discovered the small cottage was available, too. They bought it before it ever went on the market. Then they set out to find an architect who would understand their needs.

"You've got to talk to Mark Becker," said a friend who had commissioned the young architect to build

The family prepares a quick lunch in the kitchen, joined by a friend of Steve's. The family room, an extension of the kitchen, always sees action, as does the backyard pool.

a house a block away. Other architects had shown the Farmers plans for 10,000-square-foot trophy houses—exactly what this unpretentious couple did not want. But Mark was different.

"He showed up for our first meeting in a white T-shirt, shorts, and thongs. He was very laid-back," says Jeff. (Mark recalls virtually the same thing about the Farmers.) The architect impressed his soon-to-be clients with rough drafts of what he could do.

Experienced remodelers—this is their fourth house—the Farmers



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Louder chairs, some with linen slipcovers, surround the double-pedestal dining table. For quiet, Karen and Jeff retreat to the living room (above). Lucy, the resident pug, refishes her designated spot. Right: French bamboo chairs, with their original velvet upholstery, and an antique rug add color to the double-bright entry.



know what works for them and didn't shy away from the myriad decisions required in building a house from scratch. Jeff offered thoughts about space configuration, access to views, and room size. Karen focused on interiors. While opinionated clients can sometimes clash with headstrong architects, this chemistry was just right. "Mark really listened to what we wanted," says Jeff. "He nailed it."

To help the process, the Farmers gathered clippings and books of houses they liked. Invariably, they were drawn to shingle-style houses with white trim and porches. The style originated in New England, but the beach-friendly look has been adapted to seaside communities from Cape Cod to Coronado. "The shingle style seemed to suit Newport Beach," Karen says, and it's favored by Mark, whose other houses in the area draw on a similar aesthetic.

"Every house has a challenge, and in this case, it was to get in the views," he says. "I started out wanting to do a wraparound porch and went from there." The house sits snugly on its lot but makes the most of its relationship to the outside, taking full advantage of the vista while maintaining a sense of privacy inside. On a clear day, the silhouette of Santa Catalina Island appears in the distance.

The Farmers also asked for an open floor plan that would allow for family interaction. To set the tone, Mark designed a double-height stairway and entrance hall, a special request of Jeff's. "We wanted a light and airy feeling when you first walk in," Jeff says. Though Mark had concerns that it might seem too ostentatious for the house, the result is far from grandiose.

Generously proportioned rooms in the 4,600-square-foot house



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radiate from this point. In less skillful hands, the ample spaces and largely monochromatic interior could have been uninviting, but conscientious attention to scale and detail ensures the opposite effect. Trim, mantel-pieces, and built-ins, while custom crafted, are restrained. "I showed Mark the simplicity of the moldings and other things that I liked in our old house," recalls Karen. "At one point, I thought we should go more ornate because this is a bigger house, but Mark convinced me that I should trust my instincts."

Karen worked with designer Ann Fraser to strike a balance between traditional comfort and modern elegance. Linen slipcovers on down-filled furniture and pillows upholstered in vintage fabric stand out from dark-stained oak floors and wooden blinds. Woven rugs, touches of wicker and bamboo, and a few

In the master bedroom, an elegant sleigh bed points toward a set of French doors that lead to a west-facing balcony. Bottom right: The home's deep-stained wood floors and white woodwork carry over into the master bath. Right: Carly and Lucy

well-chosen antiques add texture and interest. The mixture gives the house the restful quality of a weekend retreat.

And yet, it's also a great house for an active, athletic family with a busy social life. Jeff and Karen have hosted fund-raisers for the Surfrider Foundation (an environmental organization) and donor parties to support local public schools. More than anything, the home is a place to kick back while staring off toward the glistening horizon. "I enjoy going down to the beach," says Jeff. "But on the weekends, I find myself not wanting to leave the house." 🌿

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