Shingle Chic

Designer Steven Gambrel revs up a friend's builder's special house with mouthwatering colors and cocktail-shaker style

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“It’s a happy, fun weekend house,” says Steven Gambrel. “Not a place where a great deal of work is produced”
When investment banker John Rolles headed to the Hamptons to find the perfect weekend pad, he had a specific vision dancing in his head: a handsome, venerable shingled house, loaded with noble moldings and picturesque nooks and crannies. What he bought, though, turned out to be somewhat less exciting.

“It was a builder’s special,” says Rolles, a managing director at Deutsche Bank. The walls were Sheetrock, the wood floors uniformly bland, and the shingles fresh from the lumberyard, but the price was right, the land was wooded, and everything worked like a charm, from plumbing to wiring. Especially surprised by the choice of property was designer Steven Gambrel, a long-time friend who had spearheaded the real-estate search. “I was a bit underwhelmed when I saw it,” admits Gambrel, but he soon came around to Rolles’s way of thinking and the realization that the unprepossessing house had the potential to take on a new attitude. “John told me to think of it as a tear-apart, not a teardown,” he says. “That’s when it all made sense.”

Having long admired Gambrel’s spirited renovation of his own 19th-century house in nearby Sag Harbor, Rolles ordered up a similarly sassy redo. The first step was to beef up the anemic architecture, so the designer, a history-minded graduate of the University of Virginia architecture school, nimbly outfitted it with made-to-order extras like working plank shutters painted classic seaside blue, perky dormer windows, and a little columned porch featuring a pair of curvaceous settees (very convenient
for guests who have to smoke,” Rolfes says with a laugh. A pergola was constructed out back, complete with a fireplace and a broad floor of salvaged brick, and the existing pool house was tricked out with a cunning little tower and crisp new moldings. Indoors, the first floor’s original open floor plan was closed up to create a traditional living room, dining room, kitchen, and sunroom, and doorways and windows were lined up to create space-enhancing, light-affirming vistas.

“The goal was to ‘early up’ the background of the place,” says Gambrel, who likes to give old houses a new lease on life. “I didn’t want to go all the way back to the 19th century, though. I was thinking more Summer of ‘42.” Whatever the inspiration, his client was happy to give Gambrel carte blanche indoors as well as out—which explains how a 40-year-old apple orchard ended up being transplanted to the backyard. “I didn’t want to be involved,” Rolfes says, as his yellow Labrador retriever, Wyatt, pants at his feet. “I wanted to be surprised, and I knew it would be great if Steven didn’t have me slowing him down.” Better yet, he knew that Gambrel would give him a weekend getaway like no one else’s. “Many of my friends have old-fashioned Colonial-style houses whose insides look like any city apartment: all beige and black and white and minimalist,” Rolfes says. “I wanted this to be a beach house.”

But not just any beach house. Gambrel conjured a cottage that a globe-trotting great-aunt might have inherited, probably back in the 1940s, filled with a transatlantic haul picked up everywhere from San Francisco to St.-Tropez, a place where she partied heartily through the ’60s and then left to a sporty young relation.
Thoughts of that imagined great-aunt’s Pucci dresses resulted in a dining room painted a tart tangerine, lined with bead board, and hung with white plaster brackets bearing a reef’s worth of pink conch shells discovered at shops in Laguna Beach. The blue-and-white sunroom’s scalloped valances and rattan chairs dressed in white piqué recall haute Paris designer Stephane Boudin’s work for midcentury sirens like the Duchess of Windsor and mining heiress Margaret Biddle. One guest bedroom has a flotilla of sailboat models mounted on its walls (it’s a favorite spot for visiting nieces and nephews), while another’s windows are outfitted with full-length curtains made of vintage jacket-lining fabric.

Only in the master bedroom suite do things chromatic calm down, the citrusy palette that Gambrel deployed elsewhere giving way to muted taupe, mushroom, and beige, with walls covered in finely woven Madagascar grass cloth (it’s Gambrel’s very subtle homage to one of his design idols, the legendary American decorator Billy Baldwin). The bedroom is also one of the few places in
This page: A Brunschwig & Fils cotton-rayon upholsers the library’s English daybed; a Designers Guild fabric from Osborne & Little hangs at the windows. Facing page, from top: Striped carpeting from ABC Carpet & Home in the entrance hall. The kitchen was revamped with Benjamin Moore’s 479 green paint, Carrara marble counters, and a Sub-Zero refrigerator. See Resources.
the house that doesn’t look like a party is about to start.
Which explains a lot about the good-times decor.

“John entertains a ton, so there are always cocktails
shaking and music playing,” says Gambrel, who has been
to more than a few of Rolfe’s summertime shindigs. “It’s
a happy, fun weekend house—not a place where a great
deal of work is produced.” It’s precisely what the client or-
dered. Except that Rolfe has only recently realized what
a hot ticket his new home would prove to be. “There’s
generally a houseful of people,” he says, adding that a
backyard clambake for 24 is not an uncommon occu-
pence. “I have to get an extra washer and dryer, I think.”