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A DESERT HIDEAWAY
PLUS: SUMMER WEEKEND FASHIONS
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Violet Fras

result is wishy-washy. But to her credit, Liz risked trying something different and ran with it." (She was so taken with the Venetian theme that she even named her wire-haired dachshund puppies Marco and Polo.)

The favorite architect of such local homeowners as Terry Allen Kramer, David and Julia Koch, Kathleen Ford and various members of the Lauder clan, Smith specializes in large houses that aren't victims of their own grandeur: unwieldy to live in, unpleasant to look at. For the Mezzacappas, he designed a twenty-thousand-square-foot house that is primarily composed of a two-story, H-shaped main block capped by a barreled, red-clay-tile roof. Upstairs, there are a pair of bedroom suites that are reached by a soaring stairwell; on the ground floor, a series of meticulously detailed public rooms flow from a colonnaded central hallway. One end of the hallway opens onto a single-story, light-filled garden room that in turn leads to a separate garage and guest wing. (And in a nod to the city of canals, the whole ensemble is pushed as close to the water's edge as local zoning would allow.)

Above left: Liz found the inspiration for the pool's design in the pages of a book on Moroccan style. "I wanted it to look like a picture set in a frame on the lawn," she explains. Above right: Jessica Mezzacappa Friedberg and her children, Damon and Lily, are frequent visitors. Opposite: With its comfortable wicker furniture upholstered in tan duck, the loggia is a favorite spot for family gatherings.

Having already overseen the renovation of a Fifth Avenue apartment and the construction of a Southampton house, both relatively traditional in scope, Liz says she wanted to create a totally "magical and unique" retreat for the few months she'd be spending in Palm Beach every winter. (Damon, an investment manager, comes down for weekends and for longer stretches when his schedule permits.) "Because we live a somewhat formal, enclosed life in New York," she explains, "we wanted a place that was comfortable, relaxed, full of light and with doors always open to the fresh air and wonderful smells of the garden."

If the house was conceived as an antidote to the strictures of New York City living, then the two-acre-plus garden was an outgrowth of the pleasure Liz derives from ▸198

Villa With a View

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her Southampton property. She enlisted Deborah Nevins, with whom she had worked on Long Island, to create a lush, exotic garden, full of fragrant star jasmine, shell ginger, gardenias and frangipani. "Liz really pushes for detail—the tile edging around the pool, the color of the gravel for her driveway," Nevins recounts. "Plus, she's originally from Australia, so she really knows her tropicals." To please her client, Nevins says she selected such color-drenched plants as *Heliconias*, Seminole hibiscus and bougainvillea, as well as "a seldom-used pale yellow oleander that looks fantastic against the apricot-pink walls of the house." There are stonework fountains (including one specifically designed for Marco and Polo to drink from), a half-dozen varieties of palms, a thick canopy of ficus over the driveway and, planted right up against the lakefront façade, two full-grown banyan trees that were brought over from West Palm Beach by barge.

And since she says she "lives in" the glass conservatory attached to her Southampton house, Liz commissioned Smith to design an all-purpose garden room for Villa Venezia. With a rattan sofa Liz found in Bali as its centerpiece, the room has two long walls of French doors, capped by undulating trefoil arches and a beamed ceiling lined in Indonesian straw. It has quickly become a favorite spot for reading and relaxing, as well as the site of many meals. "We rarely eat out in restaurants down here," Liz says. "But we eat *everywhere* in the house."

In fact, the Mezzacappas are just as likely to be found taking their meals in the library, the living room, the guest wing's media room or outside on the loggia as they are in the dining room (whose turquoise and red hues are so dramatically delicious one wonders whether Bunny Williams chose them specifically to lure her clients back into the room). "We don't like to be predictable," Liz says. "And you always have to learn how to make a house work in a way that suits your needs."

That means turning what was planned as an upstairs storage closet into a small office for Liz and her computer, and transforming what was to be a potting shed at the back of the guest wing into a third bedroom to accommodate the growing number of visiting grandchildren. Palm Beach life for the Mezzacappas may revolve around swimming, playing golf and enjoying the island's newly youthful energy, but Liz says it especially centers on entertaining family and close friends. And Villa Venezia is certainly set up to coddle guests with some high-style privacy.

"We tend to make a bit of a mess and a lot of noise," says Liz's stepdaughter Jessica Mezzacappa Friedberg, down from New York for a long weekend with her brood—three-year-old daughter Lily, twenty-one-month-old son Damon and their nanny (husband Bob was away on business). "Set off as we are beyond the pool, it's nice not to have to worry about disturbing Dad or Liz. And since the colors out here are so bold and the pieces so overscaled, it feels like a fun house to the kids."

The guest wing is where Liz and Williams really let loose—expanding on the Venetian theme and introducing North African and Middle Eastern elements into the décor. "As an important center of trade, Venice certainly absorbed these worldly influences into its design sensibility," Williams explains, adding with a laugh, "I'd also just returned from a wonderful vacation in Morocco when we started thinking about this part of the house." So bathrooms now have tiled Moorish niches, while the media room's decadently deep banquette, styled with a typically Moroccan wooden fringe, sits beneath a coffered cypress ceiling painted in lively saffron, teal and tomato red. "I've worked on a few houses by Mizner and Wyeth—and they required a certain amount of rigor," Williams explains. "But once Liz and Jeff had settled on the Venetian theme, it really opened things up for fun and fantasy."

Case in point: the unusual (albeit vintage Venice) terrazzo floor of the twenty-five- by forty-five-foot main living room. "Usually, you'd see a wood or tile floor in Palm Beach," says Williams. Throughout the house, there are playfully overscaled mirrors, ornate cabinets, from India and elsewhere, built in as bars, and statuesque stone fireplaces made in the south of France.

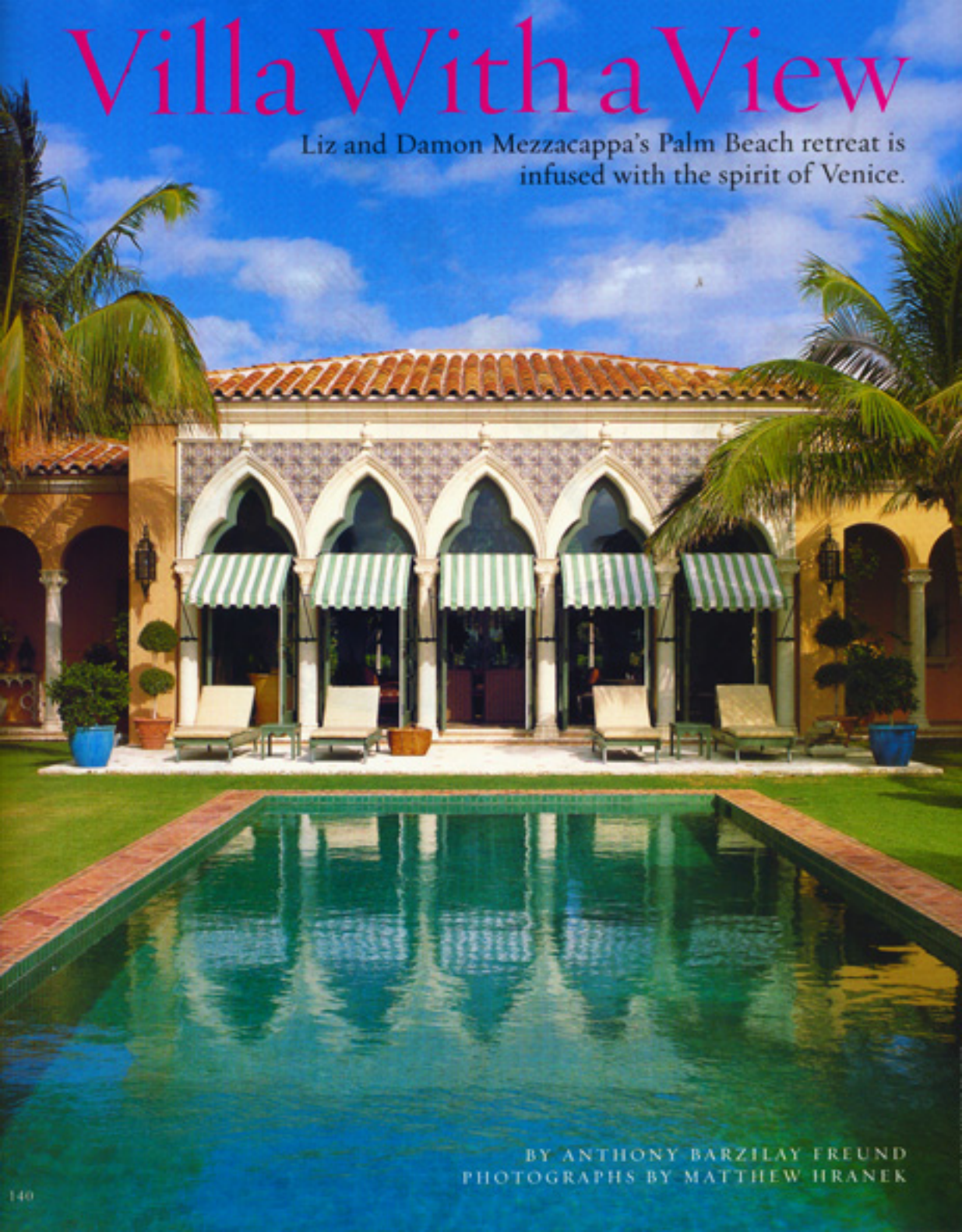
These flights of fancy work, Williams concedes, because they're contained within such a controlled architectural envelope. "Jeff has the vocabulary and really understands details—he does wonderful columns and pilasters—and the scale and proportions are always just right." Smith is an avid student of classical architecture as well as of more recent local precedents. "I love Fatio's work, which was much more organized than Mizner's," he explains. "Mizner always wanted his homes to look as if they'd been added on to by different owners over the years. I want them to look old, no question, but not haphazard."

Smith says he'd always wanted to work in the Venetian vernacular and was thrilled to have finally found a sympathetic client. Now he and Liz are just patiently waiting to convince local authorities to allow them to put Venetian-style barber poles in the water (to moor the gondola, perhaps?). In fact, waiting is something Liz has become particularly good at during Villa Venezia's long journey to completion. "She's always willing to sit tight for unusual objects at the right scale," Williams explains. "Liz never says, 'Where is it, where is it?'"

And where is Liz? With the work finally done, she's now comfortably ensconced in an armchair on Villa Venezia's loggia, a lemonade in hand, the afternoon sun casting shadows through delicate stone tracery onto the coral-stone floor. "At this point, my duties have been reduced to in-house Maintenance Department," she says with a laugh, feigning complete exhaustion and looking out to the water. "But I hope to retire soon from that job, too."

Villa With a View

Liz and Damon Mezzacappa's Palm Beach retreat is infused with the spirit of Venice.



BY ANTHONY BARZILAY FREUND
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATTHEW HRANEK

Liz Mezzacappa on the front steps of Villa Venezia, her new Palm Beach vacation house. Opposite: The Venetian-inspired house has undulating trefoil arches, colorful tile work and awnings more typically seen billowing along the Grand Canal.

THIS PAST JANUARY, SHORTLY AFTER NEW YORKERS Liz and Damon Mezzacappa had moved for the season into their striking new Venetian-style vacation house in Palm Beach, Florida, they gave a small dinner party. The doors of Villa Venezia's turquoise-walled dining room were open to the lantern-lit garden, with its whispering palms and the dark waters of Lake Worth beyond. Over the Italian walnut table, an extravagantly beaded Tuscan chandelier cast a soft light on the faces of the evening's dozen guests—key members of the local construction team, among them, architect Jeffery Smith, contractor Hugh Davis and their spouses. Before dessert was served, Damon Mezzacappa toasted the assembled crowd by reading a poem he'd composed for the occasion. The unfolding rhymes captured with great comic flair every twist and turn of the long, exacting project—a five-year odyssey from the initial hunt for a suitable piece of land to the arrival of the last crates of hand-painted garden-bench tiles. Then he turned to his wife with a smile and concluded: "And Liz, thank you, too. After all, dear, you're one of the crew."

It was then that the room erupted in laughter. As is usually the case with the best jokes, Damon's kicker worked because it was grounded in truth: Liz had been a tireless toiler in pursuit of perfection. Decorators and architects are often loath to share the credit (when I once told a world-famous interior designer that a certain Park Avenue doyenne had claimed the renovation of her duplex was "a completely collaborative effort," he rolled his eyes and exclaimed, "That's what they all say"). But in the case of Villa Venezia, every member of Liz's A-list creative team—which also included decorator Bunny Williams and landscape designer Deborah Nevins, both of New York—enthusiastically volunteered that she played an integral part in the design process. "Liz really worked hard,"

Opposite: An arched colonnade gives way to Villa Venezia's expansive living room. The walls are waxed Venetian plaster (the pigment was worked directly into the plaster); the floor is cool terrazzo. Above left: Atop the dining room's 19th-century marble console, a homegrown still life converses with Nicaraguan artist Armando Morales's painting of a banana plantation. Above right: The guest wing's lakefront Green Bedroom.

Bunny Williams kept the downstairs hallway neutrally toned to contrast with the house's boldly hued public rooms. Opposite: The walnut table and chairs are based on 18th-century Italian pieces Williams had copied and notched up in scale to suit the dining room's ample proportions. The 19th-century chandelier is from Tuscany.

says Smith. "She came down here every two weeks during the two years of construction and sat through meetings upon meetings upon meetings." Adds Williams, who went on European buying trips with Liz and spent hours at her side hunting through antiques stores and thick auction catalogues for the perfect mix of Italian and Continental furnishings: "What's so great about Liz is that she's opinionated and has a completely clear vision. Plus, she really knows how to live in a house—she fills it up with interesting plates and napkins and flowers and, of course, people."

"Interesting" is the operative word when talking about Villa Venezia—named not just for its distinctive Italian style but in honor of Damon's late mother, Venezia Mezzacappa. When Palm Beach was first developed in the 1920s and '30s as a winter retreat for America's wealthiest families, the island's reigning architects of the day, Addison Mizner, Maurice Fatio and Marion Sims Wyeth, looked to the Mediterranean—primarily to Spain and Italy, with their comparable climates and wonderful light—for aesthetic inspiration. But they seldom employed the dramatic trefoil arches, delicate decorative stonework and truly audacious colors that are endemic to Venice. (Mizner's Casa de Leoni, at the end of Worth Avenue, is a rare exception.) This light-hearted style has also failed to catch on with builders of the self-serious and overblown megamansions that have gone up around the island in recent years. That all may change, however, once the town takes a look at the Mezzacappas' place.

"You've got to be careful with Venetian," admits Smith, the most adept young historicist working in Palm Beach today. (He's built Romanesque palazzi, Palladian villas, even a Shingle-style pile—but nothing before in the Venetian vernacular.) "Too much exuberance and the house starts to look like a wedding cake; too much restraint and the ►151

Above left: Even the Mezzacappas' wirehaired dachshunds understand Venetian vernacular—they're named Marco and Polo, after all. Above right and opposite: A Syrian chest, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, strikes the perfect note in the garden room, where Indian-print textiles, a large rattan couch from Bali and a ceiling covered in Indonesian straw are the essence of hothouse exoticism.

Villa Venezia—seen here magically aglow at dusk—was pushed up to the Lake Worth sea wall in homage to the city of canals. "I am particularly fond of the way the house bravely addresses the waterfront," says its architect, Jeffery Smith.