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TWO VETERAN FRENCH
ARTISANS CONVERGE
IN KHAO YAI TO
MAKE ONE PROPERTY
A TRUE PROVENÇAL
EXPERIENCE.

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REN DITION

RUSTIC ELEGANCE Clockwise from far left: Bedroom with a view; the design of Provence, Khao Yai is as authentic as you can find in France's Provence-; a luxury dining area.



VARAVUDH LATTANAND (PORTRAIT)

SOME OF HIS FRIENDS LIKE TO joke that he spent more time in the Palace of Versailles than Louis XIV did. Jean-François Jiquel, however, could not care less as he had only work on his mind. Always a passionate craftsman, Jean at the age of 14 started learning his trade with a locksmith in Le Chesnay where he was noticed by the Head Historical Monuments Architect in charge of Versailles at the time.

What followed was 45 years of in-house service at Versailles during which he became a master of all metalwork which led him to apply his skills at some of France's most notable landmarks such as the Paris Opera, the Louvre Museum, Arc de Triomphe, Cathédrale Notre Dame de Paris and Place de la Bastille.

Jean was presented with the Chevalier of the Ordre National du Mérite at a retirement party held by the French government at Les Orangeries in Versailles itself. Life after retirement is still busy as ever for Jean though. The gentleman put his knowledge and savoir-faire to good use by setting up a company called Jardins du Roi Soleil to produce garden decorations and furniture. This company is the sole producer of the Versailles orange tree planters—a unique horticultural tool designed in 1975 by Jean based on older styles of garden trays there. Besides managing the worldwide demand for his planters and garden furniture, he remains a preferred consultant for Versailles and many historical sites across France.

Meanwhile, halfway across the globe, the owners of Magnifique, the French furniture retailer on Sukhumvit 31, were looking to perfect their property venture in Khao Yai. Preeraya Bunnag and Peter Chie have always been passionate about the French style, particularly that of the Provence region. Their idea was to create a small community of 23 plots featuring authentic Provençal houses with the help of consultants from Provence including painters, stone layers, garden designers, interior and exterior designers, as well as a roofing specialist. For a project of this scale, both of them knew they would still have to look for additional resources, especially where metalwork and landscaping were concerned.

Preeraya and Peter met Jean eventually in Paris through a mutual friend who happened to be a neighbor of Jean. After more than a year of scheduling, they finally converged on the design and decoration trade show Maison & Objet to discuss the work that needed to be done at L'Esprit de Provence in Khao Yai. It was agreed that Jean and one of his associates, Christian Préaud, should come to Thailand to visit the site.

"We landed in Bangkok at night after 11 hours, were driven to Khao Yai and stayed one night at a hotel. The next day, with all the jet lag, we went to their place. It was most touching to see what had been done so far," shares Jean.

Clearly the initial efforts of Preeraya and Peter were met with the French team's approval. These traditional Provençal houses are built of stones, old wood, and terra cotta roof tiles supplied by the largest French vendor specializing in Provence-style tiles. This perfect harmony of old and new worlds is achieved when rustic styling and elegance is complemented with modern comforts and practicality. More of these villas will appear against the mountainous background when each plot is sold to individual customers who can choose from the various house designs available.



A TOUCH OF PROVENCE Clockwise from top left: a Provençal garden; a minimalist yet cozy and classic bathroom; Christian Préaud and Jean-François Jiquel; another Provençal garden on site; Provence Khao Yai offers an authentic Provençal feel.

"My work here mostly concerns everything that is metal like gates, signages and other garden furniture. I have to make sure that they are authentic. These iron and metal parts are made in France and shipped here to be put together."

Taking care of less metallic and more earthly elements at L'Esprit de Provence, Christian has worked everywhere in France and significantly in Switzerland, Belgium, Morocco, and the Gulf. He says, "This one would be my first project in Asia, actually my first time in Asia! In order to give Provence Khao Yai a genuine Provençal landscape look and feel, the main structural gesture will be to work on leveling the grounds in successive terraces held with hedges or dry stone walls. This is what we call 'restanques' in French."

Christian finds Khao Yai more humid than Provence but less tropical than he thought before arriving. Some of the plants he had in mind for the project like rosemary and curry plant were already in the soil, suggesting the possibility of growing sage and lavender. Christian is very curious to experiment further to get the look and feel of Provence by adding more trees typical of the Mediterranean coast like chinar, holly oak, and osmanthus. Olive is also in the plan although he doubts it would be able to withstand the Thai humidity.

"The essence of Provence is the sight of picturesque fields and hills, the smell of herbs and plants, and the sound of cicadas. It is very peculiar and it is everywhere. Provençal [in France] is quite hot outside but very fresh inside the house."

BORN WITH A LOVE FOR BEAUTIFUL gardens, Christian spent much time with his grandmother in Brittany when he was a boy. There was a beautiful garden at that house. The climate was sweet and never too cold or warm. Christian recalls, "Everything worked. I learned to appreciate and play with plants so it has always been a passion. I created gardens for myself and my friends all my life but not commercially."

Only after the Internet boom did he return to school to study landscape architecture. Already trained as an architect at the Ecole Speciale d'Architecture de Paris, Christian took another two years to graduate with the equivalent of a doctorate from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure du Paysage de Versailles. He has been creating gardens for a profession since. Today, he operates under Atelier Jardins, a Paris-based firm specializing in design and execution of permanent gardens for properties, temporary gardens for events, as well as exhibitions on themes relating to landscape, gardens, and plants.

Having discovered and becoming familiarized with L'Esprit de Provence through their first phase of work, both Christian and Jean are now ready to continue with the next phase of work where they will build a large and exceptionally well-landscaped common area in the vicinity of the property. Jean explains, "It is the way people build in Provence. There is always a square as the center of a village. It is a community, outside, outdoor, out of the house. People would come here to play pétanque and drink and such."

"And here we are in Provence!" exclaims the cheerful Christian. "We sent pictures back home and our friends say what are you doing in Provence?! It is not just the decor. The soul is here. The lifestyle will be here [as owners begin to move in]." •



THREE CYPRESS TREES Christian Préaud shares an interesting anecdote. "Provence in the 18th or 19th century was a forest. Travelers used to get lost. In order for them to find their way again, next to each house you would plant three of those Cypress trees meaning there is a house there. These trees are taller than other trees and you can see them when you climb up a regular tree. It's like a welcome sign."



MAKE IT REAL From top: A corner in the kitchen; the property is decorated with a variety of flowers; two different views of the interior. Opposite: An outdoor terrace with imported French furniture overlooks lush views.

