



PIÈCE DE RÉSISTANCE

Frog and Simon Michaels' sensitive renovation project
breathed new life into this 16th-century French
manor house, restoring it to its former glory

WORDS VIVIENNE AYERS | PHOTOGRAPHS BRENT DARBY

A door in the more formal sitting room was moved for easier access and the old alcove was filled. After the walls were replastered, they were painted in Light Blue by Farrow & Ball to create an understated backdrop. The curtains used to be stage curtains and were bought at a regional auction house in Penrith. The sofa is from Lots Road Auctions



THE STORY

OWNERS Writer Frog Michaels and husband Simon, vice chairman of a trust company in Singapore, own the manor and spend holidays here with their children, Florence, 15, and Joseph, 11, and border terrier, Daffodil. They rent out part of the estate to guests (lafuye.com)

PROPERTY The seven-bedroom 16th-century chateau is not far from Chinon, in France's Loire Valley. It has a listed exterior and is a *Monument Historique*, with five acres of grounds and 10.7 acres of truffle orchards

WHAT THEY DID The couple rewired, replumbed and added new central heating. They created a boot room and reconfigured the kitchen to make it open plan. Upstairs, they replaced bathrooms and redesigned the master bedroom. A new septic tank was also added



Frog Michaels describes the moment she first saw La Fuye, now her holiday home, as ‘*un coup de foudre*’ – like a bolt of lightning, it was love at first sight. ‘France was our go-to for holidays and we always wanted to buy a home there,’ she says. ‘On the last day of one holiday, before we went back to our home in Singapore, we spotted this property up for sale and decided to go and see it. We drove up the lime tree-lined approach – the leaves were out, making a tunnel effect – and it felt like a magical place. I just looked at Simon – we hadn’t even seen the house yet – and said: “Oh my goodness, let’s buy it”. So we did. You could just see the house peeking through the gates and it felt amazing, it was like we had stumbled upon a hidden gem.’

The couple bought the house thinking that it didn’t need much work, apart from decorating. ‘Then we came in from the fields in boots caked in mud and thought, “where’s the boot room?”’, says Frog. ‘We were hiding wellies under the sofas and shoving them in the dining room, so the instigation for doing a quite expensive renovation was that I really needed a boot room.’

It soon became apparent, however, how much more work needed to be done. Nothing happened for a year because the couple were unable to find a suitable architect, but once work began, the house was rewired and replumbed and work started on creating Frog’s boot room. ‘The château ended with a false wall and behind it, was another door that led to the base of the tower where there was a rudimentary laundry. We employed an architect to open up the archway, then we knocked through the base of the tower and transformed it into a boot room, laundry and cloakroom,’ explains Frog.

She and Simon then started work on the kitchen, transforming it into a welcoming, open-plan space. ‘It was very dark and small when we moved in,’ explains Frog. ‘We wanted a living kitchen with a sitting and dining area, so we knocked through the walls.’ New central heating was installed meaning that the store cupboard just off the kitchen, which had housed the ancient boiler, could be transformed into a larder as the new boiler was relocated to the garage.

English kitchen cabinets were chosen but Frog struggled with the colour choice. ‘Our apartment in Singapore is white and contemporary with clean lines and modern art. This house is very ➤



TOP The family by their vintage Citroen DS, a real symbol of France, which they use when visiting their French holiday home. The château is built in honey coloured *tuffeau* stone, typical of the region

ABOVE The fairytale exterior of La Fuye with its two towers, the oldest parts of the property. The house has two façades – the austere northern façade is more architecturally important as it is older, while the south facing part was built in a more classical château-style



A wall was knocked down to create this open-plan kitchen diner. The reclaimed floor tiles, or *tomettes*, are used throughout the house and the table was made bespoke. It was hard to find benches that were the exact size to match the table, but Frog eventually found these, which came from a country house in Ireland, on The Saleroom



ABOVE LEFT The muted sage colour on the dining room walls – Farrow & Ball’s Lichen – helps the ancient beams and shutters to stand out. An antique dining table and chairs enhance the period feel. This space was once the château kitchen and the alcove still contains the old stone sink



ABOVE RIGHT Painting the walls in Farrow & Ball’s Pointing creates an understated backdrop to the kitchen-diner. The Georgian sideboard was another lucky find on The Saleroom – Frog loves its pretty apron detailing. The decorative lamp and shade are both from Oka

different. I didn’t want to get the colours wrong,’ she explains. Lots of houses in the Loire Valley are built from honey-coloured *tuffeau* stone, and paired with light grey painted woodwork. Frog chose a dramatic, darker grey that creates a beautiful contrast and sings against the white Aga, another classic English touch.

All the walls in the house were replastered. ‘They were very rough with rustic lime plaster that drinks the paint and doesn’t give you the right finish,’ says Frog. In addition, the floors were relaid with reclaimed *tomettes*, floor tiles which are typical of the region. ‘We had too many different coloured and patterned *tomettes* and so needed one cohesive stone floor to run all the way through,’ she explains.


In the formal dining room, a tapestry was hung to prevent the room from being echoey while also complementing the new pale green wall colour, chosen to set off the floor tiles. The old polished oak window frames and beams were left unpainted bringing a sense of warmth to the room. ‘The dining room is used in winter but not at all in the summer. I’m always buying things at auctions in England and bringing them over, so I use the dining room as my Aladdin’s cave in the summer and I love filling it,’ says Frog.

Most of her furniture is antique and either bought at auction or inherited. ‘I tend to buy at auction, which is my complete passion, for really good prices. I love UK regional auction houses – you can still get great deals there.

‘I have an eclectic style that’s always evolving. I don’t like it to look as if I’ve spent ages thinking about it but secretly I have! I’m a huge believer in making use of what you’ve got and maybe changing the knobs, or painting the inside.’

The blue and white toile guest bedroom with its high ceilings has barely been touched as the fabric-covered walls were already there and the couple loved its cocooning charm.

All the bathrooms were refurbished. The main bathroom has a double basin made using an old reclaimed French dresser, while the guest bathroom in the East Tower features a generous roll-top bath that was bought on Ebay and came from Liverpool, replacing a 1970s bath.

‘We love spending time here in France and it is the perfect balance to the quite frenetic, connected life that we have in Singapore,’ says Frog. ‘When we come here, it’s a joy and we love the seasonal pace of country life – the perfect antidote. I feel very much at home when I’m here and I don’t want to be anywhere else.’ 

The Flemish 18th-century tapestry came from a restaurant in Antwerp and was bought at auction from Döbritz Auction House in Frankfurt – it is the perfect piece to soften the formal sitting room. The grand piano came from Lindsay Burns Auctioneers and the cowhide rug was bought in Argentina





Chalon kitchen cabinetry painted in Farrow & Ball's dark grey Down Pipe contrasts with the white backdrop. Frog bought the still life oil painting of oranges and lemons from a brocante in Chinon, and the Cardinal Richelieu oval painting is from the Chinon auction house. A Graham & Green yellow wall clock and pendant lights from Tala bring a modern edge to the room





The ceiling beams create a cosy feel in the open-plan seating area and really sing against walls painted in Farrow & Ball's Pointing. Frog added pops of colour with a teal sofa from The Saleroom and a larger blue design from Sofa.com. Pattern is introduced through the footstool from Clock House Furniture, a rug from Lindsay Burns Auctioneers and a Miro lithograph from a gallery in Oxford





Frog and Simon inherited the toile de Jouy fabric covered walls of the guest bedroom and loved its cocooning charm. To brighten the room, they painted the woodwork in Dimpse by Farrow & Ball. The bed from Norris Bedding is dressed with white and blue bedding to complement the tones of the toile



TOP LEFT The *tomettes* in the guest bedroom add warmth and make a perfect foil for the Kashmiri rug from David Duggleby Auctioneers. The two chairs were bought off the previous owners of the château

TOP RIGHT The main bathroom was reconfigured and part of the en suite from another bedroom was incorporated into it to create a larger space. Marble floor tiles from Mandarin Stone sing against the walls painted in Cornforth White by Farrow & Ball. The CP Hart freestanding bath is the focal point of the room

ABOVE LEFT & RIGHT Behind the bed in the master bedroom was a passageway that Frog closed off and is the reason the bed is framed the way it is. On the bed, from And so to Bed, are cushions by Elizabeth Hay Designs in Singapore, made with ikat fabric by Nicole Fabre. Frog painted the walls in Tallow by Farrow & Ball so that the morning light would bounce off them and she added contrast by using its Dimpse on beams and woodwork