

S. Russell Groves, who has designed projects for Giorgio Armani, Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan, completely rescripted the home's exterior space, adding an extensive ipe wood deck, an outdoor shower and a pool cabana.



FROM HOUSE TO ME

Cosmetics queen Essie Weingarten and partner Max Sortino transformed this East Hampton abode into the beach house of their dreams.

BY SUE HOSTETLER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL FILONOW



The soaring living room is a study in serene colors and rich textures like raw linen, leather and suede. Most of the furnishings were custom-made by Groves.



Essie Weingarten picking flowers in the backyard of her East Hampton estate

“IT WAS THAT TYPICAL HORROR STORY of having a great inspection and the next day everything in the house falls apart!” So says nail-polish maven Essie Weingarten, describing the renovation ordeal that she and partner Max Sortino endured after buying their East Hampton beach house. Purchased in 2001, the modern, expansive space seemed perfect to the couple. Weingarten, founder and president of Essie Cosmetics Ltd., which produces hundreds of shades of nail polish sold in more than 250,000 salons in 95 countries, and Sortino, CEO of the company, were living full-time in the city and sought a weekend sanctuary where they could relax and recharge. “I run my own business 24/7 and wanted a place to take a break, and we had always rented in and loved the Hamptons,” says Weingarten.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Most of the windows in the home were enlarged, including in the master bedroom, which now provides stellar views of the garden; a contemporary Poggenpohl kitchen, awash in stainless steel and white marble, was added for the couple (they love to cook); a dining table topped with frosted glass is surrounded by tall-windowed doors that open onto the deck and pool area in the charming alcove off the kitchen.





FROM LEFT: Adorning the home's entry is a sandblasted oak console, over which hangs one of the many pieces of water-themed artwork Weingarten has collected; a deco-feeling walnut console actually serves as the bar, with liquor bottles and glassware hidden inside; a triptych hangs in the living room, under which sits a low-slung minimalist bench and classic petite Saaren tulip table.

But what was supposed to be a simple cosmetic face-lift turned into a complete overhaul when the general contractor opened up a wall and found water and mold—a home that was basically “rotten to the core.” The couple needed to call in the big guns. Enter S. Russell Groves. “I had always admired the Greenhouse Spa [now called Lather Spa] on 57th Street in the city and simply found the architect who had designed that,” says Weingarten. To further complicate matters, the couple wanted the property completed by Memorial Day, and it was already February. “It was definitely a tight schedule,” laughs Groves. “But we were able to rise to the challenge. It became all about trust, which allowed for quick decisions.” Groves acted as both architect and interior designer, reconfiguring the exterior of the home, furnishing the space, designing a sprawling deck and even handling the landscaping. Unified vision, indeed.

The original T-shaped floor plan was retained, with the soaring double-height living room as the visual focal point. Before Groves joined the project Weingarten added generous angular skylights, and old windows were enlarged to infuse the home with brilliant East End sunlight. The nearly 5,000-square-foot, five-bedroom, six-bathroom home is a modern reinterpretation of the contemporary beach house. Groves was careful to respect the original design, a 1970s fusion of disparate modernist shapes. The kitchen got a complete updating with high-tech Poggenpohl fixtures and features a minimalist combination of sleek stainless steel and light marble. “My favorite room is the kitchen,” says Weingarten. “I adore cooking; it takes me far away. I use fresh vegetables from my garden—tomatoes, basil, eggplant, peppers—and we barbecue 12 months a year.”

The idiom of the interior is one of serene comfort; a mix of rich textures and materials like raw linen, raw silk, leather and suede echo the natural surroundings and impart tranquility. “Essie wanted a neutral palette; since she works with color all day, she wanted a refuge from it,” says Groves. Bleached-white oak floors provide the perfect casual backdrop for furnishings of teak, bamboo and cerused oak, found at little boutiques or custom-designed and fabricated by Groves. A standout is the simple yet elegant entry console. Finished in sandblasted lime-washed oak, it has the appearance of a sophisticated form of driftwood. Beautiful water-themed artwork is strategically placed around the home, adding restrained pops of color.

The pièce de résistance is surely the glorious exterior living space, which recalls California indoor-outdoor style. Extending from the back of the house, a hardwood plank deck of Brazilian ipe was added, with steps down to the pool (long steps in the pool cleverly mimic the deck). A trellis-covered shower and indoor cabana remind visitors that this is a residence that’s serious about leisure activities. “I call this area with the outdoor shower and reading spot the Zen area,” says Weingarten. This is also Groves’ favorite part of the finished home: “I really like how the interior and the exterior seamlessly flow together, and how the decks cascade down to the pool.”

“Simple style is my style,” adds Weingarten, describing the couple’s overall life in East Hampton. She and Sortino enjoy walking to the beach, picking flowers in their garden (“orchids, peonies, hydrangeas—it’s all about whatever looks good at the time”) and going to garage sales. Isn’t it always the simple things in life? **H**