

Retiring to a European vineyard estate in Dundee: Why leave the country?

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Attorney Annette Wilson Christensen spent much of her career buried in documents and her husband, Claus Fjord Christensen, a deep-sea hydrographer, charted waters around the world.

When the two decided it was time to retire, their thoughts turned first to settling into a European village, where they envisioned themselves walking to the market to buy fresh food, appreciating the landscape and embracing a slower pace.

“As the fantasy moved closer to reality, we realized we would be too far from friends and family,” says Wilson Christensen, a former Microsoft lawyer who specialized in product development for international corporations. “When we decided we couldn’t move to France, the next best place in the world is the Willamette Valley. So here we are.”

Relocating to a foreign land to spend their golden years is a common dream among working Americans. But when it’s time to pack up and pullout, most stay in the USA. The majority of residents over 50 have no plans to move from their current homes, says Shelley Buckingham of **AARP Oregon**. Instead of crossing the Atlantic, the Christensens built a LEED-platinum residence in the heart of Oregon’s wine country that delivers their longed-for lifestyle. They have the look and leisure of a rural Mediterranean-style estate fronted by vineyards.

Although new, time-honored architectural features, reclaimed building materials and heirlooms from Fjord Christensen's family create the appearance of the Old World.

Off a country road in Dundee, the bright stucco house cuts through the fog on cold spring days.

“At first Annette wanted a tan or bone color for the house,” says Fjord Christensen, “but under gray skies, it just didn’t look very cheerful and so we selected a warm, deep gold that cheers us on the blustery Oregon days.”

Extending the European illusion, courtyards, landscaping and a potager were modeled after properties the couple has seen in Southern France. “Now I can walk out and pick lettuce and other vegetables for our dinner salad and preserve tomato sauce for enjoyment in the cool months,” says Wilson Christensen.

Inside, a stately limestone fireplace surround sits under a ceiling crossed by lightly white washed wood beams. Reclaimed walnut was used for the dark wood floors. Throughout the house are art pieces they have collected while traveling: Her folk and modern pieces and his classic and European-style works. The couple did not set out to receive LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) platinum, the highest level of environmentally responsible construction recognized by the **U.S. Green Building Council**. Their decisions of design, quality and efficiency, however, contributed to the outcome.

Being energy efficient for comfort and sustainability was “always our highest priority,” says Fjord Christensen, as he moved through a room, switching off a light before he exited.

The couple began working with Carson Benner of **Cellar Ridge Construction**, a green builder in McMinnville, during their property search.

Benner guided them through choices such as installing an advanced stucco rainscreen and rainwater catchment irrigation for the house and vineyard as well as solar panels and other green features.

Architect Matthew O. Daby “understood what we wanted from the very beginning,” says Fjord Christensen, “and was able to design in passive solar elements and implement green technology without sacrificing aesthetics.”

The two-story has been super insulated to cut the expense of heating and cooling, but some of the insulation features also contribute to the appearance. Thick walls created deep windowsills and **Kolbe windows** add to the lightness and warmth of the home.

Reclaimed wood was used not only on the flooring but also for the dramatic, rough-hewn beam and corbels above the cooktop in the kitchen. Reusing old wood avoided the need for new lumber while adding a layer of time-earned texture.

Carrie Gates of **Absolute Procurement**, a Portland interior designer, “saved our marriage,” says Wilson Christensen. “She guided us through choices for everything from the kitchen sink to the Italian wall tiles that evoke the feeling of a Mediterranean kitchen.”

Scott Picker at **Aspen Creek Landscaping** in Newberg contributed to the LEED certification by using local materials to build stonewalls and patios. Picker also worked closely with Wilson Christensen, an avid gardener, to select drought-tolerant plants.

As with the home, the garden plan met the couple’s need to save well water and reduce the amount of upkeep, while also matching their visual design goals.

“Since we are getting a bit creakier in our late middling years,” jokes Wilson Christensen, “we wanted a simple landscape design and low-maintenance plants such as sedum, berberis, lavender and grasses to create a Mediterranean mood.”

Her favorite part of the house: Being able to wander out the mud room door to her kitchen garden.

His: A sense of vastness gathered from walking the vineyard, watching the clouds and fog move in and out, and seeing birds fly by.

This is the first time Fjord Christensen has not lived by or on the water. But he’s not missing the ocean or that original dream of retiring to Europe.

“With great neighbors, interesting new friends and Annette by my side,” he says, “it all combines to make me feel that I have entered the best phase of my life.”

-- Janet Eastman

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Reaching LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) platinum status

Cellar Ridge Construction, a green builder in McMinnville, installed these green features in the Christensen vineyard property in Dundee:

Water conservation

5,000 gallon rainwater catchment system

Pre-plumbed to use rainwater for toilets

Dual flush Toto toilets

All excess rainwater goes to a bioswale

Energy efficiency

Super efficient HVAC system 15.5 SEER, 8.7 HSPF

Weighted average U-value of 0.28 for Kolbe windows

Insulation

R-43: Walls 2 inch spray foam and 8 inch blown in fiberglass

R-59: Ceiling 4 inch spray foam +R38 bat

R-60: 16 inch open web floor trusses filled with blown in fiberglass

98 percent Efficient Navien on demand water heater

Final blower door test 2 ACH at 50 pascals

5 KW ground mounted solar array

All hot water lines insulated

3/8-inch rain screen under 1-inch stucco

Southern orientation for passive solar

Air-lock front entry design

Raised heel trusses.

Sustainable materials

Reclaimed wood flooring

Local grassland restoration juniper used for rafters

Locally sourced Columbia river sand used in stucco

30 percent post-consumer recycled content in insulation

Locally sourced framing package

Reclaimed beam and corbels around cooking area

25 percent Fly-Ash content foundation

69 percent of all construction waste diverted for recycling.

Indoor air quality

Merv 13 air filtration system

Lifebreath HRV

No carpet

No VOC solvents or paints used

Shoe removal and storage area in mud room

Dog wash outside heated envelope

Automatic garage exhaust fan system

Built-in vacuum system

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