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Frank and Becky Ponterio enjoy a glass of red in the pergola. The couple's wine collection is stored in a former carriage house that has been converted to a pour room (at left).

Hospitality Sweet

A designer, oenophile, and generous host makes his house and its grounds even more inviting to guests **by Lisa Cregan**

For years, interior designer Frank Ponterio has been too busy creating luxe residences for his A-list clients to get around to the projects awaiting him at home. Friends say it seems like forever that he's been talking about tweaking the elegant Lake Forest house he shares with his wife, Becky, and their 12-year-old daughter. So it was a delightful surprise for his wide social circle to hear that Ponterio had finally completed two upgrades—a renovated kitchen and a pour room—aimed squarely at entertaining.

Even before these improvements, gathering chez Ponterio was always pretty swell. But with his fancy new kitchen and the chance to dine surrounded by hundreds of bottles of wine, the designer has amped up the anticipation an invitation to one of his frequent get-togethers elicits.

The pour room is in a tiny outbuilding, a former standalone carriage house, that's a remnant of the 1929 estate designed by architect David Adler for advertising tycoon Albert Lasker. The Ponterios live in the gatehouse of that long-vanished estate, and for the past eight years they've been gradually (and respectfully) renovating and repurposing their property's structures. The pour room is a particularly inspired idea.

"We didn't want to do a wine cellar with a dining table," Ponterio says. "Yes, it's fun to eat in a wine cellar because you're surrounded by wine, but it's chilled and you're chilled!"

Rather than fitting out a clammy basement to hold his bottles, Ponterio transformed the carriage house, storing his wine in enormous

PHOTOGRAPHY MATTHEW GILSON STYLING SUSAN VICTORIA







The courtyard, complete with an outdoor fireplace, is perfect for both cocktail parties and intimate chats on a pair of Adirondack chairs. The building to the right houses Ponterio's office. **LEFT** The kitchen features Christopher Peacock cabinetry, walls tiled with Carrara marble, and soapstone countertops. "Soapstone is a little bit waxy to the touch, so the counters feel like they've been there for a while," Ponterio says.

temperature-controlled "caves" hidden behind panels made from simple slat boards that match the look of the old structure. He installed large front doors of naturally aged mahogany, which he and Becky fling open as often as the gods of Midwestern meteorology allow. It's about the furthest thing from a dank, candlelit wine cellar you could imagine.

"It looks very rustic in there on purpose," Ponterio says. "We really wanted to keep the mood casual." Now, as often as twice a month, eight or so fortunate guests enjoy dinner around the rough-hewn French farm table Ponterio found in New Orleans. As his guests gaze contentedly through the open doors and across the lush gardens designed by Frank Mariani, Ponterio pours liberally



The Pontorios' daughter brings drinks to the family dining area, paved with crushed stone, just outside the kitchen. Antique wine jugs, in their original crates, are gradually filling up with corks.

from his collection of fine Italian reds.

But man does not live by *vino rosso* alone. The kitchen that Ponterio designed for the main house (across the courtyard from the pour room) is another successful renovation and one that gets a real workout, as the Pontorios are avid cooks. From the moment they moved in, they dreamed of opening up the space between the kitchen and dining room to accommodate their fantasy of a cooking space.

To do it, Ponterio bumped back a rear wall by three feet and added two custom windows that match exactly the proportions of Adler's original French casement designs. And he installed a five-foot-square island, topped with three-inch-thick butcher block, that's as useful as it is dramatic.

"It's a huge island for a kitchen this size, but we use it every day," Ponterio says. "We chop on it, we prep on it, our daughter does her homework there, and at parties it's where we set out the antipasti"—typically roasted beets, grilled vegetables, goat cheeses, and olives, served with Champagne or prosecco.

"Becky's usually in the kitchen putting the finishing touch on a salad, and I'm at my grill in the gravel courtyard," Ponterio says. "People wander in and out. It's all very relaxed." Guests often congregate in the curtained pergola that Ponterio built a few years ago. When it's time to grab a plate, everyone streams into the pour room.

"I love to open a wine I'm excited about, like a '99 Brunello, and share it with my friends," says Ponterio. "But I know some people don't like red—although I don't know why!—so I'll offer white wine, too." In his youth, Ponterio spent summers visiting relatives in southern Italy who make their own wine; he admits he fell completely in love with his cousins' wine and with their food-friends-family lifestyle.

"After dinner, we'll all end up around our outdoor fireplace with a glass of port or Scotch, and invariably someone will have brought some cigars." Talk about an enchanted evening. ■

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