

EXTERIOR

The outdoor staircase to Emma's farmhouse remains a reminder of past centuries when animals occupied the ground floor to keep the farmer and his family warm on the floor above



A TASTE of ITALY

High above undulating countryside encircled by faraway mountains is a farmhouse creatively restored by Emma Bini

FEATURE MAGGIE COLVIN | PHOTOGRAPHY SPIKE POWELL



HOME TRUTHS

THE PROPERTY

A farmhouse and former cowshed built in 1874
LOCATION Tuscany, Italy
ROOMS Hall, sitting room, dining room, kitchen, utility room, four bedrooms (all en suite), plus a one-bedroom guest annex with sitting room, kitchen and en-suite bathroom

PURCHASED 1973

PREVIOUS PROPERTY

'Before I moved here, I lived in a flat in Rome,' says Emma.



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Ethiopian-born Emma Bini is a keen explorer and spent several years travelling the world before moving to Italy in her twenties. Within a few months she married a sculptor, Philip Leroy. 'We shared a romantic dream to live in the country, growing vegetables and keeping chickens, so we left our flat in Rome to buy this run-down farmhouse in Tuscany,' says Emma. 'The two-storey house was mostly open-plan, except for one half of the ground floor, which was where the cows lived. And although the kitchen and bathroom were very primitive, the property had huge potential.'

In those early days the only safe access to the first floor was via the exterior stone staircase, so Philip's first project was to fit an interior rope ladder. 'After I became pregnant with our son Luca, we soon realised this was not negotiable or even safe,' says Emma, 'so we worked out plans for proper internal stairs.'

More recently, after Emma and Philip parted amicably, Emma began the main building project, which took the house ▶

1 HALL
 Emma laid reclaimed bricks on the floor and found the old chest in an antiques shop. Viking Reclamation sells salvaged bricks, prices on request

2 SITTING ROOM
 Rich-yellow walls, deep-pink sofas and a Chinese-style coffee table add warmth

and character, while French doors bring in natural light. Walls painted in Dorset Cream estate emulsion, £34.50 for 2.5 litres, Farrow & Ball. Sofa Workshop's Miss Daisy in Vogue Hot Pink, £1,049, would look good

3 POOL
 This area is a popular place for family to gather when they visit



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from its simple artisan's roots into the comfortable home it is now. Creating separate rooms was the priority and Emma divided the first floor into three bedrooms and two bathrooms. On the ground floor, after builders had replaced bricks pitted by cows' hooves with reclaimed versions, that too was split up. 'The old kitchen was no more than a woodburning stove and a sink,' says Emma, 'so I got a joiner to make farmhouse-style units and added French doors to separate this space from the dining area.'

With the building work finished, Emma could concentrate on the decoration. 'The fun bit began when the painters arrived and I was forced to decide whether or not to cover the dark wooden ceiling beams,' she says. 'Most Italians like dark wood, but I decided light was more important than tradition, so we painted them all off-white. But as custodian of a historic house, I left the original beams in the hall as it's the oldest room.'

Over the years Emma has accumulated most of her furniture at local auctions and antiques shops, and curtains ►

1 SITTING ROOM

Emma wanted to create a relaxed look, so she furnished the space with mismatched pieces – a cane sofa, planter's chair, upholstered armchair and red lacquered coffee table. Laura Ashley's Addison armchair in Luxford Stripe Cranberry, £770, and Balmoral rattan sofa, £680, are good alternatives. A similar planter's chair is available from Cyan, priced at £325

2 KITCHEN

The antique marble-topped table is a classic Tuscan design. Reclaimed brick flooring, cream-painted units and a beamed ceiling all add to the room's country charm. For similar wooden units try Bespoke Kitchens. Cabinets painted in Hound Lemon, with panel edges picked out in Red Earth, both estate eggshell, £50 for 2.5 litres, Farrow & Ball



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INSPIRATION 'I love mixing pieces from different countries and eras, but I've tried not to let my cosmopolitan collection detract from the house's rustic Italian character'

DINING ROOM

Red-painted cane chairs contrast well with Emma's collection of turquoise glass and hand-painted pottery. Navy 111 chair in Red, £252, The Conran Shop, is a similarly vibrant design. For hand-decorated tableware try Divertimenti's Solimene range, from £11.50 for a dinner plate



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were designed and donated by artist friends. After her children Luca and Cecile started school, Emma got into the fashion business working for Italian *Vogue* and Valentino, which involved extensive travelling. Those many business trips defined the international, eclectic look she's given her home. 'I love the rich colours of red Chinese lacquer and different global styles,' she says. Emma has also indulged her feminine side by adding pretty touches, especially in her bedroom. 'Who else has a pink room decorated with handpainted roses?' she says.

Emma's home radiates relaxed warmth, making it a magnet for friends and family. Her grandchildren are the most frequent visitors, and when not devouring a plate of her home-made pasta, they're usually found playing in the swimming pool while grown-ups bask in the Italian sun. 25

1 GUEST ANNEX
This cosy space is mostly accessorised with mementoes from holidays, including a rug bought in Bulgaria, lanterns from Sweden, and a picture and coffee table from China. For a comparable metal-framed daybed try the Classico sofa, £1,070, Metal Design Furniture

2 MASTER BEDROOM
A four-poster bed draped in silk adds a feminine feel. Hasena Venezia bed, £629, Head2bed, has this look. For

similar material try Nepal Silk in Duckegg, £38m, Prêt à Vivre

3 MASTER EN SUITE
A vibrant green-painted door complements the delicate rose-pink shade on the walls. Door painted in Arsenic estate eggshell, £50 for 2.5 litres, Farrow & Ball. Wrought-iron Paris chair, £90, Metal Design Furniture, would suit this scheme. Podere Sant Adele is available to rent through Merriion Charles, 0039 392 155 1464; info@merriioncharles.com