

S B L S

Santa Barbara Life & Style Magazine

July/August 2023



10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

The DUCK CLUB



EVERYTHING HAS A STORY AT THIS OUTDOORSY-CHIC ESTATE IN THE HEART OF THE SANTA YNEZ VALLEY

BY *Alexandra Lee* | PHOTOGRAPHY *Tynan Daniels*

When Greg and Mishel Rohl searched for an ideal luxury vacation home in Santa Barbara wine country, Greg's one non-negotiable was a bit different than you'd expect. It wasn't a pool, not a sauna or home theater, not a tricked-out party barn (though they have one of those, too). It was a pond. A pond just big enough to fish (catch & release only), swim and paddle, for a community of bass, bluegill, and turtles to thrive, and for an island with a dock and two chairs to watch the sunset. So, it seemed like fate when their realtor took the couple to tour a one-square-mile Santa Ynez property with a pond smack in the middle. After one 30-minute tour, their offer was on the table that same day.

"The owner must've thought, 'Who are these people? Are they serious?'" Greg laughs. The truth is, they could make such a quick offer because they understood the

property so well. However, another buyer was interested, and a competing offer was on the table. Mishel knew she'd have to fight for the property, so she directed Greg, "You're the English major, write them a letter explaining why we get it!" And so, it was—Greg wrote the owner that letter, and the property was theirs not long after. Something about the mix of heartfelt memories of growing up in the Midwest and photos of times spent at a family's property in Wisconsin convinced the current owner that the Rohls were the right buyers. "Simply put, our pitch came down to, 'when you know, you know,'" Greg says. Thus, The Duck Club was reborn.

Greg and Mishel were not, by standard means, "country people." At the time, they lived in Newport Beach and, previously, the charming town of Mill Valley in Marin County. In fact, they were one of two couples ever to get married at Kokkari in San Francisco (Mishel's

background is Greek). What could be more city than that? However, this move to the Valley represented a return to old ways. To simpler living. To a nature-abounding lifestyle and close-knit relationships with neighbors. Greg describes his experience with city living as the “ambient angst,” something from which Santa Ynez Valley could not be more opposite. “There’s something about when you pass Lake Cachuma, you come through the pass, and you start looking out and...something changes.” It’s true—as you approach the end of their access road, surrounded by vineyards and past many a quaint country home, something *does* change. It’s like you’ve been plucked out of California and dropped into Tuscany, all the pastoral allure of the fabled region appearing right in the property’s cypress-lined driveway. It’s like the Valley has been waiting for you—at least, The Duck Club certainly has.

Oriented north to south on 26 acres of land, this spot blends rustic country living with high-tech luxury and modern aesthetics, resulting in the most tricked-out yet idyllic off-the-grid vacation spot imaginable. It’s every kid’s dream summer camp and every adult’s dream home all wrapped into one. A quick jaunt around in the golf cart and you’ll discover hidden gems at every turn—my personal favorite is the Tippy Goat Bar. In this fenced-in enclosure, guests can sip dry martinis in the company of two lovable Nigerian Pygmy goats. Of course, there’s an obligatory bocce court, but also a volleyball court, basketball half-court, party barn, pond-side “beach club,” and an on-site campground complete with an Airstream and a swim spa. It would be easier to name what they *don’t* have. The common thread amongst these activities is to get visitors off the couch and outdoors, exploring what natural entertainment the Valley offers.

What’s the best word to describe the Duck Club? “*Habitat.*” It’s like a nature TV program constantly occurs outside their closed doors. “As my uncle back in Wisconsin would say about his property, you don’t really own property like this. We’re just renting,” says Greg, he and Mishel, the self-proclaimed “fortunate stewards” of the land. They keep a running tally of every wildlife sighting over the years, including, but not limited to, coyotes, herons, swans, osprey, turtles, baby bunnies, and, of course, mallard ducks. “Did you see that movie a few years ago with Matt Damon, *We Bought a Zoo?*” Greg asks. “Well, if we made a movie, it’d be *We Bought a Park.*”

With credit to its natural abundance, The Duck Club has a rich history within the Santa Ynez community, long

before Greg and Mishel became those fortunate stewards back in 2016. As a tributary blue line passes through the property on its way to the Santa Ynez River, it naturally collected water where ducks would gather, enticing some locals over the years to sneak over the fence and try to “catch” them. “I used to do it with my godbrother Chad!” chimes in Kate Campbell, the Rohl’s current realtor, friend, and goddaughter of The Duck Club’s next-door neighbors has her own fair share of memories on this very property. Those days are long past, but the tongue-in-cheek reference to the property as “The Duck Club” still endures. Now, the logo Greg created for the modern Duck Club asserts that the estate is “a club *for* ducks,” a statement representative of their philosophy for sharing the wealth of this natural treasure trove with the surrounding community.

Case in point: Kate’s four-year-old son, Chase, caught his first fish here the other week. “Seeing it through kids’ eyes is so cool,” she says. “As an adult, you walk in, and you’re like, ‘Wow, look at this, it’s so vast and gorgeous,’ it takes you a good twenty minutes to walk around this place. As a *child*, think about how it’s like seeing Disneyland for the first time.” With a summer camp feel and everything but the ropes course, the property boasts its own Duck Club Beach Club on the pond shores, with an authentic lifeguard chair and collection of paddle boats and kayaks. “It’s sort of like an infinity pool. It’s an infinity pond,” says Greg. Angry teens can disappear on the golf cart or into the party barn of never-ending rounds on the golf simulator and skee ball machine. The adults call their expeditions “going on safari.”

During the pandemic, The Duck Club became a therapeutic escape for friends and family to unwind from never-ending lockdowns. “This is such a healing property,” they would say. “There’s something about it.” Aside from the unique location and views encompassing vineyards, mountains, and water, the home features comfortable community spaces and five ensuite bedrooms, offering tranquility and privacy for those seeking seclusion. The house, a modern sprawling luxury villa, boasts five bedrooms, seven bathrooms, collections of artwork (including two hand-painted portraits of their poodles, Riley and Hattie), a wine shower (because who needs a cellar?), and a beautifully redone kitchen with an island ideal for hosting dinners and wine tastings.

“This spot blends rustic country living with high-tech luxury and modern aesthetics.”



Over the past few years, The Duck Club has benefitted many friends, family, neighbors, and the community. Examples include a private omakase sushi and sake cocktail party for thirty guests and an Atterdag Village Harvest Party fundraiser for the senior center in Solvang. Music group The Side Deal, a band made up of Grammy-winning artists from Sugar Ray, The Pawn Shop Kings, and former member of The Who whom Greg happens to know from his Orange County days, hosted a concert by the pond that raised \$100,000 in just one day. The most meaningful event was a wedding for the son of their neighbors and close friends, the Falloons.

As I wrap up my tour, all spots considered, I have one burning question: which part of the property is their favorite? Greg launches into a story about the island in the middle of the pond and their great search for its final touch. “When we bought the property, I loved walking out on the island, but there wasn’t a dock,”

he says. While, like the pond, a dock might not be a priority for most luxury homeowners, it was the cherry on top for Greg. “Surprisingly, trying to find a pond dock is hard in California. I got this thing shipped from Connecticut,” he says. “We put it out there, and the first time I sat...” his words trail off, his eyes belying a wave of nostalgia. The dock is a full-circle tribute to his childhood of joy in the lake-mottled Midwest and undoubtedly a place where today’s children can create the same long-lasting memories and develop an appreciation for the natural entertainment of the Valley.

“It’s been incredibly enriching,” adds Greg of their experience as stewards of the land. “We’re constantly surprised, sometimes challenged, but always grateful for every day.” So, there you have it: a Tuscany-inspired luxury retreat with partying goats, sweeping views, and a pond great enough to make a grown man cry.*

*The Duck Club Estate will be on the market summer 2023. Private showings available by appointment for qualified buyers.
Contact: Kate Campbell
(626) 840-8582 | kate.campbell@engelvoelkers.com*