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If These Walls Could Talk...



...they'd speak of their modest 18th-century beginnings and their dreamy village on the quiet Canadian coast, even of falling into disrepair in the face of eager developers. And they'd tell you how one day, **two summer visitors came along and saved them**, board by beautiful board.

Owners Philip Mitchell and Mark Narsansky inscribed the year the cottage was built (1795) in the marble entryway tile. **OPPOSITE:** Heirloom Limoges fish sets hang on painted paneled walls in the cottage's servery. Wall color, Gray by Benjamin Moore.





A braided indoor/outdoor rug (Dash & Albert) in the mudroom offers a soft landing for the couple's Ganaraskans, Wylo (left) and Jacob. Overhead, Mitchell papered the ceiling in an updated paisley pattern (Thibaut). Wall color, Hancock Gray by Benjamin Moore.



At first, Mitchell, 44, thought he and Narsansky might retire there later. Located about a two-hour flight from Toronto, the town isn't exactly convenient to his current Toronto-centered work life. But then they fell for one of Chester's white elephants: an imposing 1795 "Colonial mish-mash" of a house, as Mitchell calls it. Situated on a prime seaside lot, it had been modified and added onto by many owners. Mitchell and Narsansky heard developers were looking to tear it down and subdivide the property, fighting words as far as they're concerned.

"We work to save the history and charm of our village," Mitchell says. "That's our passion."

So they bought (or more accurately, rescued) the house known as White Cottage and soon discovered just how deep the rot went. "Somebody had attached a porch without flashing," Mitchell says. "Water had been pouring through it for 20 years. It was deep in the walls and you couldn't see it." They made the decision to disassemble the entire structure piece by piece and reuse everything they could. Each part was numbered, cataloged, and put in storage. Then they rebuilt according to the house's original footprint and style, reprising a few architectural features that had been removed decades ago.

All the hardwood floors were taken out piece by piece. "There were four species of wood in the house, of varying plank lengths, varying widths, varying ages," Mitchell said. "We decided, with our artisan hardwood installer,



ABOVE: The kitchen is a study in character-building contrasts: A rustic hemlock island is paired with lively lilac counter stools; banquette seating is crafted of tufted leather and resilient acrylic fabric (both by Ralph Lauren); an ikat pendant shade (custom, The Urban Electric Co.) is a brilliant foil for the overhead lighting (bulkhead cage lights, Cape Cod Lanterns).

TOP: The patio fireplace surround is Beach Stone by Shaw Brick; the flooring is slate.



Mitchell and Narsansky returned character to the dining room by replacing wainscot and trim details that had been stripped away in a previous renovation. Pedestal dining table, HH Ruseau. Chair upholstery fabric, Brunschwig & Fils.



“We work to save the history and charm of our village. That’s our passion.”



Life strews happy accidents along every path,
but some people really know how to work them.

White satin-finish paint accentuates charming tongue-and-groove paneling, exposed beams, and cased archways in the living room (here and above). Drapery fabric, Kravet. Armchair fabric, Lee Jofa.



Canadian-born interior designer Philip Mitchell and his husband, Mark Narsansky, an advertising executive, have that wondrous blend of timing and talent. The two met almost 20 years ago through mutual clients and since then have shared a modern apartment in Toronto, a six-bedroom weekend cottage an hour's drive away on Lake Erie, and an office and apartment in Manhattan.

So when a troubled 18th-century cottage on the coast of Nova Scotia came on their radar, they weren't exactly looking to add to their real estate roster. What would prompt the two to scoop it up and embark on a to-the-studs renovation?

The answer comes down to being the right people in the right place (not to mention a healthy obsession with the past). The pair had been vacationing in Chester, Nova Scotia, an idyllic seaside village of roughly 1,500 year-round residents on the east coast of Canada, for a few summers when they heard about the house. Known for its centuries-old architecture, wooden boat sailing, and sparkling summer weather, Chester has been a part-time haven for affluent Americans and Europeans since the late 1700s. It's also quiet and quaint—decidedly under the radar.

"This is embarrassing to say, but even though I'm from Canada, I'd never been east of Montreal," Mitchell says. "I'd never been to any of the Maritime provinces. But we totally fell in love. Chester has historic integrity and unbelievably friendly people. It's a little slice of heaven."



to mix them all together, and that's why the floors have this beautiful character."

Because of the area's history of shipbuilding and wooden boat building, local craftsmen can do virtually anything and do it splendidly, says Mitchell, who marvels at three hand-carved newel posts an artisan woodworker created to copy the house's lone original one.

The restoration took about two and a half years. Then came the decorating. As if he were a marvelously sophisticated ship's captain, Mitchell filled the house with a luxurious seafaring style laced with all manner of storied collections and rich antiques.

"We have English furniture, French furniture, Swedish furniture. Things we inherited got mixed with new antiques we found in Europe," says Mitchell. "And we love contemporary art. It has a way of loosening things up."

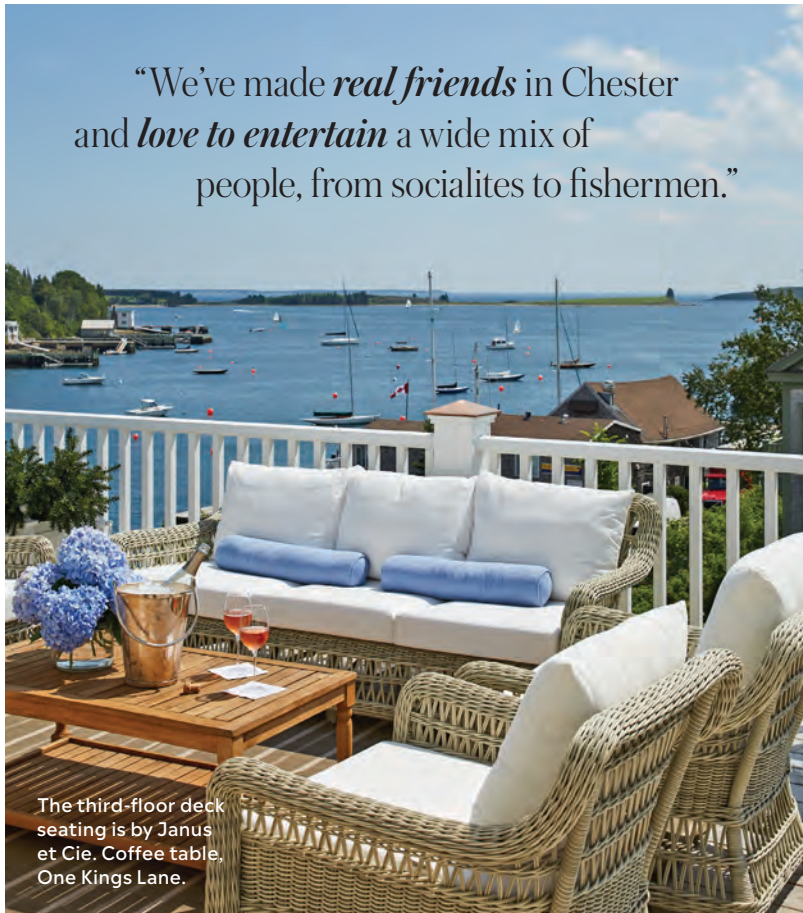
In the kitchen—with its La Cornue range, butcher block island, marine ceiling lights, and white cabinetry secured with heavy brass boat latches—he's displayed a green majolica collection started by his grandmother, continued by his mother, and added onto by himself and Narsansky. "We use all of it regularly. Those tureens and pitchers are frequent serving pieces," says Mitchell.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The stair rail and balusters are yellow cedar. The water side of the 5,000-square-foot home faces Chester's Front Harbour. A mix of Swedish, French, and English antiques furnishes the third-floor guest bedroom. A Waterworks claw-foot tub occupies an arched nook in an airy guest bath.

The master bedroom's southeastern exposure and corner position on the second floor offer first views of sunrise over the harbor. Window seat cushion fabric, Cowtan & Tout.



“We’ve made *real friends* in Chester and *love to entertain* a wide mix of people, from socialites to fishermen.”



The third-floor deck seating is by Janus et Cie. Coffee table, One Kings Lane.

Their 45-foot-long living room is broken up with several seating groups. “A lot of the pieces here came from our apartments and places along the way. We went through our inventory and picked the things we love the most. The grandfather clock is an English piece I surprised Mark with for his birthday one year. There’s an amazing Pembroke sofa table that’s one of Mark’s favorites too, so it was definitely going to be in the room we use the most.”

The entire main floor of the house gets slipcovered in white cotton and linen every June for a ritual of summer dress that Mitchell and Narsansky enact themselves with the help of a housekeeper, who steams the slipcovers just before they wrestle them on. “Even the toss pillows are slipcovered in white,” Mitchell says. “They all have different white fringes.”

A third-floor deck, accessed by a guest room and Mark’s office, is arguably the perfect spot. “We’re out there all the time,” Mitchell says of the simply furnished terrace. “It’s great for cocktails in the summer. We’ve made real friends in Chester and love to entertain a wide mix of people, from socialites to fishermen. We whip up appetizers for ten people or a hundred. With the Chester Front Harbour below and the wooden sailboats racing past, it’s perfect. We just add drinks.” ♦

Building on Heirlooms

"If someone in our families was smart enough to start something great, we want to add to it and make it part of our lives," says Mitchell. Here, he shares the couple's collections that bridge past and present.



BRASS CANDLESTICKS

Mitchell seeks "early pieces that have developed a pale patina over time" and hand-hammered metals, as they tend to be "less perfect."



WEDGWOOD JASPERWARE

The biscuit-finish pottery belonged to Mitchell's mother. The style, developed in 1775, arose out of attempts to unravel the secret to porcelain.



MAJOLICA POTTERY

Majolica was widely crafted in the latter half of the 19th century. Their collection includes Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and English tin-glazed pieces.



CORNISH SERVINGWARE

Narsansky began amassing the blue-and-white servingware after spotting it in a friend's UK home. "He was smitten from that moment on."



LIMOGES FISH SETS

"There were so many of these plates made throughout history, so collecting is really about choosing the types of fish you'd like to see."



LOCAL STONWARE

The pair commissioned this colorful pottery from local artist Paula MacDonald. "We loved that it was made right here in Chester."



ANTIQUE CROCKS

These earthy pottery jugs, used to store food before the advent of refrigeration, were the first pieces the couple collected together.



BLUE-AND-WHITE EXPORT

Their collection spans three centuries and includes early Chinese and Japanese jars, English delftware, and Meissen porcelain.



CRYSTAL SCENT BOTTLES

"I look for unusual shapes and designs, like those with interesting cut crystal detailing or carved silver lids and caps."