

Today their large yellow home forms a local landmark on the skyline. Before it sweeps a majestic vista of Whitianga Harbour, the islands of Mercury Bay and the sparkling sea beyond.

Built to emulate the prow of a ship about to set sail, the house is a tribute to things Tuscan – in a totally New Zealand landscape.

Margherita explains: “An architect friend in Italy designed the house plans which a local draftsman adjusted for the local regulations and the location.

“We chose sunflower yellow for the house, which is common in my region. It is like a piece of Tuscany. The building materials are what we would use in Italy: plaster, concrete, tiles and marble.”

The slate used outside came from Whangamata and Giorgio painstakingly chipped it to size for the paths, terrace and walls. For three years the couple’s furniture and thirteen tons of terracotta tiles, not to mention an authentic pizza oven, lay in storage in Auckland waiting for planning consents and completion of building at Villa Toscana.

At last the 6000 square foot house was ready for Margherita, Giorgio, Giorma and baby daughter Fiamma to move in.

Margherita had no doubts about the way she would furnish her castle.

“Most of the furniture is from my mother-in-law’s home in Piedmont. She knows I like old things.

“I really enjoy having the past around me, maybe contrasting the old with something extremely modern. I can take you and tell stories about this furniture. You move your eyes around and they stop at something, then it can tell you a little story.”

Collections of china, a rare and precious silk hanging from Turkey and antique lace tablecloths and tea towels pressed into service as curtains all attest to Margherita’s reverence for old things. A favourite hall chair was rescued piece by piece from the wood pile and repaired when an astute furniture restorer spied the hallmarks of a genuine antique. Now, despite offers to buy it, the chair has pride of place in

Margherita’s heart. “The chair says ‘thank you’,” she says.

At the hub of the house is a massive sitting room with a huge fireplace. From here the house spreads in two wings: bedrooms and living areas. There are often visitors from Italy – family and friends come for a month at a time.

“I think the shape of the house gives space to everyone. Because it is so long, it is very easy to have guests here,” says Giorgio. A separate apartment on the ground floor is available for guests and Giorgio is only too keen to take them out for a day’s fishing in his launch.

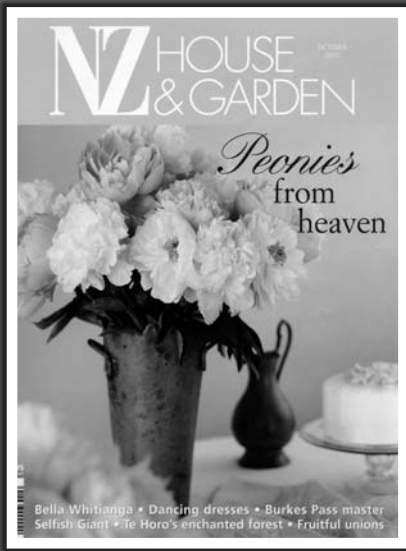
Now Margherita and Giorgio open their lodge to visitors from other cultures. “We believe it gives our kids a cosmopolitan idea. Travelling and meeting many different people gives you tolerance to everything,” she says.

“When you move abroad you are an ambassador for your country,” he adds. “If we have friends or visitors here, they experience the original Italian life – house, people, food, wine – even the mess! In Turin I was working and at night studying oenology at university. I wanted to bring grapes to New Zealand but the places where they would grow were not where I wanted to settle with my family. The choice was grapes or ferns. I chose ferns. I have had a passion for them.”

Margherita and Giorgio import wines from small producers in Piedmont and olive oil from the estate of one of their Tuscan relatives. Giorgio is proud of his extensive cellar and Margherita has taken up watercolour painting again, displaying her works against the white walls in gallery style.

“Now we can keep our diet and lifestyle as they used to be in Italy,” comments Giorgio. “We do miss some cheeses, prosciutto, olives – only a very few things. Often at lunchtime I have a baguette with olive oil and a glass of wine and fruit. I love it. You feel like you’re in Italy.”

Only the view is different. □
Villa Toscana Lodge, Obuka Park, PO Box 43, Whitianga, tel (07) 866 2293.

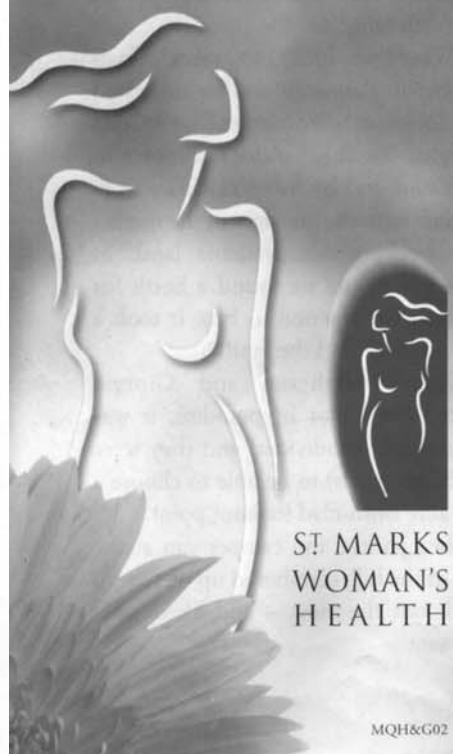


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