



MAKEOVER MASTER

As Alastair Humphries prepares to launch his interior design business, he tells **Gill Harris** how he ended up transforming a neglected old pub into a stylish home

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BEKI YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHY**

Did you train in interior design?

I did my BA in Interior Design at Guildhall University and my Masters in Interior Design at The Royal College of Art. Once I graduated I moved to Amsterdam to work for two design firms. I got spotted by a scout from Storm Modelling Agency and that took me away from design into the world of fashion. It was a wonderful and totally unexpected experience. It did change my perspective and didn't feel a yearning to go back into design.

So how did you end up running restaurants in East Sussex?

Food is my other passion. This was initiated from a very young age and coming from a large family, I remember baking scones, cakes and even a Victoria sandwich from around 10-years-old. I enrolled in a hotel management course at Birmingham College of Food and Domestic Arts, spending the first two years learning classic French cuisine.

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marry my two passions together: food and interiors and set up a restaurant.

I was living in Clapham at the time and during a weekend down in Brighton I found the perfect space in a derelict warehouse in the North Laines, which at the time was not the trendy part of Brighton – and Nia Restaurant was born. It did really well in its first year and I started to look for another site. I didn't want the second location to be in Brighton, but close enough to make it easy to oversee two sites.



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I came across Shoreham by chance. This site had the Adur river running at the back of it and I could already imagine a cantilevered structure coming out from the fixed windows that would be ripped out and a stripped metal industrial door fitted so the customers could sit there on a sunny day eating, drinking and chatting overlooking the river with the moored houseboats in the distance.

Then I found site number three in a rural village called Steyning a couple of years later. It was a disused Post Office that had an overgrown garden and a very large dilapidated building that I converted into a private dining room accommodating 16 guests for special celebrations.



The restaurants were all pretty unique in their own way but all quite industrial. Lots of steel and glass, Italian plastered walls and polished concrete floors .

To warm up the interiors I flanked the floors with worn antique kilims. I raided every second-hand shop in Sussex, and auction houses and was introduced to Ardingly and Kempton – enormous antique fairs taking up fields with wonderful things. I bought every old table, school and church chair for my cherished customers to dine at.

How come you ended up in France?

I sold my restaurants in 2013 and went on a sabbatical for a year to recharge my batteries. I decided on France and ended

up driving through Saint-Malo, through Normandy and onto Brittany where I spent a week. I went around various villages and started looking in the windows of the estate agents, looking at old farm houses. The frontrunner was a six-bedroom farmhouse dating back to 1820, set in two acres with old outbuildings that could form gîtes at a later stage.

Once I got the property renovated, I then set about the outbuildings to form four gîtes. Old metal beds and armoires arrived from the various brocantes, and I visited the renowned Clignancourt flea market in Paris for most of the objects. I cooked supper for guests if they requested it and it was a blissful time in my life. After four years in ➔



Brittany I came back to Brighton, where I met my current partner, Carlo. On our first date, he told me he wanted to open a restaurant. I wanted to run for the hills!

We moved in together and did up our flat in Kempton Village and went on to open our Mexican restaurant Zona Rosa. We worked and lived together and nearly killed each other. Our two beloved Weimaraners kept us sane, taking them for late night walks on the beach after service.

So how did you end up on the Wiltshire border?

We sold our flat, business and decided our next adventure would be in the States, Carlo's native country. A friend had told us about the website Circa Old Houses, which specialises in old, rundown properties that need to be saved. We found a beautiful 1910 Arts and Craft house in Pennsylvania that had been in the same family for over 100 years. It had fallen into a terrible state of repair, so we got it for a good price and it had all the original fixtures intact. We spent a lot of time reinstating all the services.

Then came all the great stuff in my world – the interiors. We were all set to move and when the pandemic happened. My best friend from university lived on the Dorset/Wiltshire border and we had been down many times and loved it so we decided to make that our next adventure.

I went up and down looking at rentals and nothing was suitable and no landlord would take dogs. I stumbled across an old pub on Rightmove. Half the pub had been done and the other half looked like something from yesteryear with the original sign hanging off bearing the name The Fountain Inn in Enmore Green, not far from Semley. I knew it had so much potential and could make this pub with a very chequered past into our home.

I found local carpenters and handymen to transform the place. We put up lovely reclaimed tongue and groove, covering up horrible stone walls, added shelving to house my million books, installed a woodburner to keep us cosy and give a central feature to our living room with a lovely old mantel being →



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held up by two heavy weight iron brackets. From reclamation yard has become my new best friend.

I painted all the walls and ceilings in Farrow and Ball Pointing, which is one of my favourite colours, and then put my pictures and mirrors up and started to introduce colour and texture through sofas, chairs, cushions and curtains and my trademark oil and landscape painting.

I got old French heavy linen to form new loose covers for the sofa, found old Liberty curtains and remnants of William Morris fabric turned into cushions.

At Bath showground I found the most beautiful vintage Ralph Lauren bedspread with roses all over it that now decorates our bedroom.

We have an enormous laundry room which I knew I would have to share and put my office in but there was no way I could design at my lovely old battered sewing table while looking at a washing machine.

I found a lovely old fabric shop on Instagram that had old ticking and got my soft furnishing seamstress, Thomasin to make a curtain to cover the washing machine, and she made me a blind with the rest, so the office was taking shape. I coupled it with hydrangea wallpaper, and a simple wingback linen chair with a botanical fabric cushion to finish off the look.



You've lived all over the world and transformed all sorts of properties. Is there a particular style of property you would like to get your hands on?

My absolute favourite space to work on the domestic front are Georgian homes. The light, space and window proportions give the house such symmetry. They are stunning houses to work on, respecting their historical presence while at the same time making the interior a modern, eclectic space that sits well with their very honest façade.

alastairhumphries.com