

Sonoma Home

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JAMES FANUCCI

The simple Glen Ellen cottage that famed writer M.F.K. Fisher (1908-1992) named her “Last House” is where she spent the last two decades of her life, writing 13 books, reading and entertaining and cooking for friends. The house was built for her on her friend David Pleydell-Bouverie’s ranch.

‘Last House’ Lessons

What we can learn from famed author MFK Fisher’s aesthetic, living large in a small house

By **MEG MCCONAHEY**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

When famed writer M.F.K. Fisher moved into the new house she had built on her friend David Pleydell-Bouverie’s ranch, she was 63 and ready to downsize. But it was not to be a retirement home.

Beginning in the 1930s with “Serve it Forth,” Fisher was the first to write extravagantly about food as metaphor and memoir in a lush and literary way that earned her an elite spot among 20th-century writers. Her two decades in the two-room cottage in Glen Ellen was a fertile time.

She wrote and published 13 books and entertained friends such as Julia Child, James Beard, Alice Wa-



AUDUBON CANYON RANCH

Fisher is seen relaxing in one of the arched porches that looked out on land now protected by Audubon Canyon Ranch in an undated photo.

ters, Herb Caen and Maya Angelou, typically over simple meals from her galley kitchen.

She called her bungalow “Last House.” Here she consorted with “Sister Age” as she called it, fiercely determined to continue writing despite debilitating arthritis and Parkinson’s disease, writing by dictation and even in her head.

“I’m not hungry anymore,” she told New York Times Magazine Food Columnist Molly O’Neill two

years before she died, alluding to the inner cravings that drove her work.

“Yet this is the most creative time of my life.”

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ADVICE TO GROW BY » MASTER GARDENERS

European mistletoe brought to Sonoma County by Burbank

This week we welcome the Sonoma County Master Gardeners to the Press Democrat’s Home and Garden section. These specially trained volunteers are dedicated to helping people in the community become better gardeners by using sustainable practices. Every other week they will dig deep to answer your gardening questions. Email them at the address at the end of the column.

Question: What are those big green balls of leaves growing in the trees around Sebastopol?

Answer: The large globes of



JANET BLAIR / SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS

The odd balls of leaves in this tree are mistletoe, a parasite.

leaves you see, especially around Sebastopol, are European mistletoe (*Viscum album*). This plant parasite was introduced to the area by the horticulturalist Luther Burbank around the turn of the 20th century. Burbank grew mistletoe plants from seeds and attached them to apple trees at his Gold Ridge Experimental Farm in Sebastopol.

Since then, European mistletoe has slowly spread and you can now find it as far north as Windsor, west to Occidental, to the east side of Santa Rosa and

TURN TO GARDENERS » PAGE D3

HOME & GARDEN BRIEFS

NORTH BAY

Backyard bird count

You don’t have to be an avid birder to join people from all over the country in the Great Backyard Bird Count. Participants of all ages, from beginning bird watchers to experts, are invited to participate in the four-day event this month.

Participants are asked to count birds for as little as 15 minutes on one or more days of the count and report their sightings online at birdcount.org.

Marisela de Santa Anna,

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LESSONS

CONTINUED FROM D1

There is much about the simple house, nestled in a meadow on what is now the 535-acre Bouverie Preserve, that suited her needs and served her well.

Working closely with Pleydell-Bouverie, an architect, she created a flexible multipurpose home with just enough space to do what she wanted to do, and no more. She winnowed down her objects to only those things she needed or truly loved, most which had a story or history. It was not pretension, but it accommodated a life of non-material richness.

Last House reflected Fisher's aesthetic rather than the latest in design. Yet there were features she incorporated 50 years ago that are in vogue again, from the open kitchen and living room to the way the home invited in the outdoors and was at ease in the landscape, as if it belonged there. In summer, the pale stucco walls blend with the dry grass.

There are many things about Last House, and how Fisher expressed herself through it, that resonate in a timeless way and offer valuable lessons for creating a home that suits our individual needs and tastes, particularly as we age and during a pandemic when so much of our lives are centered at home.

As Oakland writer Elizabeth Fishel put it, "She lived large in her small house," and it "fit her perfectly, like a well-designed dress." Fishel, who studies the homes of famous authors and what they can teach us, recently led a writer's workshop with Fisher's daughter Kennedy Golden that focused on some of the design and lifestyle principles embodied in Last House. The Last House Writing Workshop, which included a visual tour of the house, was so popular it will be repeated on April 24 (egret.org/mfk-fishers-last-house).

A new start

Fisher grew up in Whittier but spent some of her most significant years in Switzerland and France, where her appreciation for the sensual pleasures of food, the places where it was enjoyed and the people with whom it was shared took root and flourished. During her middle years she raised her two daughters in a Victorian on Oak Avenue in St. Helena.

"It was wonderful for entertaining," Golden recalled of the Victorian house. "It had seven beds and a big kitchen where we had many meals with friends and family. But my sister and I had left the nest and my mother was there by herself. While she loved the house, it was too much for her. She was basically running a bed and breakfast because everybody came to stay. She was totally incapable of finding any time to write and to work and even just to enjoy her life."

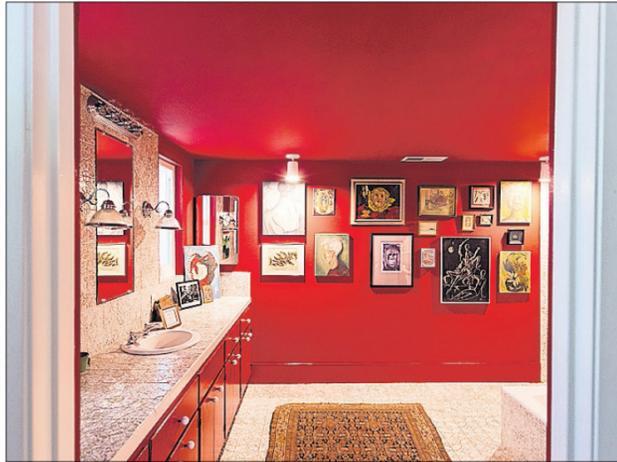
The home's three stories, counting attic and basement, were a lot to maintain and difficult to navigate as arthritis set in.

"The old house was like loving



JEFF KAN LEE / THE PRESS DEMOCRAT, 1980

M.F.K. Fisher filled Last House with fresh flowers, paintings and objects with special meaning collected over a lifetime.



JAMES FANUCCI

A contemporary photo at Last House shows the red bathroom that Fisher lined with paintings, many by her second husband, Dillwyn Parrish.

someone you feel passionately about but just can't live with any more," Golden said.

Pleydell-Bouverie's offer to allow Fisher to build a house not far from his own on his 565-acre ranch was a blessing and a chance to create something from the ground up that was uniquely hers.

Downsizing is right-sizing

Like Fisher, many people find themselves wanting or needing to downsize to a smaller place in middle or later life. But a lot of younger people are turning to smaller houses, too, for a multitude of reasons, from budget constraints to the ease they offer.

Fisher decided she needed only two rooms — a combined kitchen and living room, or what we now call a great room, and a bedroom and workspace.

Fishel said she has found, in Last House, several basic principles that would resonate with anyone wishing to create a comfortable environment, whether they live in a palace or a palazzino, as Fisher called Last House.

One is the idea of creating a balance in your home that allows for company but also solitude.

"It's a really important thing for a writer," Fishel said. "You

need to be comfortable with your own solitude and that is where your creative wellspring comes from."

Even within a relatively small house, Fisher found many different spaces in which to enjoy the quiet. She would sometimes cocoon with a book in a chair in her big bathroom. She painted the walls a deep Chinese red and filled them with paintings, many by her second husband and the love of her life, Dillwyn Parrish. The room was warm and embracing, like a chapel rather than a church. She made a writing space at one end of her bedroom, with a long refectory table under the window for papers and a metal typing table. She sometimes had intimate talks with friends at a round table she brought from Switzerland set in a corner of the bedroom.

Last House has twin enclosed porches on either end of the house, framed with wide arched openings through which Fisher could look to the Mayacamas on one side or to Sonoma Mountain on the other. She had beds on the patios for visitors and a settee inside that pulled out into a bed, just enough to accommodate an overnight guest but not a crowd or extended stays.

But she was not a hermit. "She had endless spaces where she would sit and talk to peo-

ple," Golden said. On the front porch in her queen chair looking out over the valley, on a couch in the living room, by the fire in her two cast-iron stoves. One doesn't need multiple rooms, just distinctive spaces.

Fisher welcomed many guests to her home, making signature meals with maximum taste and minimum fuss in a no-frills galley kitchen along one wall. She had a pantry and tall open shelves for kitchenware and her Provençal pottery so she could easily see, find and retrieve whatever she needed without bending and digging.

For Fisher, cooking was more about the ingredients, the flavors and the company, not the equipment.

Living above her means

The kitchen's finest feature was a picture window which looked out into the branches of an ancient oak. This is one of the ways Fisher lived well in simplicity, focusing on natural beauty rather than finery, wise advice for anyone.

"She took pleasure in so many of the great things in life that are free," Fishel said. Art, books, music, nature and of course, friends. That's a big part of what gave quality to her life."

It was a way, they said, of living above her means.

She surrounded herself with precious things that were meaningful to her but not pricey. For instance, a green ceramic bowl she bought in France made its way to Last House. It was worn from use but carried the memories of so many salads and meals.

"It was just a local artisan pottery," Golden said. "She also bought the plates at the time and a number of casseroles she used until they fell apart."

In downsizing, one has to make hard decisions about what is most important, what items bring the greatest pleasure. For Fisher, it was her books, paintings and records. She brought some 2,000 volumes with her from St. Helena and had built-in bookcases throughout Last House. She even removed some of the built-in bookcases from her St. Helena house and

installed them in Last House. By her bed was a revolving bookcase, one her family had received years ago with an encyclopedia.

"She loved that thing," Golden said.

Her paintings were also dear to her. She had collected pieces her whole life, and every bit of wall space became a gallery, including in the bathroom. Paintings by Parrish, the cousin of painter Maxfield Parrish, were particularly precious. She had a special closet built to contain her paintings upright. Because the house was too small to display every painting, she rotated them so she could spend time with all of them.

"It's a message of the pandemic world," Fishel said. "We are cooped up but all of these pleasures of the mind — books, art and music and definitely nature — are still available."

Sensual pleasures

The writer John Updike called Fisher "the poet of our appetites." She expressed that not just with her writing but in how she lived, Fishel said. She always had fresh flowers and delicious meals. She had boxes of farm fresh produce before they were a thing. "It's another thing we all can do to enhance our lives that has relatively little cost, and we can do it while we're sheltering."

The fourth takeaway from how Fisher lived at Last House was the way she treasured every minute of being alive, Fishel said. Fisher once said "carpe diem" was engraved on her heart. She endured great sadness. Parrish suffered from an excruciating disease and finally found release in suicide in 1941. A year later her brother killed himself. She raised her two daughters as a single mom.

"Writing was the way she survived," Fishel said. Her home was a haven for her creative expression, and she lived as fully as she could.

Golden said the only notable miscalculation in the design of Last House was the presence of several stairs between the bedroom and the living room. It wasn't a high rise but Fisher found it impossible to navigate in her last years, preventing her from spending time in her living room.

The carport was concerted into a caretaker's room. Many people now planning their own last houses are encouraged to think about "universal design" that calls for level surfaces and other design features that enable people to live independently through old age.

But in the larger picture, Fisher effectively honed in on those things that meant the most to her, an object lesson in living large in a small space.

"There is always a little bit of trauma associated with leaving the old family home behind," Fishel said. "That's where the memories are. The younger generation wishes they could go back there. But I really think it was the right thing to do and the right moment for her."

You can reach Staff Writer Meg McConahey at 707-521-5204 or meg.mcconahey@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @megmcconahey.

What to watch SATURDAY

All times Pacific. Start times can vary based on cable/satellite provider. Confirm times on our on-screen guide.

Wonder Woman

H&I, 7 a.m.

That brief glimpse of iconic TV Wonder Woman Lynda Carter at the end of WWS4 wasn't enough! In "Wonder Woman vs. Gargantua," see her battle Gargantua, a 7-foot circus ape controlled by the Nazis, in this 1976 hoot of an episode.

College Basketball

ABC, ESPN, ESPN2 & FOX, beginning at 9 a.m. Live

Top matchups on the college hardwood include Seton Hall at UConn (FOX), Iowa State at Oklahoma (ESPN2), Texas at Oklahoma State (ABC), Louisville at Virginia (ESPN), Ole Miss at Auburn (ESPN2), North Carolina at Duke (ESPN) and Tennessee at Kentucky (ESPN).

NBA Basketball:

Golden State at Dallas

ABC, 5:30 p.m. Live

Luka Doncic and the Dallas Mavericks play host to Steph Curry and the Golden State Warriors on ABC's Saturday NBA primetime matchup.

CATCH A CLASSIC

Mel Brooks & Gene Wilder

TCM, beginning at 5 p.m.

The individual comedic geniuses of writer/director Mel Brooks and actor Gene Wilder combined into an even more uproarious force when they worked together on films, and tonight's double feature spotlights two films that are among this pairing's most hilarious high points. First up is their first teaming, for the 1967 comedy masterpiece **The Producers** (pictured), the directorial debut for Brooks, who won an Oscar for his screenplay. Best Supporting Actor Oscar



Beverly Hills Wedding

Hallmark Channel, 9 p.m. ■ Original Film

When small-town wedding photographer Molly's baby sister gets engaged, she enters the budget-conscious couple in a contest and wins a dream wedding — an all-expenses-paid, celeb-worthy event at a historic Beverly Hills hotel, thrown by "planner to the stars" Terrence Roquefort. It all seems perfect, but when the engaged couple seems uneasy with the new plans, and maid of honor duties bring Molly closer to the best man, her ex-boyfriend Cory, she reconsiders whose dreams she is trying to fulfill. Starring Brooke D'Orsay and Brendan Penny.

Saturday Night Live

NBC, 11:30 p.m.

Dan Levy, the co-creator and costar of the Emmy-winning comedy Schitt's Creek, makes his SNL debut tonight. He is joined by Grammy nominee Phoebe Bridgers, who is performing as a musical guest for her first time.

Devil May Care

Syfy, midnight ■ New Series!

This late-night, 15-minute animated comedy stars Alan Tudyk (Resident Alien) as the devil and Asif Ali as his newly hired social media coordinator.

nominee Wilder costars as the accountant for Zero Mostel's Broadway producer, who plots to stage what should be a sure-fire opening-night flop — a Hitler-themed musical — then take the investors' money and run. Unfortunately, the duo is left hilariously wondering where they went right when the play somehow becomes a smash hit and their investors expect a large payout. Tonight's second film is **Blazing Saddles** (1974), co-written and directed by Brooks. It's a riotous and scathing satire of Hollywood Westerns, particularly the racism that is literally white-washed from most of those films, with Wilder playing alcoholic gunslinger "The Waco Kid" alongside Cleavon Little's Sheriff Bart.



MOVIES YOU'LL LOVE



'Blazing Saddles' WARNER BROS.

Blow (2001, Crime drama) Johnny Depp, Penelope Cruz **Vice**, 4 p.m.

Demolition Man (1993, Science fiction) Sylvester Stallone, Wesley Snipes **Vice**, 6:30 p.m.

Blazing Saddles (1974, Comedy) Cleavon Little, Gene Wilder **TCM**, 7 p.m.

Ant-Man (2015, Action) Paul Rudd, Michael Douglas **SVFY**, 7 p.m.

Bohemian Rhapsody (2018, Biography) Rami Malek, Lucy Boynton **FX**, 7 p.m.

Shrek Forever After (2010, Children) Mike Myers, Eddie Murphy **Comedy**, 7 p.m.

Fast & Furious (2009, Action) Vin Diesel, Paul Walker **Paramount**, 7:30 p.m.

Southpaw (2015, Drama) Jake Gyllenhaal, Forest Whitaker **AMC**, 8 p.m.

The Central Park Five (2012, Documentary) Ed Koch, Craig Steven Wilder **PBS**, 8 p.m.

The Heat (2013, Comedy) Sandra Bullock, Melissa McCarthy **TNT**, 8 p.m.

Fifty Shades Darker (2017, Romance) Dakota Johnson, Jamie Dornan **E!** 8:30 p.m.

The Predator (2018, Science fiction) Boyd Holbrook, Trevante Rhodes **FXM**, 8:30 p.m.

The Guardian (2006, Drama) Kevin Costner, Ashton Kutcher **CMT**, 10 p.m.

From the editors of **tv** Weekly and tvinsider.com

TCM *** Grey Gardens (TV, Documentary) Former socialites become recluses in decrepit mansion. **TCM** *** La Promesse (96, Drama) (Mirielle and Jean-Pierre L aud) Jean-Pierre L aud and Mireille Lacroix befriends a widowed illegal immigrant. **TLC** My Knees **N** Skin/Peeling **N** My Baby Weighs **N** Body/Shai **TNT** NBA Basketball Wizards at Boston Celtics. **N** In NBA **N** *** Shar **TRAVEL** Delicious Delicious Bizarre Foods/Zimmer Best Bars Best Bars Delicious **TRU** Carbonaro Carbonaro Carbonaro Carbonaro Imp Jokers Imp Jokers Imp Jokers

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BRIEFS

CONTINUED FROM D1

president of the Peregrin Audubon Society, will help you prepare for the count during a free one-hour online workshop at 10 a.m. Feb. 12, the first day of the count. She is a staff biologist for the Mendocino County Resource Conservation District and has been involved for years in environmental education, including leading bird hikes. The workshop is put on by the Sonoma State University Center for Environmental Inquiry.

For a short introductory video on recording bird sightings, go to ebird.org. To register visit cei.sonomamg.ucanr.edu. For more information, call 650-996-8322 or email rawlinsm@sonoma.edu

SONOMA COUNTY

Learn basics

of starting seeds

If you're hoping to start your summer vegetable garden by seed, February is the time to do it.

The Sonoma County Master Gardeners are offering a free workshop Feb. 9 to discuss the basics of starting from seed. They also will talk about choosing and growing citrus and asparagus in the garden. There will be time at the end of the one-hour workshop to ask questions. 12:30 p.m. To enroll, visit sonomamg.ucanr.edu

SONOMA COUNTY

Get the dirt on wonderful worms

Learn how to put worms to work in your garden during a free online workshop Feb. 13.

Worms are great at creating compost. From 10:30 a.m. to noon, Sonoma County Master Gardener Jennifer Roberts will talk about how to set up a worm bin and what to feed worms and give other tips for care and maintenance. To register visit sonomamg.ucanr.edu.

Submit home and garden related items at least three weeks ahead of an event to meg.mcconahey@pressdemocrat.com.

SUBSCRIBE
707.575.7500