

Mistress of the house

In days gone by, the pinnacle of bourgeois aspiration in small-town France was ownership of a large, two-storeyed detached residence with an imposing facade – a maison de maître or master's house.

Those homes still command a premium and the term maison de maître remains in regular use. So who knows what the locals of St Maximin thought when Amanda Taylor-Ace swept into town, parked her convertible outside the big house on the corner and screwed a discreet brass plaque to her new front door inscribed "maison de maîtresse".



That was seven years ago and the cheerful blonde from Devonport says some of the locals still don't get it. It seems that her witty riposte may have fallen victim to the double entendre. "Of course," says Amanda laughing, "the French are too polite to say."

Amanda's mother was French (her father, English) but Amanda herself had spent very little time in France until 1997 when she decided it was time to take a break from her Auckland restaurant, Café la Poste, and discover her roots.

Amanda left New Zealand with her teenage son Piers and set up base in Aix-en-Provence for a year. While Piers went to school Amanda busied herself learning the language, soaking up the ambience and figuring out how she was going to fit France permanently into her life.

To cut a long story short, she sold her restaurant and signed her life away to a French bank in exchange for bourgeois respectability in St Maximin, a quiet but charming village in Languedoc-Roussillon.

The 18th century mansion was exactly what she had been looking for. "I wanted stone, in a village, covered in vines – everything we don't have in New Zealand – so this is the perfect place. Every day I wake up smiling."

The house is actually two houses. "They're joined at the hip – the main house and the coach house."

Together they present a formal frontage to the street and, at the back, they enclose a multi-terraced courtyard and swimming pool. The outside area is set up like a French café with enough tables and chairs on hand to seat up to sixty-five guests. Parties of that size are not unusual at Amanda's place. Her guests are a happy mix of people from the village, friends from other parts of France, New Zealanders who drop in from time to time and travellers who pay to stay in the guest rooms of her grande maison.

It's hardly surprising she is booked up months ahead. In fact, business is so good that when the 14th century house next door came up for sale Amanda bought that too, in partnership with Hester Bullen, a close friend from Auckland. Hester already felt at home in St Maximin. "When Amanda bought her house I was living in England and I'd come over to help out. So I got drawn into the whole lovely scene. And then, when this other house came up for sale, well..."

Well, it very nearly ended in tears. The renovation job featured a dodgy French builder, missed deadlines, threats and recriminations and near defeat for the house owners. Then – at the last minute – some good-guy builders came to the rescue, swung their hammers, finished the job and joined everyone for a pastis on the terrace.

That is the abridged version. What matters is that it did end happily and Hester now has her own rooms with three apartments to let. She calls the house Absolutely Fabulous, which it surely is. It is light and airy with whitewashed walls, old oak beams and original stonework. Its spare simplicity complements the vivacious style of the house next door. Hester may be a restrained minimalist but Amanda is an unabashed collector. "I like flash, trash and bling – anything big, extravagant and outrageous... eclectic clutter, things that mean something to me. And I travel a lot so I bring things back." It's true. There are garden sculptures from Huia, a hand-stitched antique bedspread from Rhodes, gold-painted cherubs, exciting finds from flea markets, lots of feather boas and a wall fountain from Italy she brought back in her convertible. She has filled every bit of space and has plans to create some more.

Yes, it's all coming together nicely. And in between the building projects Amanda is living the life most of us dream about – nine months of the year partying in the south of France and three months in New Zealand visiting friends. Life's an endless summer – enough to keep you smiling all day long.

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