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Living in Color

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The clients' brief for their new family retreat in Sonoma was "a fun, warm and vibrant place," says San Francisco designer Jeff Schlarb. But the starting point they gave him was a spec house that had been designed in the 1990s. Fortunately, the generic Spanish Revival architecture was no impediment to Schlarb, whose eponymous design studio is known for layering patterns and textures. "We use a lot of color and pattern, but we provide a place for the eye to rest, so that the effect is not so overwhelming that it clouds the mind," he says. In the hands of Schlarb's team, the vast home was transformed into a series of colorful and personal spaces, including an array of enticing environments that stand up to the rigors of serious entertaining. "Every room has its own vibe," he says.

The clients, who had previously hired Schlarb to design their San Francisco townhome, purchased the Sonoma house during the pandemic to have more space for themselves, their two teenagers, and their wide circle of friends. The couple are both influential connectors—the wife is a political advisor; the husband is an investor—and frequently host big gatherings. Thus, the interiors had to stand up to a good deal of wear and tear while maintaining a sense of chic. "It's a country house, but we wanted to make it more metropolitan," says Schlarb.

To that end, he replaced the natural pine floors with dark-stained, wide-plank oak flooring and selected glamorous but sturdy indoor-outdoor fabrics. He left the architecture alone, allowing the contemporary finishes and furnishings to pop out against the traditional backdrop. Any dated elements are subsumed into their vibrant surroundings. For instance, in the primary bedroom, the thick window frames have been painted a deep green and blend in with the riotous jungle-foliage wallpaper from House of Hackney and a custom four-poster bed upholstered in Graffito, a bold graphic pattern from Lee Jofa. Whenever clients are concerned about dark wall treatments, Schlarb reminds them that "only 50 percent of the room is dark—there's the whole ceiling, and you can have a rug on the floor. They have to trust us that they won't feel like they're in a cave."

The studio's deft hand at layering patterns can also be seen in the living room, where multiple wallpapers and fabrics combine to create visual jazz. Wallpapered in Kaleido Block blue by Timorous Beasties, the fireplace becomes an enormous artwork, while Indi by Trove's birds enliven the vaulted ceiling. In addition to these two, there are no fewer than seven other different patterns on upholstery (and one lampshade) and two more on the curtains. "We tried to spread the patterns around the room so that it feels full and consistent," Schlarb notes. Meanwhile, the grand piano, a family heirloom, has been revitalized—or "zhuzhed up," as Schlarb likes to say—with a coat of high-gloss blue paint.









The kitchen is similarly stylish but not precious: The backsplash is a custom stone-and-brass mosaic from New Ravenna, and the kitchen island, as well as the countertops, is clad in Calacatta marble. The adjoining informal dining area is furnished with a custom table made from reclaimed Douglas fir and finished with a gray wash wax. But Schlarb still brought the party: Against this fairly neutral palette, Nuevo's Ames dining chairs make a dramatic entrance: They're upholstered in Harlequin dyed velvet in hues of fuchsia, plum and tangerine, and detailed with yellow Italian leather piping.

For two particular spaces, Schlarb commissioned decorative painter Caroline Lizarraga to create truly unique wall finishes. The media room, designed to be a cozy family room, sets a groovy mood with its purple ombre walls and ceiling. Meanwhile, the stairwell leading up to the primary bedroom suite is painted in pastels and embellished with silver leaf for an ethereal effect. Marching up the steps themselves is a navy blue-and-white runner from Stark. The sharp contrast is deliberate. "We often combine organic patterns with structured patterns," says Schlarb. "When you use them together, I think you end up with something more long lasting, for interiors that have more of a sense of place instead of a period of time." ■ Jeff Schlarb Design Studio, jeffschlarb.com

