

# Going with the



MOUNTAIN  
AWARDS OF HONOR  
HOME

A Taos couple developed an unconventional working arrangement with their architect: He didn't design the home down to the last bolt, and they were able to offer input into the home's character as it was being built. The finished product won the 1995 *MOUNTAIN LIVING* magazine award of honor for homes under 3,000 square feet.

# Flow

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PHOTOS BY ALEX VERTIKOFF



Lee and Elaine Ryder's pueblo-style, two-bedroom home is perched on 10 piñon-studded acres high above Taos, New Mexico.

Building a new home always holds surprises, as Lee and Elaine Ryder of Taos, New Mexico, discovered. "As our house was being built," Lee recalls, "we had these cute little chipmunks running around. What we didn't know was that they were building their nests and storing nuts in the ceilings. Then when winter came and we finished closing in the house, they didn't like it because we were disturbing their home. They were really obnoxious about being displaced. We had a regular war going—it was almost a *Caddyshack* thing," Ryder says, referring to the Chevy Chase film that features members of a posh country club who are pitted against an aggressively territorial rodent.

The chipmunks came close to taking up residence in the Ryders' bedroom. "Once, when we left town for a few weeks, we returned and found nuts stored between the mattress and box springs in the guest bedroom," Elaine says.

But the Ryders finally prevailed. "We trapped them and relocated them to the ski valley," Lee says.

Then there was the fireplace fiasco. The two-bedroom Ryder house, perched on a 10-acre, piñon-studded site high above Taos, is constructed mostly of adobe bricks, in keeping with its pueblo-style design. "When we went to build the house, we were anxious to get started and hadn't decided on everything we

wanted to do," Elaine recalls. "We had this wonderful person doing the adobe, very artistic. He started on the fireplace, sort of a round kiva design, and it started growing and growing into the middle of the room. After a few days, I said, 'I don't think this is going to work; there won't be any room for people in here.' Soon, everybody else started agreeing with me, so we had to rip it out and start

all over again. There was adobe mud all over the place. The next try wasn't a free-for-all—we had the architect draw up the present stepped design."

It didn't take the Ryders long after they married in 1990 to realize that they needed larger quarters than Lee's bachelor pad provided. "We needed more room because we entertain a lot and wanted something that was ours together," Elaine says.

Lee had come to Taos in 1987, after retiring as president of a small manufacturing company in Pennsylvania. "I wanted to live someplace where life was simpler," says Lee, who was 46 when he left the Northeast for Taos. "I'd never been to Taos. Some friends said that I should come take a look at it. I came out and never left, never even went anywhere else."

And Lee, who worked part time as a ski instructor last year, began to satisfy at least one of his yearnings. "The first

year he was here, he skied 102 days," says Elaine, who met Lee in 1989 when she was in Taos on a vacation from Tennessee.

Before breaking ground for their home in 1992, the couple had a good idea about what they wanted—if not the exact details. And thanks to architect Oscar B. Palacios, the home was built as an artwork in progress, rather than as the implementation of a plan designed down to the last nut and bolt. "The architect worked with us in an unconventional way," Lee says. "It wasn't designed down to the last detail. If we had an idea of something we wanted, he would draw us a picture."

Lee, who spent most of his free time at the construction site, had a lot of input into the home's personality. "We fashioned many things as we went along," he recalls. "We sat on an orange crate and talked about how to do this or that."

So it isn't surprising that many of the house's defining characteristics materialized as the home was being built. "We knew where we wanted the rooms," Elaine says. "I wanted the



**Architect Oscar Palacios devised a pleasing flow of rooms, each defined by rounded, sensuous lines, and all affording spectacular views. "Because of the way the house was designed, it's like a sculpture that changes as you move and as the sun moves," Lee says.**

kitchen and the bedroom and bath on the east side, for the morning sun. So we knew the footprint of the house and worked from there. We told the architect that we wanted an open house that flowed, and this is what he came up with."

What Palacios designed is an artistic blend of form and function—a pleasing flow of rooms all affording spectacular views. "Because of the way the house was designed and built, it's like a sculpture that changes as you move and as the sun moves," Lee says. "Since the plaster walls over the adobe bricks were left unpainted, you get wonderful variations in light and shadow all the time."

Lee, whose hobby is woodworking, made or designed many of the home's furnishings, along with its front door—which is





made from ash, walnut and pecan woods worked into a basket-weave pattern. "It had 336 pieces, and the three different colors cause the design to be effective," he says.

Lee also honed the kitchen's carved beams. "That came about because Elaine had seen pictures of an old hacienda, and in one photo there was a glimpse of these beams," says Lee, who also finished the kitchen cabinets. "It turned out to be a major undertaking, and it took days of constant work to do it."

But the beams, which feature a two-inch corbel design, make a striking addition to the spacious kitchen.

"We wanted a big kitchen because everyone is always in there," Elaine says. "It has seating for people, a fireplace and a great view." Lee chimes in: "There's an arroyo just a couple hundred feet outside the window, and you look right out at the mountain peaks."

The kitchen also features the handpainted tile work of a Tennessee artist who decided to visit the area and deliver the



**The kitchen features beams carved in a corbel design, which Lee Ryder crafted, as well as handpainted tiles, a fireplace and a spectacular view of an arroyo and the mountains beyond.**

tiles herself. "It's a handpainted mural under the cabinets with a leaf motif and fruits and vegetables," Elaine says.

Lee supervised the design of a television closet in the den, as well as a secretary-style computer cabinet in the living room. He'll need the latter piece, since it folds out

into a desk that will function as his office when the first addition to the Ryder family arrives in January.

"We have a balcony outside the master bedroom that was to be my office," he says. "But now we're going to put the baby there, and that left me with no office." And no room for the inevitable parade of doting relatives, either.

But the Ryders' home, remember, is a work in progress. "We thought we'd build a guest house later on," Lee says. ▲