

on the waterfront

After years on the high seas, Gwen McCaw drops anchor at an idyllic Maine island retreat. Robert Haskell visits the new family compound.



Photographed by Arthur Elgort



SEA CHANGE

Mother and son, her first mate, paddle to shore. The family's summer hideaway (in background) overlooks a rocky harbor. Details, see In This Issue. Seatings Editor: Miranda Brooks.

For a grand house to share some of the fresher allurements of a charming one, it needs only the right chatelaine—a person capable of wearing a weighty mantle with ease. Gwen McCaw certainly isn't at home in heavy attire; at her wedding seven years ago, she exchanged her twelve-pound, ermine-trimmed bridal gown, from Yves Saint Laurent's last couture collection, for a simple Vera Wang dress when Stevie

Wonder took the stage. But McCaw's warm, earthbound manner is an ideal counterpoint to the mantle hung upon her shoulders when on a lark her husband, John McCaw, Jr., bought a magisterial home on a furtively splendid island off the coast of Maine three years ago.

For a couple who spent the first five years of marriage with no permanent address—they lived mostly on a 355-foot yacht, which they sold in 2004—the Maine house, with its storied past, is a heavy dose of terra firma. The island itself offers a window into America's gilded age, when visitors arrived at their "summer cottages" from Boston, New York, or Philadelphia on large steam-powered yachts. (Alexander Van Rensselaer's boat had a staff of 40.) Even today the homes that dot the island's west-facing coast, with sloping gray roofs and endless lawns tucked into the tall fir trees, hew to a Gatsby standard of graceful isolation.

"We were vagabonds," says McCaw, 32, pregnant with her fourth child and enjoying a small parcel of calm at her house in L.A., which has lately begun to look like the inside of FAO Schwarz. "After my second child, I realized we needed a nest. I was importing friends and picking children up off beaches. So we moved to Los Angeles."

In no time and with seemingly very little effort, McCaw—strikingly tall, with long black hair and a taste for sixties-style dresses—has become one of L.A.'s most recognizable young women. But the wanderlust has not left her. "We love to be in Europe," she says, "and Maine started because I wanted to rent a place in the summer where I could dump my stuff off and travel. Somebody brought a tear sheet to me at a play group. John flew out for a night, came back, and said, 'I got the house.' I knew no one there—it was a total leap of faith. But it ended up being six degrees of separation."

It certainly helps to find familiar faces on the island. There is only a single restaurant, all but shuttered by nine in the evening; social life in the summer consists of nightly cocktail parties and dinners,

that.) After Mitchell was implicated in a murder years later, the house fell vacant. The Mitchell cottage, as it is still known, became an inn before Kirstie Alley and Parker Stevenson bought it in 1991.

The couple may have been unlikely summer visitors, but Alley knew enough to call upon Sister Parish, the legendary American decorator and a lifelong resident of the island. Parish, by then in her 80s, was coaxed out of retirement to rework the covered porch on the first floor. She had played at the house as a child and remembered the porch as Mrs. Mitchell's tearoom—with vaulted cove ceilings and an astonishing interior basket-weave lattice that had long since been covered in plaster. The porch, its fine skeleton now exposed, is the house's quiet treasure.

Alley decorated the rest of the house

herself in all the Victorian wallpaper and chintz that characterized the cluttered traditionalism of the summer cottages. "Kirstie tried to out-Parish Sister Parish," McCaw says, laughing. "I had to have the whole place exorcised." So McCaw hired the Los Angeles-based decorator Windsor Smith, who had done her friend Colleen Bell's Malibu house. Smith has distilled the Mitchell cottage down to its Colonial Revival essence, emphasizing

the fine interior woodwork and, most of all, the house's felicitous perch over a blissfully sheltered harbor, where the riotous tangerine sunsets would leave any visitor breathless.

"What's great about Windsor," says McCaw, "is that she's very young, and I'm not an old lady. It's all very casual, which I don't think we would have been able to do in a really simple house. But because it's such an architecturally beautiful house, I felt I could decorate in a really clean way—that it didn't need too much. Of course, we also wanted everything machine-washable and kid-friendly." (In addition to the couple's three children, John has three of his own from a previous marriage.)

Smith describes the house, when she first saw it, as "Sister Parish on acid." Instead Smith introduced a nautical palette



PORT OF CALL

For McCaw, the Maine house is a dose of terra firma after years spent on the high seas.

and guest lists tend to evolve only according to births and deaths. Indeed, most of the summer cottages are still owned by the families who built them 100 years ago: Choate, Tiffany, Howe, Auchincloss. "The new guard is definitely under inspection," says McCaw, "but that's because the island is so protective of the old ways. Everybody but John Travolta and me has been here for ten generations."

The McCaws' house was built in 1916 by J. Kearsley Mitchell, a Philadelphia businessman who had just married Frances Stotesbury, the daughter of a partner of J. P. Morgan. (Stotesbury's dowry included a check for \$1 million, along with a strand of pearls, a diamond necklace, and a diamond tiara, valued at half


FLOWER CHILD

One of McCaw's daughters, sporting a vintage 1950s swim cap, perched upon a Windsor Smith Home Chloe love seat.

Anthropologie pillows, T. Lockman cashmere throw, and Chameleon Fine Lighting sconce.







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NAUTICAL MOOD

A late-1800s handmade pond yacht adorns the wall above a Gatsby couch, designed by Windsor Smith, McCaw's decorator. The chairs, Sister Parish originals, were re-covered by Smith in a Bennison gray floral.



JUST DESSERT

Anthropologie dessert plate, \$14; (800) 309-2500. Denton and Gardner mug, \$150; dentongardner.com.



PRIMARY COLORS

Anthropologie blue cotton napkin, \$6; anthropologie.com; The Silk Trading Co. red-striped Asusena fabric, \$28 a yard; silktrading.com.



TOUCH UPS

Farrow & Ball sample paint cans, \$5 each; farrow-ball.com.



CLAM BAKE

Party platter, arranged by chef Amy Weldon.

McCAW'S MUST-HAVES



PIRATE'S BOOTY

Painted trunks by Sentimento Antiques, from \$1,220 to \$1,625; sentimentoantiques.com.



BEDTIME STORY

F. Schumacher & Co. Sailing to Win, \$24; Artisan Books & Bindery, Islesboro ME; CJ Dellatore pillows, \$98 each.



SEA CREATURES

Kazumi Yoshida for Clarence House La Mer outdoor fabric; (800) 803-2850.



INTO THE GARDEN

Kazumi Yoshida for Clarence House Le Flora Danica outdoor fabric; (800) 803-2850.



MUG SHOT

J-Class Collection by Nautica, from \$10 to \$44; (877) NAUTICA.

SPIRITED AWAY

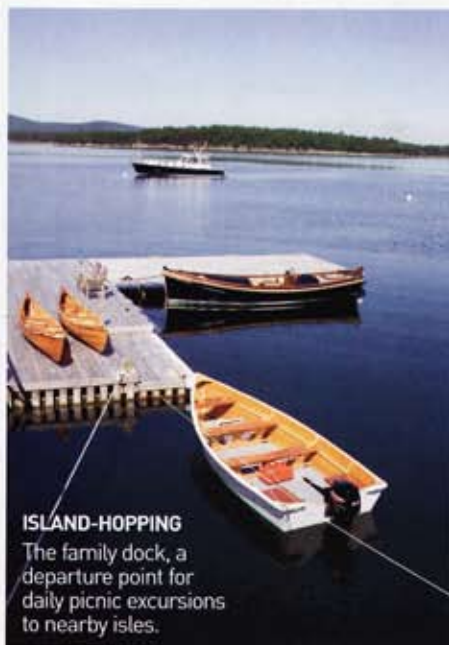
McCaw, in a Ralph Lauren Collection tank and skirt, twists to the sounds of the Charlie Pendleton Band on her lattice-woodwork porch. In this story: hair and makeup, Timothy Johnson for Privé Salon NYC/Utopia. Details, see In This Issue.





and Chinese Export touches in the spirit of the McCaws' love of sea travel. In the master bedroom, the very American seersucker walls set off blue-and-white porcelain, Indian paisley lamp shades, and an antique Syrian rifle. "When we bought the house," says McCaw, "the master bedroom had wild, crazy yellow butterfly fabric on the walls, curtains, bed, everywhere. I liked that unity, but I wanted to do it in a more modern, easy-going way. You can't get more Maine than seersucker. And as for the color, what can I say? We're blue people. It's water—it's the magical color of our lives, which we wanted to bring inside."

down the hall, the vestibule of a guest room is covered in 1920s hand-painted wallpaper depicting naive New England boating and riding scenes, and the bedroom itself brings together an American Colonial-style bed, a Gustavian settee, a Dutch sea painting, and a collection of intaglios. The idea was to add some eclectic touches to make it "less obvious," says McCaw. Most everywhere, those touches are of a seafaring sort: barometers, propellers, life preservers and anchors, ship lanterns, maps, vintage bathing suits pressed into picture frames. "I wanted to pull away from the nostalgic spirit of the island—chintz, florals," says Smith, "because the McCaws didn't have a history there. I wanted them to begin their own history in the house."



ISLAND-HOPPING

The family dock, a departure point for daily picnic excursions to nearby isles.



McCaw was born in Vermont and grew up in downtown Manhattan with her mother. "I had a great, funky upbringing, with two artist parents," she says. She went to boarding school at Garrison Forest in Maryland because it was then the only girls' school in America with a polo team, and after a year at the University of Vermont, she moved to Europe to model. Back in New York, she enrolled at Columbia, but her studies were interrupted when she met John McCaw, who in 1993 had sold his highly successful telecom company to AT&T.

"We had this very fifties courtship," she says, "where he'd come in from Seattle, pick me up, take me out, and bring me to my door. He never saw my apartment!" In Paris, McCaw met Deeda Blair, the Washington (and now New York) hostess, who undertook the project of McCaw's trousseau from Saint Laurent's couture atelier—ten outfits, including *le smoking*. After years aboard their yacht, the McCaws settled in Los Angeles.

But the island, McCaw says, is the ultimate antidote to life in L.A. "There's a special type of person who comes here. It's not the Hamptons. It's really about checking out—about simplifying life: finding sea glass, catching crabs, walking to the ice-cream shop." In summer, the garden overflows with flowers: purple phlox, Shasta daisies, bachelor's buttons, coreopsis, mustard, and a rim of creamy viburnum bush. Before breakfast, the McCaws can be found on one of their many boats: a small yacht, sailboats, the antique cedar-planked canoes with gleaming bronze nails, dinghies, kayaks, or *Porto Cervo*, the only Riva in the harbor. During the day, the family picnics on one of the many neighboring islands, and in the evening they return for lobster bakes on the beach. (There are enough mussels, clams, scallops, and lobsters in the waters just below the dock at the Mitchell cottage to feed hundreds of friends.) At sunset, the sound of bagpipes and sea chanteys can be heard floating off the little pointy-nosed schooners from Camden and Rockland docked in the cove. Each night, as the sun dips behind the tree line, the McCaw children fire a cannon, a mariners' tradition echoed all around the harbor.

The setting is sublime, but the pleasures veer toward the quaint—and that's precisely the point. "An island like this forces you to take your life down to the bare minimum," says McCaw. "I think people who have houses here tend to be very soulful. You're disconnected from the rest of the world, and yet you're more connected." □



SIMPLE TREASURES

Clockwise from top left: One of McCaw's daughters in her bedroom, decorated with vintage seersucker curtains and a handmade 1920s Eiffel Tower model. Sister Parish restored the trellis walls; game chairs covered in gray-and-white fabric from Rogers & Goffigon. McCaw's son steers an authentic captain's wheel in his bathroom, which is decoupage with marine blueprints.

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