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You could win HGTV's Sonoma dream home

Network chose Sonoma Wine Country as the place to build a luxury house it will give away in a national sweepstakes

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Developer and winery owner Steve Ledson figured he was just chatting up another friendly patron that day in April when a stranger struck up a conversation in the plush Harmony Lounge of his Sonoma Plaza hotel.

Over a glass of wine, Jack Thomasson disclosed only that he was looking for property in the Sonoma area. He didn't fully grasp that when Ledson mentioned he had some land and might be able to help, it wasn't an empty offer. In fact, Thomasson was talking not just to a friendly hotelier but to one of Sonoma's leading builders: a man with 40 years experience in construction who had built more than 1,000 homes throughout Northern California, as well as two family wineries. A man known for building homes with a touch of architectural fantasy.

That is precisely what Thomasson was looking for.

He went on his way, continuing his undercover search for the perfect place in Wine Country to build HGTV's 2009 Dream Home. He found a neighborhood in east Sonoma with intriguing possibilities. With its stately manses set not far off the street, Armstrong Estates looks like Santa Rosa's McDonald Avenue or Petaluma's D Street might have looked a century ago when everything was gleaming and new. It turned out to be Ledson's development.

"I found the property on my own," marveled Thomasson, a professional house



CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

This 3,628 square-foot Victorian-style home in Armstrong Estates at 5th Street East and Patten Street in Sonoma is being given away in a sweepstakes by HGTV.

planner and scout for the Home and Garden television network. "It's a great coincidence. But I loved the community so much I was determined to keep driving around searching to find something in Sonoma that worked for me. When I found Armstrong Estates, I thought, 'Oh wow. This would be fantastic.' "

Soon the two men were tooling around the Sonoma countryside, examining the old farmhouses that are such a familiar sight amid the pastures and vineyards of the Valley of the Moon.

Before a week had passed, Ledson and his draftsman had sketched up a classic old Sonoma homestead — a two-story Victorian farmhouse with big porches, gables and bay windows, stripped of the fussy embellishments found on city dwellings of the 19th century. It was just the look Thomasson had in mind.

Four months later the sketch is a real home, 3,628 square feet of luxury wrapped in Victorian charm. Work is now under way to completely landscape the half-acre property surrounding the house in Ledson's Armstrong Estates, using tall trees, a mature privet hedge and a mini-vineyard of Sonoma zinfandel. And this fall, a team of designers led by HGTV's Linda Woodrum will decorate the three-bedroom, 3½-bath house with expensive furnishings and accessories.

It's all a prelude to Jan. 1, when HGTV will unveil the home in a one-hour special that will kick off a nationwide contest.

It will mark the 11th year the network has given away a luxury home, each one in some delicious vacation spot. People can enter online or by postcard, with a limit of one entry a day, until the sweepstakes drawing closes Feb. 19.

Last year's \$2.2 million HGTV Dream Home was built in Islamorada in the Florida Keys. Other dream locations have included Jackson Hole, Wyo., Winter Park, Colo., the coast of Maine and the eastern shore of Maryland.

"We look for locations that are dreamy, that people would want to have a dream home in. So very often it's on a coast or in an area with a lot of tourism," said Emily Yarborough, a spokeswoman for HGTV, based in Knoxville, Tenn.

Ledson enlisted a longtime associate, contractor Bruce Lee, to build the gabled house at the corner of Patten and Fifth Street East. It sits at the main entrance to Armstrong Estates, a pet project that Ledson has been working on for more than 20 years.

He bought the 35-acre site in 1986 and remodeled and moved into the 1870 Italianate Victorian that sits in the middle of the property. Director Francis Ford Coppola filmed parts of his 1987 movie "Tucker" in and around the old house. But it took Ledson eight years to win permission from the city to develop the upscale subdivision of custom-built homes, each with a different but classic architectural style indigenous to old Sonoma.

"It's my dream," said Ledson, whose roots in Sonoma County go back generations. "I'm trying to build these houses to make it look like they were here from the beginning of time and just an extension of the old town. I'm not in any hurry to do it. There are 53 lots in here and I have 22 left. It will probably take me another five to seven years to finish. That doesn't matter. I'm having fun."

The HGTV project presented a new challenge — erecting a complete luxury home from the foundation up in six months. Ledson and Lee pulled it off in four, with a still camera mounted on a pole outside the house documenting the progress. People can see floor plans and view videos of the project at the network Web site, HGTV.com.

Working with an undisclosed budget, Ledson designed the house with typical Victorian farmhouse features like tall, narrow double-hung windows, decorative knee brace supports under the eaves and relatively simple trim compared with the gingerbread of the Queen Anne style. Squared bay windows pop out in front and back.

The inside so far is being kept under wraps. But it includes a home office with separate entrance, a formal "parlor" and dining room and what Ledson calls a "Wine Country entertaining area" of open kitchen, family room and dining nook, spilling out onto a patio equipped with an outdoor kitchen.

After HGTV mounts its 360-degree tour of the finished home on its Web site Dec. 15, the neighborhood is expected to draw a fair share of onlookers. Ledson would like to arrange with the network to do tours of the Dream Home, with proceeds benefitting a Ledson family foundation that underwrites opportunities for disadvantaged children.

