

LIFESTYLE



A warm welcome

For former fashion designer PASCALE SMETS, a renovated Victorian rectory in Suffolk is the perfect canvas to showcase her eye for detail, with a focus on conviviality – a particularly beguiling combination at this time of year

TEXT ELIZABETH METCALFE | PHOTOGRAPHS DEAN HEARNE



Every December, Pascale Smets orders two 10ft Christmas trees – one for the sitting room and one for the entrance hall of the Victorian rectory in which she lives with her family, on the Suffolk-Norfolk border. Decorating the former is always a team effort, with her husband Matt Pritchett – better known as Matt, his pen-name for *The Telegraph*, where he has been producing witty cartoons for 32 years – and their four grown-up children, Edith, 25, Mary, 23, Henry, 22, and Dorothy, 18, all assuming the role of elves.

‘The paper-plate angel that Mary made in nursery always goes there,’ says Pascale, gesturing to the top of the tree. The hall tree is a more choreographed affair, changing each year. This Christmas, Pascale has enlisted the help of her friend, local florist Brigitte Girling, who runs Moss & Stone

Floral Design. The result, with foraged thistles and giant fennel enveloping the staircase, is just what Pascale had in mind. ‘It’s beautifully wild,’ she says.

For Pascale, life has always been about details and a certain generosity of spirit. She grew up in Hampshire, with a South African mother and a Belgian father, and recalls long, candlelit, multi-generational dinners. From a young age, she knew that she wanted to work in fashion, so at 19 she headed to Central Saint Martins. It was there that she met Matt, who was dabbling in film and graphics and ‘playing lots of snooker in dives on the Old Kent Road’.

After stints with Daniel Hechter in Paris and Jean Muir in London, Pascale launched her eponymous studio. She was nominated for Designer of the Year New Generation at the British Fashion Awards in 1992, but it was tough financially and, after six years, she called it a day.

She continued as a freelance designer, ▷

The decoration throughout the house is *unfussy* and *welcoming* – there is a great sense of *familial harmony*





PREVIOUS PAGE Pascale in the sitting room with her husband Matt and three of their four children: Henry, Dorothy and Edith. OPPOSITE Gathering foliage in the garden with florist Brigitte Girling (left), Pascale's daughter Mary and the family dog Reggie. THIS PAGE Decorating the 10ft Christmas tree in the hall, beside the staircase, on which is a striking arrangement of giant fennel and thistles



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The dining room table set for a drinks party with friends and neighbours. Pascale prepares Old Fashioneds for the guests. She designed the mirrors and log crates on either side of the chimneypiece in the sitting room and had them made by a local blacksmith



For *Pascale*, life has always been about *details* and a certain *generosity of spirit*





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
Pascale and Mary add logs to the fires burning in braziers on either side of the front door.

Foraged foliage from the garden. Built in the early Victorian period, the former rectory is surrounded by seven acres of land. In December, Pascale creates a rustic display in the sitting room with candles set in terracotta flowerpots on the mantelpiece. The tree here is decorated in a more informal style than the one in the hall



deciding to take a break after the birth of her third child, Henry. Pascale, however, is not the sort to sit tight – ‘Matt says I have the “too much” gene, because I never sit still,’ she says – and she was soon writing a column for *The Times* with her sister, Benedicte Newland, about the hilarities of family life. It led to a book deal – *And God Created the Au Pair* was published in 2005 – and the column moved to *The Telegraph* for a further eight years.

In 2010, Pascale and Matt were living in Blackheath and decided to look for a small weekend bolthole on the coast in East Anglia. What they eventually bought was almost the exact opposite – a handsome early Victorian rectory with seven bedrooms and the same number of acres, inland near Diss. ‘I immediately knew it was the one,’ says Pascale. ‘For Matt, who had lived in south London all his life, it was a complete revelation.’ Although the house needed rewiring and replumbing, the couple were rewarded with an abundance of original features. They called in Pascale’s sister-in-law, architectural designer Pia McKerron, and over eight months they set about sensitively reconfiguring the property. A corridor was added upstairs to create better flow, while the large downstairs loo became Pascale’s study.

Today, the huge kitchen – now gently divided with alcoves, pilasters, two islands and a tall dresser – is the beating heart of the house, with the family’s much loved Jack Russell cross, Reggie, permanently installed in front of the Aga. The kitchen leads through to a cosy, panelled dining room, although the family often gathers around the farmhouse table at the far end of the kitchen for meals. ‘My style is simple yet plentiful,’ says Pascale, whose ideal Saturday morning is spent reading cookbooks. In December, the family hosts Christmas drinks for friends and neighbours; Matt and Henry fill buckets with ice and Champagne, while Pascale and the girls mix Old Fashioneds and blood-orange-juice-and-gin concoctions. There is a great sense of familial harmony and the girls are all creative – Edith has followed in Matt’s footsteps, working as a cartoonist for online slow-news platform *Tortoise*, while Mary is a ceramicist and jeweller.

Much like Pascale’s style of entertaining, the decoration throughout the house is unfussy and welcoming, with deep sofas, rush rugs and reclaimed limestone floors. Last year, she started selling homeware at the lifestyle store New Street Market, in Woodbridge, Suffolk. The idea of a shop had been brewing for some years – Pascale had sourced pieces not just for the rectory, but also for the house in Clerkenwell that the couple bought after selling up in Blackheath in 2013 – and when her friend Sam Denny-Hodson, founder of the knitwear brand Honespun, mentioned her plan to open a retail site, Pascale asked to run the home accessories side.

Housed in a former stables, it is a lovely, light-filled space, with Pascale occupying the central section and offering a delightful mix of pieces from independent makers, including ceramics by South Africa-based potter Corinne de Haas and blankets by Welsh woollen mill Melin Tregwynt. For pieces she cannot find elsewhere, she collaborates with local craftspeople, including the Suffolk-based wood turner Trevor Blackman, who has created elegant wooden candlesticks. With its clothing >

LIFESTYLE

and homeware departments, and a café named Canteen, New Street Market has garnered a loyal following since it launched in 2019, and Pascale has recently started sourcing house plants and flowers to sell. 'We're working on an events programme, too,' she says.

Although the house started out as a weekend getaway, Pascale now spends the majority of her time here, with the shop just an hour's drive away. Over lockdown, the rectory played host to the entire family, plus Mary's boyfriend and Pascale's nephew. 'It was like a very extended Christmas and we felt incredibly lucky to all be together,' Pascale says. Her favourite spot is the vegetable garden. 'When I die, I'd like my ashes to be buried in one of those raised beds,' she jokes. For Matt, who usually spends his working week in *The Telegraph's* offices above Victoria Station, the house provides a relaxing contrast. He is often found in the snooker room at the front of the house, which has two floor-to-ceiling sash windows looking out over the lawn. 'I wanted it to be a dining room, but within an hour of talking about potential other uses, Matt had ordered a snooker table,' says Pascale and laughs.

The walls of this room are chock-full of paintings and prints, as well as Matt's cartoons and awards he has won over the past three decades. In one corner, there is a small certificate commemorating when Pascale, aged eight, was crowned winner of the high jump at primary school. 'Our builder, Arthur, said I needed an achievement on the wall,' says Pascale. It certainly is not her only one □

Pascale at New Street Market: pascalestore.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Matt in the snooker room in front of an eclectic assortment of artworks.

Lunch is served in the kitchen, which looks out onto the garden. Pascale harvests cavolo nero from the vegetable beds. Having previously worked as a fashion designer, she now runs the homeware department at New Street Market, a lifestyle store in nearby Woodbridge, which opened its doors in 2019

