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## A Grand English Estate Gets a Cozy Makeover

Natalie Massenet and Erik Torstensson spent the past six years transforming a former rectory in the English countryside into a family-friendly retreat.

*By Joshua Levine | Photography by Magnus Mårding for WSJ. Magazine*

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**N**atalie Massenet is sitting in the den of Donhead House—her home in the tiny village of Donhead St. Andrew, about two hours’ drive southwest of London—when she tells me about a fax she received five days after launching Net-a-Porter, the online luxury fashion platform.

This was in June of 2000. The night before, she’d exchanged words with her then-husband, Arnaud Massenet. “My husband was like, ‘Something’s got to give. You’re completely out of balance. You’ve just had a baby, you’ve just started a company. You have to pick one,’ ” recalls Massenet, who adds that they were also in the midst of renovating their London home. “I was like, I can’t pick one. Universe, give me a sign!”



Massenet and Torstensson stroll through landscape designed by Miranda Brooks near the Edwardian wing of the house.

The fax arrived as she was leaving the office, so she read it on the way home. “It said, ‘Dear Natalie, we met in New York. I got a message to pass on to you, which is that you must not stop Net-a-Porter! You will find the balance. If you would like more information, please call me.’ ” The person who sent the fax was named George Zeldis, who apart from having psychic intuitions also designed a line of cashmere sweaters that Massenet later sold on Net-a-Porter.

By then, Massenet was used to this kind of thing. She had moved to Los Angeles from Europe when she was 11 (she lived the first four years of her life in Madrid and the next seven in Paris). Her American father, Bob Rooney, was a bohemian journalist and movie publicist; her English mother, Barbara Jones, was a fashion model and free spirit who decamped back to Paris soon after the move. “That was really tough,” says Massenet.





In the Green Room, sofas by Vincent Van Duysen for Arflex flank a bespoke oak table sturdy enough to dance on.

Among Rooney’s best friends in L.A. was the English comic actor Michael Bentine, who was also a dedicated spiritualist. Bentine supposedly foresaw his own son’s death. This was familiar territory to young Natalie: “Psychics were always walking into the room.”

Massenet called Zeldis right away—“I asked for help and it came through!” But there was good news and bad news. Zeldis said Net-a-Porter would be bigger than anything Massenet, or anybody else, imagined. And indeed it was. Before Net-a-Porter, no one believed that people would buy designer clothes over the internet without touching them and trying them on. Massenet proved them spectacularly wrong, and the queen of England made her a dame—the female equivalent of a knighthood—for it.





In a guest bathroom, a lamp by Rose Uniacke hangs above the tub and a 1970s Onde armchair by Étienne Fermigier.

Zeldis also hinted at the idea that Net-a-Porter would end up being bought out from under Massenet. That happened too. In 2015, the luxury conglomerate Richemont engineered the merger of Net-a-Porter and Yoox, an online retailer of less expensive clothing founded the same year as Net-a-Porter by the Italian businessman Federico Marchetti. Massenet thought the companies might be a bad fit, but Richemont, having acquired a controlling interest in Net-a-Porter in 2010, could do what it liked.



A painting by Francis Bacon sits on the mantel above a matching 1930s sofa and armchair by Märta Blomstedt in the main bedroom of Massenet and Torstensson's three-room suite.

Massenet put on a brave public face and walked away with a substantial fortune. Inwardly, however, she was devastated and angry. “This wouldn’t have happened today,” says Massenet, who still tears up when she talks about it. “You would not kick a female founder out of her very successful business for a bunch of guys to take it over and run it. It just wouldn’t happen.”

It took Massenet a long time to overcome a nagging sense of shame. She would



cringe when she saw Net-a-Porter vans driving around London. “Then a couple of years later, I was like, Every time I see one of those vans, I’m going to say, I made that. I should be proud—although I do think they should wash the vans.”



A vintage sofa by Rose Uniacke re-covered in mohair velvet provides a reading nook in the walkway between the butler’s pantry and the boot room.

Today, she looks back at it all from a quirkier angle. “I think it would make an amazing musical, the guys in suits with their jazz hands,” she says. “It’s got laughs, it’s got tears, it’s got show tunes.” Ha ha, I say. Wait, she’s serious. “I just need to find somebody to help me write the lyrics. Do you want to be involved?”

Over the course of an afternoon, I come to learn that this is how Massenet operates. I would not be surprised if, one day, the curtain does go up on *Yoox Net-a-Porter, The Musical*. Massenet sees a fully formed image of a thing in her mind—a product, a company, a house, a child—and after honing it down to its finest-grained detail, sets about making it happen. If her way of imagining things full-blown sometimes leaves her at the mercy of unforeseen obstacles, it is outweighed by a cheerful dauntlessness that is almost impossible to discourage. She’s 57, and her looks and manner bring to mind Sandra Bullock at her pluckiest.





A "half moon" swimming pool designed by Miranda Brooks, who also oversaw the garden design.

Erik Torstensson, Massenet's current partner, works in a similar way, which is what made sparks fly when they first met. Torstensson, now 43, grew up on a farm in Sweden, but he made his career in London at the buzzy crossroads where graphic design, fashion, advertising and branding meet. In 2010, he pitched Massenet on his concept for Mr Porter, an extension of Net-a-Porter aimed at men. She recalls it vividly: "The i's dotted, the t's crossed, the dream, the machine, and I was like, Wow, this is perfection! I can see it! It needs to happen!" It did.



In the Green Room, totem sculpture by Marion Verboom next to bespoke window seating with mohair throws by Lena Rewell and velvet cushions by House of Hackney .

He recalls it vividly too: "Long before we got together romantically, I had this enormous business crush on this person." Within the next year and a half, Massenet and her husband Arnaud divorced and she and Torstensson were a couple. In the years since, they've been inseparable collaborators in a dizzying range of projects—his or hers, it doesn't seem to matter.







In the couple's main bathroom, a vintage Rose Uniacke mirror atop an antique mahogany desk by Josef Frank, used as a vanity, and a Wiggly stool (front) by Frank Gehry.

Torstensson and his business partner Jens Grede started Frame, a successful fashion and accessories company, in 2012 as a side project to their marketing agency. Today it has sales of \$200 million, and Torstensson runs it—overseeing the collections, shooting the campaigns and designing the stores and the furniture in them. In 2020, he helped launch General Idea Group, a brand-building agency with clients that include Prada, Louis Vuitton and Moncler.



Firewood lines a portico leading to a garden designed by Brooks.

Massenet joined founder José Neves as co-chair of the shopping platform Farfetch in 2017 (she stepped down three years later), the same year she and Nick Brown started running Imaginary Ventures, which has funded startup brands that blend fashion and technology (it helped bankroll the \$3.2 billion shapewear brand Skims). Massenet and Brown just closed their third fund, giving Imaginary Ventures nearly \$1 billion under management. Among their

current big bets are something called Cann, a line of THC-laced sparkling water,

and Eon, which essentially aims to use NF1's as a digital ID for any object on the planet. "Physical products have to be decoupled from the gravity, the location of where they were, and tethered to a digital ID," says Massenet. (Don't worry. Hardly anybody else gets it, either. "You still go into meetings, and people are like, 'What!?' " she admits.)



In the guest cottage, a chandelier designed by J.T. Kalmar in the 1930s hangs above the dining table.

In the midst of all this nonstop bustle, Massenet suggested that she and Torstensson have a child together. "Erik is 13 years younger than me, and I thought it was a big sacrifice for him to be with somebody he would not be able to have a child with," says Massenet. A family council was convened, including Isabella and Ava, Massenet's daughters from her first marriage (now ages 22 and 16). The motion passed by unanimous acclaim. Jet Everest Torstensson was born by a surrogate in 2017 (Massenet tells me that George Zeldis foresaw this, too).



A view into the chef's kitchen, with a table by Axel Einar Hjorth and pine chairs by Rainer Daumiller.



Knowing the two parents, there's more to the name Jet Everest than mere whimsy. "My full name is Erik Johan Torstensson—E-J-T. You turn it around, it's Jet. I come from branding, so Jet Everest Torstensson becomes J-E-T again—his initials are his name!" says Torstensson.

And Everest? "We needed an E. We were sitting around in the Hamptons, brainstorming and branding names," says Massenet. "Charles Matadin (son of the photographers Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin) said, 'What about Ever?' Then I go, 'What about Everest—the *most* ever?'"



In the Yellow Room, sofas and cube chairs designed in 1971 by Charles Pfister for Knoll surround a stone coffee table by Axel Vervoordt. The framed lithograph is by Pablo Picasso. The work on the rear wall is by Imi Knoebel.

PHOTO: FROM LEFT, PABLO PICASSO LITHOGRAPH © 2022 ESTATE OF PABLO PICASSO/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK; IMI KNOEBEL © 2022 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN

At this point, neither Massenet nor Torstensson can separate their business crush from their romantic crush. They don't even try. "When we're pillow-talking," says Massenet, "I'm like, 'We're investing in this new makeup brand. Could you redo the look and feel?'" "With them, life and business are interconnected organically. He's incredibly creative, and she's just a force of nature," says Andrew Rosen, who founded the fashion brand Theory while also nurturing a long list of fashion startups behind the scenes. Rosen was an early investor in Frame and has invested in each of Imaginary Ventures' funds.







A 1950s Italian mirror next to a table by Alvar Aalto for Finmar in the main dressing room. The vase is by Svenskt Tenn.

He also knows what it feels like to lose a throne, having been unseated as CEO of Puritan Fashions Corporation after his family sold the company in the 1980s. In retrospect, Rosen says, he and Massenet attracted more notoriety for the jobs they lost, but each gets a lot more done away from the limelight. “She evolved into someone who could do multiple things now that she’s not just focused on running a business,” he says.

One of those things has been renovating Donhead House. Massenet and Torstensson say phase one of its makeover, now almost complete, has taken six years. “The house is a good example of their collaboration,” says Rosen, “although it’s not really a house the way most people mean when they use the word *house*.”





A collection of pottery by Paul Philp ceramics atop a cabinet by Erik Chambert in a corner of the dining room.

Massenet and Torstensson bought the sprawling stone mansion on a sunny summer's day in 2014. "We never really walked into the house and thought about how much work it was going to take," Massenet recalls. "We just liked the idea of the house. We were really inspired by the images of the Rolling Stones in exile in the South of France, and how you can pile all these people into a house and have music playing all the time, and parties. Minus the drugs."





In the Yellow Room, a daybed by Charlotte Perriand next to a polyhedral dry bar by Ico Parisi is a favorite napping spot.

The sunny days of summer ended, and the rains came. Donhead House lies in a hollow surrounded by low rolling hills. But those sheep-grazed hills, so lovely to look at, also funneled rainwater directly under the house.

“One of the first things we had to do when we rebuilt this place was to tank it—dig under the house and build a perimeter to keep it dry,” Massenet says. “We thought we were going to come in and do a little painting, and it turned into quite an extravaganza to save the house.”







A collection of Barbour jackets, arranged for guests by room, line the wall of the boot room/flower room.

There were aesthetic headaches, too. Donhead House has a split architectural personality. The main part of the house, built in the 18th century, served as a rectory for the adjacent church of St. Andrew. It is basically a big box in the symmetrical manner of Georgian architecture. At the tail end of the 19th century, another architect affixed an awkward extension to the side of it. His style was Edwardian, and the Edwardians hated symmetry.

The resulting house was neither fish nor fowl. Jasper Conran, the designer and son of Sir Terence Conran, once walked through it. He approached Massenet at a cocktail party after she'd bought it. "He said to us, 'You're never going to make it work. It's impossible to fix this house,'" recalls Massenet. "I was like, Oh, no, no, no. Watch us. We know exactly what to do with this house."



Concrete lounge chairs by Willy Guhl amid a garden of *Centranthus ruber* Albus, *erigeron* and Jacqueline du Pré roses.

That must have sounded like false bravado, and it kind of was. "We had to take the house apart completely and put it back together again," says Philip Joseph, the interior designer they enlisted. "The house was so ill-conceived, we were

always saying, ‘Why on earth did they do *that*!’ It was a huge challenge.”

It took a long time, but Joseph found answers. A grand staircase in what became the entry hall was extended upward to the top floor. Rooms in different wings were linked by an enfilade that allowed the Georgian house and the Edwardian extension to communicate for the first time. To get around restrictions on renovating historic homes, Massenet consulted architectural experts to help make the case that the proposed changes somehow conformed to what the house was intended to be all along—as quixotic an exercise as divining the original intent of the U.S. Constitution’s framers.



The front of the house at night, featuring a mix of phlox, asters, Hesperis, euphorbia, Achillea and lilac beds, planted seasonally by Brooks.

“To move a staircase in a Grade II house is unheard of,” says Joseph, who sometimes wondered why they were knocking themselves out in the first place. “She could have just bought a house that had everything in place already.”

The house that emerged owes as much to Massenet’s “tenacity and vision,” says Joseph, as it does to his skill. Everywhere you look, a mood-board moment is waiting to spring to life. “When we started this project, I made a book called *Donhead One* with all the inspiration pictures. That was our brief to Philip,” says Torstensson. “All we really do is talk about how we want to live.”







Massenet and Torstensson added the tennis court, seen here lined by wild oxeye daisies and cenolophium.

The massive coffee table between us is covered with sculptures and art books. Massenet and Torstensson pictured the kind of wild party the Stones might have thrown in the South of France, where frenzied revelers end up leaping onto a table to dance. Except it's safe to say the Stones never considered the impact this would have on the furniture; Massenet and Torstensson did. "The table was built to be a dance floor," says Torstensson in a matter-of-fact, doesn't-everybody way. "You can dance 20 people on this, and we have, many times."

Before going out on his own, Joseph had worked under the English interior designer Ilse Crawford, the last four years as design director of her firm. Ett Hem, a small jewel of a hotel in Stockholm, is one of Crawford's triumphs. Torstensson and his partner Jens Grede would rent out the whole place every year around Christmastime for a family holiday. Knowing that he'd worked at the same firm that did Ett Hem, Massenet says, "we were like, 'If we ever do a house, we'd love you to work on it.'"



The outdoor dining pergola, made from reclaimed oak, set for lunch. The area was created by Miranda Brooks using reclaimed stone and with plantings that overlook a reflecting pool.

Not surprisingly, Donhead House has a very Ett Hem-ish feel about it (Ett Hem means "a home" in Swedish). And much like Ett Hem, the coziness of Donhead House makes it easy to overlook the mastery of its craftsmanship. You can see it in the spindles of the new staircase, for instance, and in the burlled wood armoires Joseph designed for it.

There's a teeny bathroom in the cottage next to the house where an overflowing soaking tub for two looks out a small window onto a kind of living floral tableau composed by Miranda Brooks, the landscaper for all of Donhead's grounds. If you



come to Donhead House with someone you love, this, not the great salon, is where you want to be. “It’s dreamy, isn’t it?” sighs Massenet, who has obviously soaked here à deux.



A view from the chef's kitchen pantry, originally part of the garage and fashioned out of white glazed bricks from Wienerberger.

A short walk from the house is a small pond that came with an additional 70 acres of land that Massenet and Torstensson bought soon after purchasing Donhead House. They’re planning a picnic spot for the other side of it. Right now, it’s just a movie in their heads, but it’s a fully realized movie.

“You can very easily get there by walking around the pond, but we have an idea that the only way you can get there is by crossing the pond, like in a little Riva-type boat with a Jet Ski engine—Jet, like our son’s name,” says Torstensson. He actually managed to acquire this unlikely contraption at auction in Monaco. The tiny thing is moored to the dock now. “We are very crazy, right?”



“Long before we got together romantically, I had this enormous business crush [on Natalie],” says Torstensson. The couple bought Donhead House in the summer of 2014.

In a few days, Massenet and Torstensson are due to fly back to New York, where they moved from London in 2021 (Donhead House is for family holidays and long weekends). They had spent two years redoing a townhouse on East 74th Street and were set to move in a year ago when an unusually hot day triggered the sprinklers, the alarm system failed, and water inundated the empty house for 36 hours before anyone discovered it. Wrecked the whole house, top to bottom.

Really bad, right? Yes and no. It turned out that while they were living in a temporary rental apartment and renovating again from scratch, the townhouse *next* to the waterlogged property came on the market, and for a very good price.



A view into the family kitchen and lounge area at Donhead House, where a hanging pot rack has been transformed into an indoor garden.

“We were like, hang on!” says Massenet. “What if we start this *new* dream where we now have a really big house, and the dream is how to connect them?” They had closed on the second house the day before.

Just another of life’s lemons to turn into lemonade?

“With a splash of vodka,” says Torstensson.

“That’s us,” says Massenet.

