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THESE PAGES A 1920s piano bought on Trade Me sits in the living and dining area of Debbie Cavit's Central Otago house: "It suited the style of the house much better than something more luscious and glossy"; the building was originally a farm stable and was converted into a home in 1979, with the alterations designed by Mason & Wales Architects from Dunedin; the slate floor tiles and the timber cross beams were added during the conversion.

ALL IS CALM

Once a month, Debbie Cavit leaves her busy Auckland lifestyle and unwinds in her Central Otago cottage

WORDS MATT PHILP / PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER



LAST JUNE, WHEN Arrowtown in Central Otago experienced its first big overnight snowfall of winter, Debbie Cavit woke earlier than usual. “The glow of the moonlight reflecting off the snow was enough to light the bedroom. I thought that was incredible.”

The owner of high-end furnishings retailer Cavit & Co has been leading a split existence since opening a small showroom in Arrowtown four years ago. Three weeks of every month she is running the business in Auckland, where she owns an elegant Parnell villa with a view that is filled with movement – from ferries on the harbour to trains shuttling downtown from the eastern suburbs (*NZ House & Garden* April 2014).

On the fourth week she is in Arrowtown, where two years ago she bought a place on the shore of Lake Hayes – a tiny 140-year-old-schist cottage, which locals say was originally a stable and never lived in until a significant addition in the 1970s. There’s a fly fishing rod in the cupboard, jars of Debbie’s home-made elderberry jam on the kitchen shelves and the view of the lake is framed by an ancient walnut tree and a wooden farm fence. >

THIS PAGE The console table behind the sofa doubles as a desk, so that Debbie can work comfortably from the cottage.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Debbie chose a trio of nested tables with different tops – teak, ebony and knotty burl timber. A Christmas votive. Debbie at work at the console table in her living room. The hand-stitched leather chair is by Ralph Lauren; the lamp base is made from a metal roller once used in wallpaper manufacture.





THIS PAGE The Central Station whitewashed teak dining table has a robust style that perfectly suits the house, accentuated by the beaten metal legs; the chairs are Antalya woven rawhide by McGuire.
OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Brandy and Christmas cake, with a bowl of Central Otago berries. On the window sill are preserves, chutney and jams made with local produce. The kitchen was repainted but otherwise left untouched. The end wall of the kitchen, decorated with a photograph of a farm building from Trowbridge Gallery in London, is the original schist building.



Across the lake is Coronet Peak. "It's so beautiful in winter, when they are making snow in the evenings and the lights on the snow guns light up the mountain," says Debbie.

"It looks like a mountain village up there, and the lights reflect off the lake."

She usually comes here to work, of course, but "it's incredibly relaxing. The house is from that period in the late 1970s when life wasn't as intense as it is now, so when I come down here the simplicity brings a sense of calm. The day to day pressure is considerably less than in Auckland and the cottage gives me space and time to think more creatively."

In revamping the Arrowtown house she has played to that theme of dialled-back living. First to go upstairs was the 1979 colour scheme, which included bright red, lime green and navy blue in the three bedrooms, with matching drapery

and light fixtures. Downstairs, where the schist walls of the old cottage (they're at least 45cm thick) are seamlessly incorporated into the 70s addition, she mostly left things untouched, other than replacing a few rustic light fittings and repainting the kitchen.

"With a timber ceiling I haven't got any reflective surfaces, which can make it a little dim during the day. I painted the walls cream to give me a little more reflective light in that room, but apart from that and a few gadgets it's really as it was. It's all about getting back to that simplicity."

And that includes having no dishwasher or microwave and the original 1979 Shacklock oven: "It still makes good scones. I love to bake and cook when I'm in Arrowtown. In Auckland I don't always get to spend time in the kitchen the way I'd like to and it's lovely to get back to real life when I'm down here." >



“Toning down the colours to a neutral palette has made an enormous difference to the look and feel of this cottage”



THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) Debbie had the transport sign hand-painted by a signwriter from a photograph she took while holidaying in the Hamptons. When Debbie bought the cottage the master bedroom was a deep navy blue; she repainted it using Dulux ‘Half Stony River’ on the wall up to the angle of the dormer window, then carried the ceiling colour down to it. William Yeoward fabric was used for the guest bedroom’s headboard and cushion. The rattan chest of drawers is by Baker Furniture. A blue and white urn is from Ralph Lauren Home.

OPPOSITE The master bedroom headboard was made locally; the rattan side table is by McGuire, the wall light by Visual Comfort and the bedlinen by Frette; the throw pillows are by American designer Barbara Barry – a good friend whose products are stocked at Cavit & Co.

In the living room the drapes are also unchanged. “They’re covered in mountain lions, grizzly bears and bobcats, straight from the 70s, but the colours fit so beautifully with the schist. And I wanted to keep the schist as the dominant feature.”

All the furniture and new light fittings came from Cavit & Co and Debbie chose textiles from designers she represents, including Ralph Lauren, William Yeoward and Barbara Barry. Belying Cavit & Co’s reputation as a purveyor of sleek formality, the feel here is of casual comfort, from the bleached teak dining table to a rattan chest of drawers.

The contrast with her Parnell villa is striking. Debbie has also found in her interior design work for local clients that Central Otago conditions dictate a different approach.

“The climate influences the architecture and the style of furnishings we use down here. The same brands run through both our locations, but with quite different stylings. We use bronze, steel and oak a lot more, and a different selection of textiles and colours. Because the sky is so incredibly blue and so expansive, it changes the tone of the colours we use.”

Outside, she has planted a small orchard of apples, apricots and cherries to complement the existing collection of walnut and elderberry trees. Making elderberry jam is an exercise that demands one slow down, she says. >





THIS PAGE (clockwise from top left) A pebbled courtyard leads to the entrance. Debbie on her northern terrace, a “total suntrap” where visitors linger on rattan loungers covered in Sunbrella fabric. A festive wreath welcomes visitors at Christmas. The fence, designed to act as a windbreak, “feels like it’s wrapping its arms around the house”. **OPPOSITE** “The old farm fence was one of the things I loved when I first saw the house,” says Debbie; Lake Hayes lies beyond.



“It’s one of the more challenging things to make jam from, because they’re about 3mm in diameter and you have to pick every single one off the stems, which are poisonous. It takes hours to make, and it’s low-yield as well as labour-intensive, but it’s worth it. Elderberry jam is heaven on a spoon.”

When not working, gardening or making preserves, she walks the dog in the hills or on the 8km circuit of Lake Hayes, plays golf, visits wineries or catches a film at the characterful boutique Dorothy Browns cinema in Arrowtown. And in winter she enjoys a roaring fire indoors and the cold dry air outdoors that “makes you tingle and feel alive”.

There’s also four-wheel driving territory to be explored. “I have a big old Toyota Prado that I recently drove up to Macetown with my daughter and her partner, fording the Arrow stream about 25 times, with water right up to the running boards. That’s great fun. >



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THIS PAGE Debbie has set up a table and chairs under the big walnut tree that dominates the outdoor space.

But there is at least one pastime that has yet to find its place in her Arrowtown schedule: “I have a fly fishing rod, but I have yet to take it out of the box. Fly fishing is one of the most relaxing things in the world, so this summer I’m planning to go fishing with friends up at Paradise, beyond Glenorchy.”

Joining her on that trip, and for a few rounds of golf over the Christmas holidays, will be “my lovely man”, who also lives between Auckland and Arrowtown. “And I’ve ended up making some wonderful friends down here. So there’s no shortage of things to do here and in Queenstown.”

You suspect, however, that she’s happy just to be sitting by that handsome schist fireplace or pottering in her orchard. “Really it’s been a dream come true finding this place.” ■

Q&A

This year my Christmas celebrations will be: With both my daughters and extended family in Auckland. Then I will fly down to Arrowtown on Boxing Day to spend time with friends.

For me, Christmas decoration calls for: A real pine tree, usually dressed to a simple theme, with clear lights (I’ve never been one for different blinking colours). But I always make sure that we have space for decorations that have special meaning.

Best decorating tip: Keep it simple. Toning down the colours to a neutral palette has made an enormous difference to the look and feel of this cottage without huge expense.

Best seat in the house: The Verellen sofa, a favourite for years and I’ve never found anything to beat it for comfort. I can sit in the one spot, look at the view over the lake, be in front of the fire and also read or watch TV – what a great way to relax.

A well-kept secret about this area: I have travelled a lot in my adult life and I think this is one of the most special places in the world. There is something magical about this area.

Debbie Cavit