

Nouveau niche

How do you downsize from a French chateau to a London terrace - and fit weathered Gallic furniture into a sleek, architect-designed home? Kate Jacobs finds out. Pictures: Rachael Smith

Rebecca Rauter's London home was never part of the plan. When daughters Zillah, 16, and Raphaela, 14, were small, she and her husband, Peter, headed to France, and a simpler life in a large but tumbledown Gascony chateau - the ultimate project house. But after just five years there, Peter tragically died. Rauter stayed on to get the house finished for sale, then brought her young daughters back to London. With their furniture in storage, and living with friends, she took up her old career as a food stylist and caterer and began to hunt for a home of their own. "It was daunting," she says.

After finding a wreck of a Victorian terraced house in north London, while lusting after its more polished neighbour, Rauter drafted in architect Martyn Clarke (martynclarkearchitecture.com) for help. He gutted the house and put it back together - with a new roof, plumbing, electrics and floors, and extensions to the back and loft. The former created a new kitchen/dining area; the latter is accessed via an elegant spiral staircase.

Clarke's sleek, contemporary style

contrasts with Rauter's collection of shabby French furniture and accessories, which includes a rusting French road sign and a gilt mirror covered with age spots, discovered in a junk shop. So she chose a palette of "muted, dirty greys" for the walls, instead of stark white, so the contrast wouldn't be so great.

In the kitchen extension, sleek stone-coloured units sit alongside a rustic farmhouse kitchen table and open oak shelves. These are piled with earthenware confit pots and Le Parfait jars, all picked up during Rauter's time in France. In place of a traditional splashback is a piece of weathered decorative enamel. A wooden "Alimentation Generale" shop sign, discovered in a flea market, softens the contemporary Corian worktops.

Rauter had forgotten most of what she had in storage, but she unpacked it all, finding a suitable spot for even the quirkiest item. But some furniture had to go. "Big armoires are beautiful, but not the most practical in a skinny terrace."

She has adapted to the move well. "I was raised in an army family, so I'm good at moving on. It was empowering to do a house project on my own, and we're settled back into London now."



▲ A French shop sign adds colour to the kitchen, and Le Parfait jars line oak shelves. Divertimenti (divertimenti.co.uk) sells classic kitchenware.



▲ Daughter Zillah's bed, from a Provence junk shop, is draped with a Turkish Suzani panel. Try French Finds (frenchfinds.co.uk) for antique beds, and Suzani Interior for textiles (suzaniinterior.com). The mirror is from a French junk shop. Try The Old Cinema (theoldcinema.co.uk) for pieces similar to the original "no-overtaking" road sign.



◀ Rauter's 'Valentin' bed, from sofa.com, is draped with a Spanish silk shawl - for similar, try Melinda Colthurst at Alfie's Antique Market (alfiesantiques.com). For vintage lighting, like the globe pendant and bedside lights, try All Belle (allbelle.co.uk).

◀ In the kitchen/dining extension, architect Martyn Clarke designed Corian worktops and cupboards (bsfsolidsurfaces.com). Try Skinflint Design (skinflintdesign.co.uk) for similar industrial factory lights.