



MARIN

FROM THE ASHES
Sonoma
DREAM
HOME
REIMAGINED

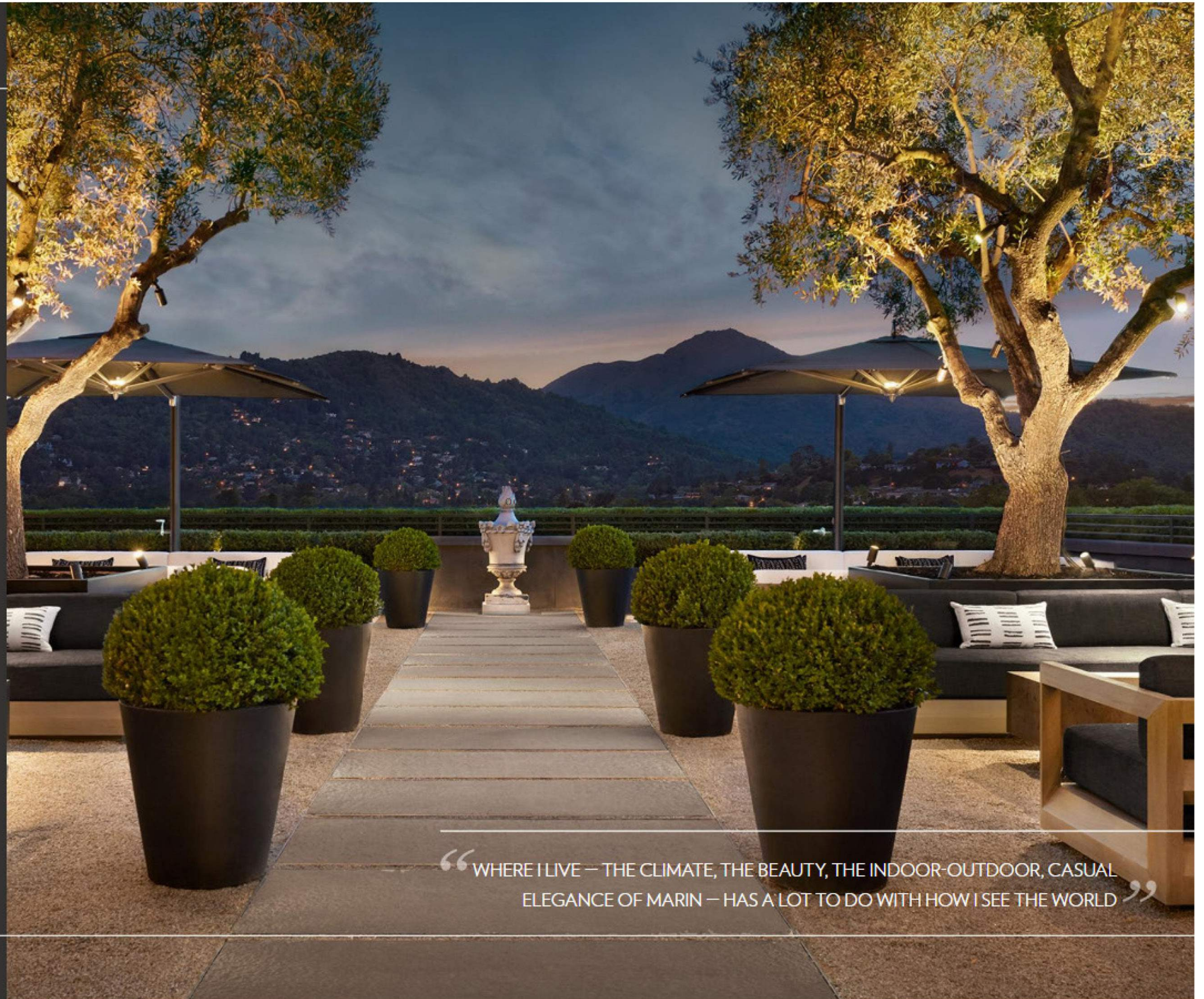
 CELEBRATING
the 43rd Annual
Mill Valley Festival

SPOTLIGHT

*Gary Friedman, Chairman
and CEO of RH, Dishes on . . .*

MARIN *and* THE STORIED BRAND HE LEADS

BY: CHRISTINA MUELLER



“WHERE I LIVE — THE CLIMATE, THE BEAUTY, THE INDOOR-OUTDOOR, CASUAL ELEGANCE OF MARIN — HAS A LOT TO DO WITH HOW I SEE THE WORLD.”



THE EARLY YEARS

Like many careers, Gary Friedman's started in retail. For him, it was a stint stocking shelves at a Gap store in Santa Rosa. "I got promoted and eventually became store manager, coming up through the ranks," the Chairman and CEO of RH told me recently. Friedman's early years gave no indication of future riches. The deteriorating mental health of his mother meant a life of asking for little. "I grew up very poor," Friedman recalls. "My mom had mental illness all her life. We lived on food stamps and were evicted many times." Friedman eventually graduated from Sonoma Valley High and enrolled at Santa Rosa Junior College, but it didn't take. "I had a college professor that told me I was wasting the taxpayer's money," Friedman chuckles. Claims of a D average reinforce the professor's notion, but management at Gap noticed a different set of skills in the young college drop-out, promoting him to store manager in San Mateo and, subsequently, regional manager in Los Angeles. His career arc began its upward trajectory. The beauty of Marin, however, lodged in Friedman's heart during his childhood.

"Marin was like Beverly Hills if you will," Friedman says. "I remember [when I was in elementary school in San Francisco] we came out with friends to the Marin Town and Country Club in Fairfax. Marin was this beautiful place with sun and space and swimming pools." Though living in the Richmond District at the time, Friedman learned to play tennis at Tiburon Peninsula Club where a school friend's family spent time. Years before he started his career in retail and subsequently took over the helm at the business known as Restoration Hardware, Marin left its mark.

ORIGINS OF RESTORATION HARDWARE

Founded in 1979 in Eureka, California by Stephen Gordon who sought in vain for affordable fixtures during the restoration of a Victorian, Restoration Hardware spent the first 19 years of existence developing

a following of customers passionate about design, both vintage and modern, and well, Victorian. Fittings and fixtures, from door knobs and faucets to towel racks and curtain rods, defined the brand as much as its name. Growing to 100 stores, the chain transitioned in the 1990s from fixtures to furniture. Friedman, who spent the late 1980s and 1990s at Williams-Sonoma, a brand launched in his hometown of Sonoma, stepped into the CEO role at Restoration Hardware in the months before the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

RH AND THE MARIN LIFESTYLE

Curating a lifestyle never stopped being a priority for RH and the neutral tones of Northern California's landscape, already steeped in the brand's look and feel, came to define the company's aesthetic under Friedman. "Where I live — the climate, the beauty, the indoor-outdoor, casual elegance of Marin — has a lot to do with how I see the world," he says. That Northern California sensibility is both Friedman's and RH's lens on the world. Friedman approaches lifestyle a little differently. "People say we built a lifestyle brand and I never really know what that means. We buy things we love and present things we love and do things we love. It's very personal," Friedman says.

Friedman told me he "ended up in Belvedere," not far from the Belvedere Tennis Club, in the first house he had ever owned in his life. But no one just ends up in Belvedere. Like other areas of Marin, it reels you in, first with its small town vibe and bay and city views, then with the tennis club, stunning afternoon light and easy access to the outdoors. Friedman and his then wife, Kendal, moved into their custom-built home in 2003 when he was 45. "I always thought this was a magical place, but a place I would probably never live in," Friedman says, hearkening back to the struggles of his childhood.

MARIN SINKS IN

Planting his roots in Marin — a home in Belvedere and RH company headquarters in Corte Madera — this place of sun and fog, hills that fade with the winter rains from brilliant green to ecru, Friedman not only embraced Marin, but turned its wondrous landscapes into RH's color palette. "People will say 'you have no color, only neutrals and grays' and I'll say it is not that we don't like color but the most comfortable way to live is in an environment that is a reflection of yourself. And every human on this planet is some shade of neutral, from light to dark," he says. Does that make Marin sound too meta? Or Friedman too enmeshed in the woo-woo beauty and navel-gazing that happens to some when they live in a place like this? Perhaps. But a tour of the House That Friedman Built reflects his passion for retail, honed since he was a young adult, and brought to fruition with Marin as its anchoring influence.

RH EXPANDS — AND EXPANDS AGAIN — THE NOTION OF HOME STORE

On Friedman's watch, RH has moved deeper into retail's many tiers, branching out from furniture and fittings into 12 categories which now include textiles, lighting and outdoor as well as art, partnering with

artists like Los Angeles's Portia de Rossi and Mexico's Adriana Jimenez Blanchet. Collections have expanded from RH Interiors (the classic) to include RH Modern, Baby & Child, Teen, Ski House and Beach House. Galleries, such as the recently opened RH in Corte Madera, reflect Friedman's recognition of two important facts: that furniture shopping is not an everyday experience and that putting together a home is a long and immersive experience.

Embedded restaurants are not a new concept — Neiman Marcus and other department stores developed restaurants within their stores to keep customers onsite all day some 50 years ago. However, at RH, the restaurant is not a distinct eating experience; it's one that blends the borders of the brand, immersing guests in the reflective glow of not only RH's ambient and focused lighting options but its textiles and room design. There is an RH burger, an RH mimosa and a broader menu with dishes that could be served at your next dinner party. "It's been incredibly successful," Friedman says. "That is why we are doing it everywhere." It is a strategy designed to attract foot traffic. "Customers know what one to three stores they are going to go to before they park their car. We need to be one of those destinations."

Even though they represented 52% of the business when he came onboard as CEO, Friedman got rid of what are called 'discovery items.' They had nothing to do with furniture or lighting or design," he says. "We got rid of the junk and created a beautiful restaurant and seamlessly integrated that into the store. The whole hospitality experience is part of coming here."

CORTE MADERA REALIZES ITS PLACE AS RH'S TRUE FLAGSHIP STORE

Marin is RH's tenth gallery and restaurant concept, opening after success in Yountville, Chicago and New York, among other locations. Opening in Corte Madera was an important step for this Marin-based business, according to Friedman. "Everything comes together here. Our Center of Innovation and Product Leadership is in Marin. The best expression of our brand here in Marin is critical for us," Friedman says. He and his team worked closely with the town of Corte Madera to build a bespoke location, visually distinct from The Village at Corte Madera, for the gallery. "Customers," he said, "already viewed the Marin store as our flagship. We looked for quite a while for a unique space in Marin. When you step out and look at what we built in Corte Madera it is unlike anything ever built in retail."

Friedman knows that customers viewed Marin as the flagship location for the brand. He also understands that Marin, despite the

skyrocketing price of real estate and other goods, has somehow held onto its image as a hippie stronghold (#blameJerry) in the psyche of the greater culturesscape. "If you look at Marin County, it doesn't really have many luxury brands. Neiman [Marcus] never came. LVMH has no brands here. It is completely underestimated," he says. Friedman is hellbent on refining this outdated perception. "Our legacy store here [which closed when RH Marin opened] did \$20 million a year, up from \$2.5 million when I came onboard. We are aiming for \$40 million which is on par with [The Village's] Nordstrom's and Apple. That will attract the quality of retailers that have never been here," he says.

COVID TIMES ARE TEMPORARY

The arrival of COVID-19 has not placed a particular damper on Friedman's strategic plans for RH. "I don't think you craft a strategy for temporal things," he told me. Though Friedman expects an acceleration of online shopping, from their current 13 or 15% of sales to 20 or 25% of sales, he expects customers to return to the stores once they are allowed to reopen. "Temporarily, people are spending more time at home, and home businesses will get a lift," he says. Have you been sitting in your dining room chairs more than you used to? Or noticed an empty spot on the wall that you never paid attention to before? You are not alone. "People are looking at their homes like they are new again. We happen to be the beneficiary of this time but we haven't really changed anything except temporarily reorganizing and reacting to COVID," Friedman says.

THE FUTURE

Friedman is not done evolving RH. Plans are in the works to bring solar powered energy to stores. And an effort is underway with Tesla to power company headquarters and move designers to meetings using renewable energy. "We want to leapfrog into the future and inspire others to make the same kind of move," Friedman says.

The brand's upcoming introduction into Europe will be a 400-year-old Oxfordshire estate situated on 73 acres, serving as yet another reminder of their ability to look for luxury in the past and anticipate what it will look like in the days and years ahead. "Would you ever think people from Marin built this?" Friedman asks. "It is something for the community to be proud of. And we are just warming up."

