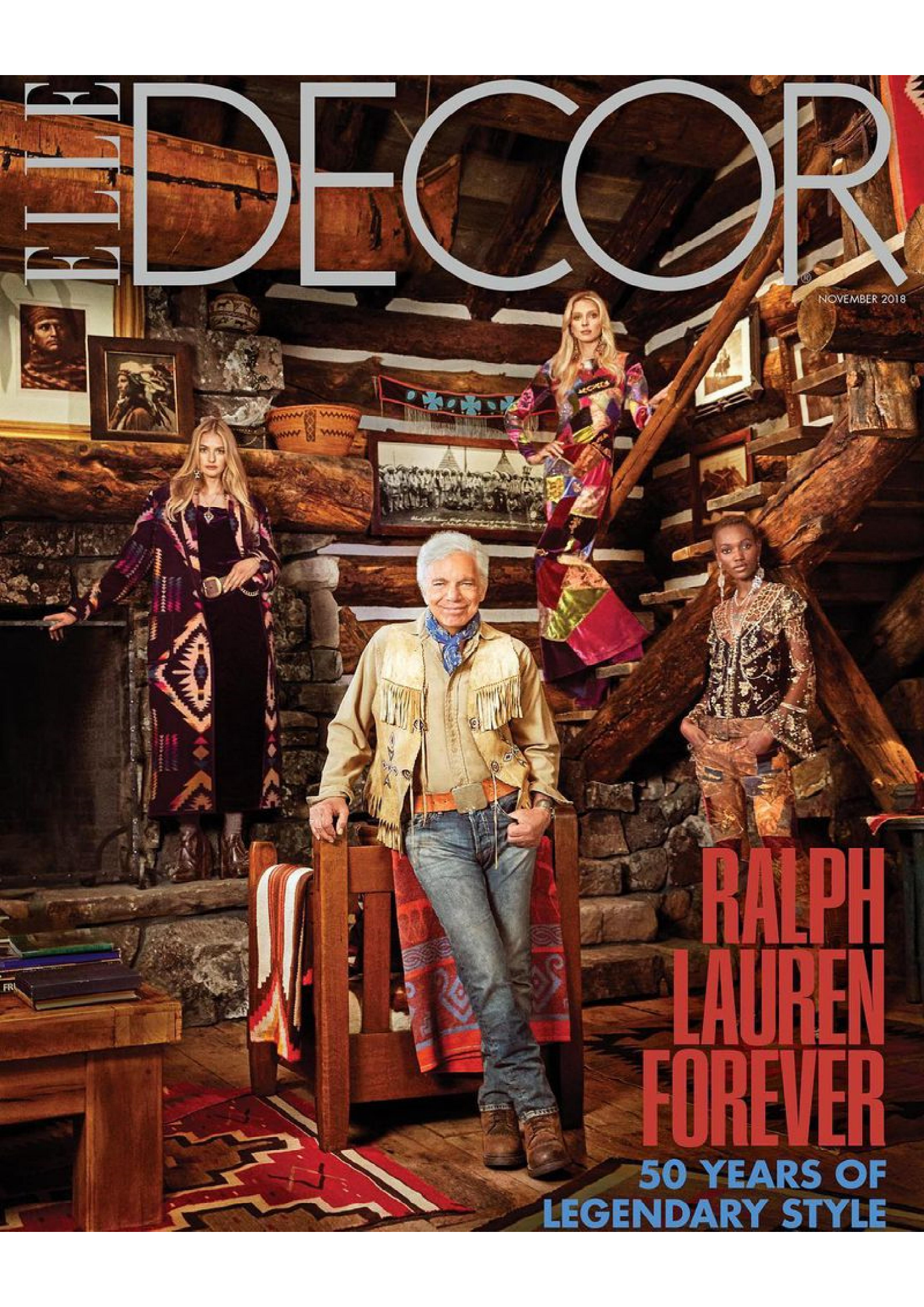


EL DECOR

NOVEMBER 2018



**RALPH
LAUREN
FOREVER**

**50 YEARS OF
LEGENDARY STYLE**



The exterior of the Barthel family's Tuscan farmhouse. **BELOW, FROM LEFT:** Francesco Barthel at home. Barthel's kitchen.

Soul Cucina

The Italian design firm Riccardo Barthel specializes in a timeless Florentine aesthetic—and discreet but ultra-luxe kitchens.

BY MARIA SHOLLENBARGER



PHOTOGRAPHS BY Cyrill Matter

THE WORD **SHOWROOM** doesn't begin to cover it. I say this to Francesco Barthel one bluebird fall day as we explore the enfilade of vast spaces in Florence's bohemian Oltrarno district that houses Riccardo Barthel, the design firm founded by his father in 1976. Having overseen things alongside his dapper





The rental Treehouse at Casa Barthel.

papà since the mid-1990s, Francesco has grown the business from an upstart kitchen-design studio to an all-service interiors emporium that also houses Desinare, Florence's best cooking school—and arguably one of the best in Italy. Francesco is used to seeing visitors' jaws drop. It's not just the unusual configuration of buildings—one structure formerly a car mechanic's, another an old Baci Perugina chocolate warehouse—clustered around a shabby-chic courtyard on the Via dei Serragli that defies conventional description; it's the multitude of goods on offer within. The ornate and the sober, the lovingly reclaimed and the state-of-the-art, the one-offs and the series—all meet and mingle here in a happy accretion of faultless good taste.

The sui generis magic of Riccardo Barthel is a *mélange* of made-to-measure resourcefulness, expert editing, and superb styling. Respect for craftsmanship, tradition, and prime materials is matched by a conspicuous disregard for the ephemera of trends, both on the part of father and son, and the artisans who have joined their studio over the years.

The firm's designs—and most notably, its custom kitchens—have attracted a clientele that includes Loro Piana, the late architect Renzo Mongiardino, and the late Gianni Agnelli. More than 20 employees—among

Barthel's dining room.

The Treehouse sleeping area. **FAR RIGHT:** Barthel's living room.

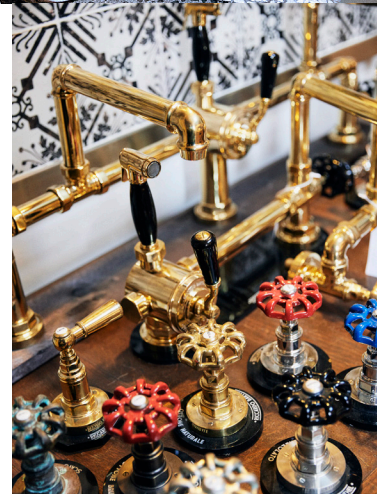


THE FIRM HAS ATTRACTED A CLIENTELE THAT INCLUDES LORO PIANA AND THE LATE GIANNI AGNELLI.



◀ Furniture for sale. **ABOVE LEFT:** Tiles at the Riccardo Barthel showroom.

▲ Tiers of decanters.



▲ A selection of handles.

them upholsterers, textile specialists, metal-smiths, carpenters, and restorers—uphold the traditions of bespoke fabrication and quality that have defined Florentine artisanship for centuries. In the process, they make some staggeringly good-looking stuff.

Lining two of the showroom's exterior courtyard walls are various tiles, both custom ones by Barthel and 19th-century majolica. For each vintage tile, there might be 200—or 2,000—pieces available, but rest assured that Barthel has bought the entire stock. Through a tall doorway is a massive De Manincor range, custom-clad in lemon-yellow-enameled steel. One entire room is

stacked with textiles: passementerie, vintage linens, embroidered silks, and more. A tiny room houses a hardware obsessive's candy store: Dozens of wooden drawers are filled with door pulls, tap handles, hinges, finials, and towel hooks, all in gleaming nickel, antiqued brass, new bronze—you name the finish, and Barthel probably has it. If not, someone here can make it happen.

Although the firm designs entire houses as well as retail spaces, such as the show-stopping Florence and Milan boutiques for porcelain house Richard Ginori, kitchens are still its calling card, sometimes in collaboration with the Milan-based Studio Peregalli.

And commissions come from as far afield as Tel Aviv, St. Moritz, and New York. Many of Italy's illustrious families can claim a Barthel kitchen in the family palazzo (not surprising, given that about 80 percent of the company's business comes through word-of-mouth). Says Chiara Ferragamo, who owns the Tuscan resort Castiglion del Bosco with her husband, Massimo: "They are so creative, and so unique. When we were planning the kitchens for the villas, I immediately thought of them. I've known Riccardo for years; he designed our kitchen in Florence—a very functional space, but with a strong, pronounced homey feeling."



▲ Francesco and Riccardo Barthel.

▼ Fabrics at the showroom.

WHIMSY AND TASTE BALANCE EACH OTHER WITH APLOMB.

The pedigree-rich client roster belies the bohemian understatement with which Francesco and Riccardo themselves live, on the outskirts of town. Home is a compound of 19th-century farmhouses set on several bucolic acres of olive trees on a hill between Florence and Impruneta, which is shared with Riccardo's wife, Daniela, and Francesco's sister, Elena. When I visit, a cast-iron daybed clad in persimmon-striped cotton sits on a lawn that hasn't—happily—seen a mower in weeks; the Duomo can just be glimpsed between silvery olive boughs. Riccardo has constructed nine modest guest cottages across the property that Elena rents out; the standout among them is the timber-and-iron Treehouse, a one-room studio on high stilts with sigh-inducing views of the Chianti hills.

Inside Francesco's two-story house, whimsy and taste balance each other with aplomb. Quality flea-market finds, books, and hand-carved models of half-hull sailing yachts fill the sitting room. Richard Ginori china and silver, in various patterns, gleam from glass-fronted cases in the dining room. Upstairs, stacks of vintage suitcases line a high bedroom shelf; in the dressing room, a collection of panama hats adorns an antique ladder. "I'd signed up for art school to study set design, but I didn't like it much," Francesco says. "When my father moved the showroom from Via dei Fossi to the Oltrarno in 1994, I helped him set things up, and I liked it so much, I ended up staying." To what does he attribute the enduring esteem with which the world's design cognoscenti hold Barthel, whose empire encompasses everything from a \$14 knife to a \$290,000 kitchen? "It comes from our history of doing bespoke projects," he says. "Kitchens, houses, stores are all *su misura*, by design. And while my father and I actually have somewhat differing personal styles—mine is more somber and spare; I love Copenhagen, but he's more about Rome or Sicily—our approach is the same. We really try to curate, as much as possible." ■

