



A QUEEN'S FOLLY

More than 200 years after Catherine the Great commissioned a Chinese village for her summer palace outside St. Petersburg, one of its pavilions again serves as a charming and fanciful weekend escape

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A hallway in a weekend house in one of the pavilions at the Chinese Village in Tsarskoe Selo, an imperial palace near St. Petersburg; the interior design by Kirill Istomin includes custom-made sconces above 1950s iron chairs found at auction, a vintage gilt-wood starburst mirror, archway trim based on Catherine II's 18th-century Chinese study in the Imperial Palace, and wallpaper in the hallway by Brunschwig & Fils. **FACING PAGE:** A pagoda-topped pavilion, one of the many 18th-century buildings in the Chinese Village. For details, see Resources.



The study's custom-made sofa and chair are covered in fabrics by Lee Jofa, the vintage secretary was purchased at Doyle New York, and the antique chandelier was bought in St. Petersburg. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** The living room's custom-made sofa is upholstered in a velvet by Cowtan & Tout, and the cocktail table is by John Rosselli & Associates; the fireplace mantel is based on a 17th-century Dutch design, vintage sconces flank 18th-century porcelain, and the rug is by the Rug Company. A chest of drawers by Century Furniture, and 18th-century garden stools and mirror in the foyer. For details, see Resources.



RUSSIAN DESIGNER KIRILL ISTOMIN takes a playful approach to his profession. “Decorating has to be fun,” he insists. “I’m always looking for things that amuse and fascinate me.” And nothing enthralls him quite like the great Russian imperial palaces. So imagine his delight when he was asked to transform a pavilion in the so-called Chinese Village of the Russian palace Tsarskoe Selo, outside St. Petersburg, into a weekend home for a client. “It’s like a fairy tale,” Istomin says. “The perfect opportunity to go to town.”

Beginning in the 18th century, Tsarskoe Selo served as a country residence for the Russian royal family. Nicholas II used it as a refuge during the 1917 Revolution. It was his illustrious ancestor, Catherine the Great, who had commissioned the Chinese Village with the aim to “capture by caprice.” The plans drawn up in the 1780s by her Scottish architect, Charles Cameron, called for a series of pavilions grouped around an octagonal domed observatory. The latter never saw the light of day. Instead, a pagoda based on one in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in England, was erected in the central position. The 10 pavilions were subsequently turned into guest accommodations in the 1820s (the Soviet poet Osip Mandelstam stayed in one), and there was also the Chinese Theatre, which was the setting for the 1893 premiere of Tolstoy’s play *The Fruits of Enlightenment*. The theater burned to the ground during World War II and was never rebuilt.

The rest of the Village, however, underwent extensive restoration in the 1990s, partly financed by Istomin’s client, a St. Petersburg real estate developer, who calls the property “truly phenomenal,

Dining chairs covered in a fabric by Duralee surround a custom-made table topped with 18th-century teapots bought at a Sotheby's auction of Brooke Astor's estate; the vintage Chinese lantern was found in Paris, the custom-made scone is in the style of Tony Duquette, and the ceiling's wallpaper is by Alan Campbell. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** A late-18th-century pavilion designed by Yury Velten, a court architect for Catherine the Great. The master bath's sink, tub, and fittings are by Villeroy & Boch, the mirror is from the 1940s, the 1950s stool is from Newel, and the 1970s chandelier was found in Palm Beach; the curtains are of a silk by Manuel Canovas. For details, see Resources.



In the master bedroom, Istomin designed the headboard, the bedcover is of a silk by Cowtan & Tout, and the chest of drawers is by Kindel; the custom-made carpet is by Lee Jofa. **RIGHT:** The Krestovy Bridge, which was built in 1779 in Alexander Park, on the palace grounds. For details, see Resources.



because of both its location and its unique architecture.” To date, the two-bedroom pavilion he shares with his wife is the only one of the pavilions to have been converted into a private residence.

When Istomin first visited, he discovered simple white walls and ceilings and not one existing period detail. There were also no records of what the rooms had originally looked like. In any case, he had no inclination to create a slavish historical reconstitution. He installed modern, custom-made sofas and club chairs, in response to his clients’ insistence on comfort, and based the living room fire-place on a 17th-century Dutch design. “It’s odd,” he admits, “but I actually think it works.”

Much of his inspiration came from the architecture of the Chinese Village itself. Pelmetts were modeled on the sweeping roofs. The motif for the baseboards, meanwhile, was copied from the cornice of a Chinese room at another Russian imperial palace, Peterhof.

More than anything, Istomin was determined to give the decor a distinctly casual feel. “It’s a weekend cottage,” he explains, “so we don’t have anything super-fancy or super-expensive.” Instead, there are whimsical three-foot-high sconces in the style of Tony Duquette and numerous chinoiserie touches. Panels of antique wallpapers were framed in gilded bamboo for the master bedroom, and vintage Chinese lanterns, purchased in Paris, hang in the dining and living rooms. The star pieces, however, are a set of 18th-century porcelain teapots, which came from the estate of the late New York socialite and philanthropist Brooke Astor.

For Istomin, the project fulfills the dream of another great woman. “During Catherine the Great’s lifetime, the Village was never completed, and I feel I’ve finally put an end chapter to it,” he says. “I’m just a humble decorator, but I think she would be rather pleased with the result.” *Originally published in ELLE DECORATION Russia.* ■