



MY STYLISH FRENCH GIRLFRIENDS

SANTONI



GIBBS SMITH



# MY STYLISH FRENCH GIRLFRIENDS

## SHARON SANTONI

*Creator of My French Country Home*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANCK SCHMITT

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# CONTENTS



*Introduction* 6

Alicia 9

Catherine 21

Cécile 33

Celestina 45

Charlotte 55

Christelle 65

Claire 77

Clarisse 87

Cornélie 97

Evelyne 107

Frédérique 117

Laure 127

Marie Christine 137

Marie 149

Nathalie 159

Sabine 169

Sophie M. 181

Stéphanie 191

Valérie 199

Ysabel 211

*The Girlfriends' Recommendations* 222

*Acknowledgments* 224



# ALICIA

The antique fair at Chatou, on the outskirts of Paris, is absolutely one of my favorites. It is a concentration of the best French dealers all in one place for ten days at a time, an ideal place for meeting new antique dealers who come from all over France to show at the fair.

Discovering new sources is always fun: sometimes it's a dealer from Brittany who specializes in paintings; other times it'll be someone from the south who sells century-old dinner services and flatware. Even if you don't buy at each stand, the dealers are always glad to chat about their work. That's how I first met Alicia.

My aunt had asked me to source an old French farm table for her kitchen. I promised to keep my eyes open and set off the next day for Chatou, her table added to my own wish list.

As I walked through the fair, buying here and there, Alicia's stand caught my eye. It was beautifully staged, with a country feel to it, exactly the style I love. She had painted wooden furniture with real patina, some wonderful textiles, a few small paintings and a farm table that looked perfect for my aunt!

I introduced myself and chatted with Alicia. She was younger than me, but I quickly realized how knowledgeable she was. It was clear that each item she sold was important to her, and that she traveled all over France to find her treasures. Her bright blue eyes divulged the passion she feels for her work. Before I knew it, we had chatted for an hour and arranged to meet at her warehouse the following week.

For her, selling antiques is not about decoration, but about the beauty of an object and how it can fit into a home. — *"Il faut que l'objet trouve sa place."* She takes a poetic approach to her work:

happy when she finds the right home for an object, happy when the new owner understands the beauty.

Alicia chooses not to have a store, as she is unwilling to be tied down to boutique hours. Instead she shows at fairs and occasionally receives clients in her warehouse on a neighboring farm. The first time I visited her storage, I took a friend with me. We drove into the farm courtyard and through a huge barn door, past tractors and combine harvesters, until at the far end of the barn, Alicia's display opened up before us, all the more beautiful because of its unlikely setting.

Alicia's eloquence belies a rocky educational path. As a child she was unhappy at school, ill at ease with the formality of the French school system. She wanted to tread her own path, to discover her own truths. At the age of fifteen she left school and joined a circus. She did stunt horseback riding; she handled falcons, charmed snakes and juggled. Not the typical route for a young girl from a fine family. At the time it certainly can't have been easy to quit the system and go against conventional truth, and her family found it difficult to watch her struggle, but time has proven her right. Away from the discipline and regulations of traditional education, Alicia has invented her own life. She is an autodidact, widely read, and a lover of music and art.

As well as understanding the antiques she sells, Alicia is also a gifted stylist. Today she is in demand for staging weddings and events in the green countryside of the Perche, to the west of Paris. She packs up her truck with furniture and accessories, and arrives with huge bouquets of freshly cut meadow flowers to complete her signature style.



The beautiful chateau and grounds provide an ideal setting for family reunions, with enough space for quiet moments, and also space to enjoy together.





Unusually, the sitting room is twice the height of the rest of the apartment, as if to draw the visitor's gaze out through the large studio windows to the view beyond.

Stéphanie's décor is punctuated with family mementos and feminine touches.



MARIE-CHRISTINE 145

The chateau may be grand, but Marie-Christine's sure eye has created elegant rooms for everyday living. Here the salon is comfortable but never cluttered. Contemporary pieces are mixed with antique furniture, and the soft palette is easy on the eye.

The kitchen has a handsome arched ceiling and a wide-open fireplace, which is used daily during the winter months. The long farm table sits beneath a crystal chandelier. Linens and tableware in neutrals blend into the overall color scheme.



YSABEL 220

Inspiration to paint is everywhere, be it a flower in the garden or a collection of antique brushes. Tall windows bathe the painting studio in natural light, allowing Ysabel to set up her easels and work comfortably on her canvases.

