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A thoroughly modern kitchen designed by Mary Ann Fehr of San Francisco's Fehr-O'Conner.

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Heritage Honored

The famed Sarah Winchester in Atherton magnificently re-envisioned

The details of Sarah Winchester, heiress to the Winchester rifle fortune, and her life are often exaggerated. Her need to constantly build her famous and fascinating mansion in San Jose and her communing with the spirits are the highlights that most people know. But Winchester was more than just legend and lore. She was a woman of great means who had known great tragedy. Following the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, Winchester looked south of the city for a new place to call home. She purchased one in Burlingame, set about building what is now called the mystery house in San Jose, and bought an unusual existing house and 40 acres in Atherton. If time is any indication, she may well have enjoyed the Atherton home above all others, for she spent the majority of her years there until her death.

The property was originally owned by one of Atherton's founding families, the Merrills. It started out as a cottage with only five rooms but was added onto again and again over the years. By the time Sarah Winchester purchased it, the structure had over 16 rooms.

When the current owners purchased it in the late 1980s, the historic home had just been redone as part of a decorator show house for charity. "It had been completely made over and infused with the style that typified the 80s—lots of grey and many contemporary touches," recalls San Francisco based interior designer Mehran Jean Michelle "Johnny" Moallempour. Thirty years later, the home was in need of another overhaul. "I was wowed by the bones of the home and its original architecture which was quite European," notes Moallempour. "It had been crafted, starting in 1904, out of local redwoods and koa wood from the Hawaiian Islands. I wanted to bring that heritage back."

Moallempour's clients remodeled the 9,960 square foot home in two phases. "They wanted to live in the home during the project," he recalls, "so we started on the second floor—gutting three bathrooms, restoring plaster, woodwork, refinishing and installing new floors." Moallempour also had a new walnut staircase installed. "My clients' grandfather

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is an artist. His painting of a cherry blossom branch above the stairs set the color scheme for the entire second floor,” said Moallempour. “We used terracotta, rose, soft ivories, and touches of celadon and mahogany, and in the process, we discovered some of Sarah Winchester’s famed secret rooms. We turned one into a beautiful and spacious steam shower.”

A not so welcome surprise materialized when they started renovating the kitchen. “Hidden behind a wall was a crumbling and long forgotten chimney that threatened to take the whole house down,” notes Moallempour. With that safely removed, the complete overhaul of the kitchen began. “The new kitchen needed to do three things,” stresses Moallempour. “It had to be state of the art, echo the design of the home, and be functional for the family and caterers for large scale entertaining.” The designer selected cherry wood and had custom cabinetry designed to his specifications. He also placed a massive two tiered island in

the center of the space with plenty of prep space and room for a bar.

The dining room features the clients’ Chippendale table and chairs and several important pieces of Chinese porcelain. The living room is a particularly special space. “My clients are travellers and collectors,” he notes. “They have extraordinary art pieces particularly from Asia. It was key to create a welcoming space that would put several of these items on display in a very natural way.” To that end, Moallempour had a pair of love seats made to flank a custom sofa and surrounded this seating group with an eclectic array of antique European and Asian tables and chests. The result is a very English country manor look—elegant and liveable.

From the vantage point overlooking the verdant garden with its charming gazebo, it’s easy to understand why this home has had a special place in so many of its owners’ hearts. Thanks to Moallempour’s skillful remodel, it is set to see another exciting chapter in history with elegance and grace. ♦