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The Genius Behind Interior Designer Robert Stilin's Hamptons Home



Christopher Testani

At his Hamptons retreat, interior designer Robert Stilin lives the life he brings to his clientele: understated chic and lots of good times.

By Stephen Wallis on May 05, 2020

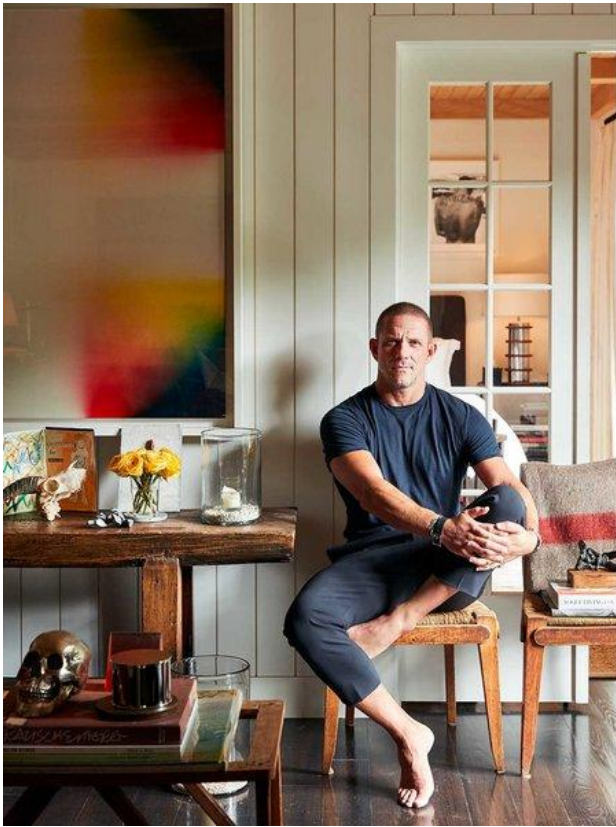
[Aperol spritz](#)? Why, yes, thank you. Not that there's any other reply on this lovely late-summer evening, with the sunlight filtering through cedars, guests mingling on the terrace, and a bossa nova soundtrack accentuating an easygoing, don't-worry-about-a-thing vibe. Without missing a beat, the host, designer [Robert Stilin](#), offers [one of the cocktails](#), a fragrant orange slice perched on the rim.

Stilin clearly knows how to have a good time. "The key to a great dinner party is really just putting together an interesting group of people," says Stilin. "You don't want to overthink this— it's about having fun and not taking any of it too seriously." He's something of an inveterate entertainer at his home in East Hampton, the seaside enclave near the tip of Long Island where he first settled more than two decades ago. The scene in his backyard is one that plays out in various iterations—with just a handful of guests or a couple dozen—on weekends from late spring well into the fall. For this occasion, Stilin has kept things small, inviting several good friends from the worlds of fashion, art, and the like. There is a decidedly easy flow between indoors and out. And it's the laid-back style of this "simple country boy from Mellen, Wisconsin," as Stilin describes himself, that sets the tone.

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"With Robert, what you see is what you get," says Elizabeth Cabral, a fashion editor and stylist who has worked with brands like Burberry and Nike, and [celebrities such as Beyoncé](#) and Taylor Swift. "He can be a little bit Mr. Tough Guy when you first meet him," she jokes, adding, "but I just love his sincerity—there's no B.S. And that's reflected in his design, which is all about bringing out heart, soul, and personality. You feel that in his own home too."

Stilin, who began his career in Palm Beach three decades ago, built his [East Hampton](#) house in 2002, making it his primary residence while raising his son, Dylan, as a single parent. Though he began spending his time in a New York City apartment several years ago—around the time his son went off to college— the Hamptons remain central to his life and design practice. It's where he made his name, tailoring interiors for discerning clients who appreciate his command of spaces that emphasize comfort, craftsmanship, and distinctive character. As confident with earthy, rustic refinement as he is with unabashed glamour, Stilin isn't shy about inserting a little whimsy when it suits, while works of art—from flea-market finds to blue-chip masterworks— nearly always play a prominent role.



From left: Stilin sits next to a framed artwork by Adam Henry; O'Neill, Jordan Cook, and Cabral on the terrace. Christopher Testani

The range of his talents is on full display in his first monograph, recently published by Vendome, featuring 15 diverse projects, from the East End and Park Avenue to Florida horse country. "One of the reasons I wanted to do a book is that I kind of got pigeonholed as this guy who does houses in the Hamptons," says Stilin. "While that's a huge part of my work, my book reveals another layer."

The final project in the book is his East Hampton home, which was built with architect Frank Greenwald. Stilin says he wanted it to feel "classic but with a modernist bent and reflective of the history of the Hamptons." Situated close to Montauk Highway, the L-shaped residence comprises a pair of distinct two-story volumes. The road-facing, shingle-clad structure—partially built into a low mound, in the manner of a traditional potato barn, Stilin notes—is the larger of the two and contains the main entertaining spaces and bedrooms. Perpendicular to it is a barnlike wing, topped by a standing-seam metal roof and featuring a media room and guest quarters.

The entire house is oriented inward, with "all of the windows and doors opening up to the backyard, pool, and garden," explains Stilin. "It's enclosed and very private." It's also perfect for indoor-outdoor entertaining.

Throughout the interior, the ash ceilings and floors were made with wood from the Stilin family's Wisconsin company, North Country Lumber, which the designer owns with his seven sisters. As is his signature, the rooms mix and match disparate styles and pedigrees, with layers of contemporary art and decorative objects amassed over many years.

On this evening dinner is served outdoors—though not before a cocktail-hour swim. Gamely cannon-balling into the pool with Stilin are fashion designer Fernando Garcia, one half of the creative duo (with his partner, Laura Kim) behind Monse and Oscar de la Renta, and entrepreneur Ryan Cook, who has launched start-ups in fields ranging from fashion to genetic science.

Standing on the terrace, drink in hand, Cook's wife, Stacey Jordan Cook, a tech investor and art collector, chats with Cabral and her husband, Kevin O'Neill, a tech executive. Jordan Cook says she and Stilin had "just kind of an instant connection" when they met five years ago. She introduced the designer to Cabral and O'Neill, and since then the five of them have vacationed together multiple times in Tulum, where, Cabral says, "all the laughter and dancing and drinking gets balanced out with workouts."



The dining table was designed by Stilin, and the photo is by Frank Thiel. Christopher Testani

Healthy living and eating are a priority for Stilin, whose typical dinner party menu is some variation on this evening's meal: roasted salmon and beef tenderloin, served family style with platters of brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes, zucchini, and mushrooms, as well as a salad of mixed greens accented with flowers.

It's an intimate group, rounded out by Kyle DeWoody, the daughter of prominent collector Beth Rudin DeWoody, a longtime friend of Stilin's. Around the time a plate of chocolate-espresso brownies arrives, the chatter turns to what distinguishes Stilin as a designer and host.

"To me, his interiors are all about comfort, with the most refined cashmeres, the comfiest sofas, which he mixes with the most masculine, Brutalist sculptures, and everything between," says Jordan Cook. That word, masculine, has often been used to describe Stilin's interiors, so frequently that he finds himself making a case for his feminine side. Ultimately, the table settles on authenticity as the defining quality of his work. Stilin, for his part, says, "I just don't like pretension. Even if you're talking about the most luxurious thing in the world, it should still feel real."