



Grand Hotel

The Hotel Bel-Air has been embraced as home, hideaway, and great escape. Now, thanks to an ever so discreet “redo,” this lush oasis of elegance and charm, finds Aimee Lee Ball, is better than ever.

Photographs by Art Streiber

The Hotel Bel-Air's signature bell tower presides elegantly over the lobby. Opposite: The white picket fence leading to the Swan Lake Suite.

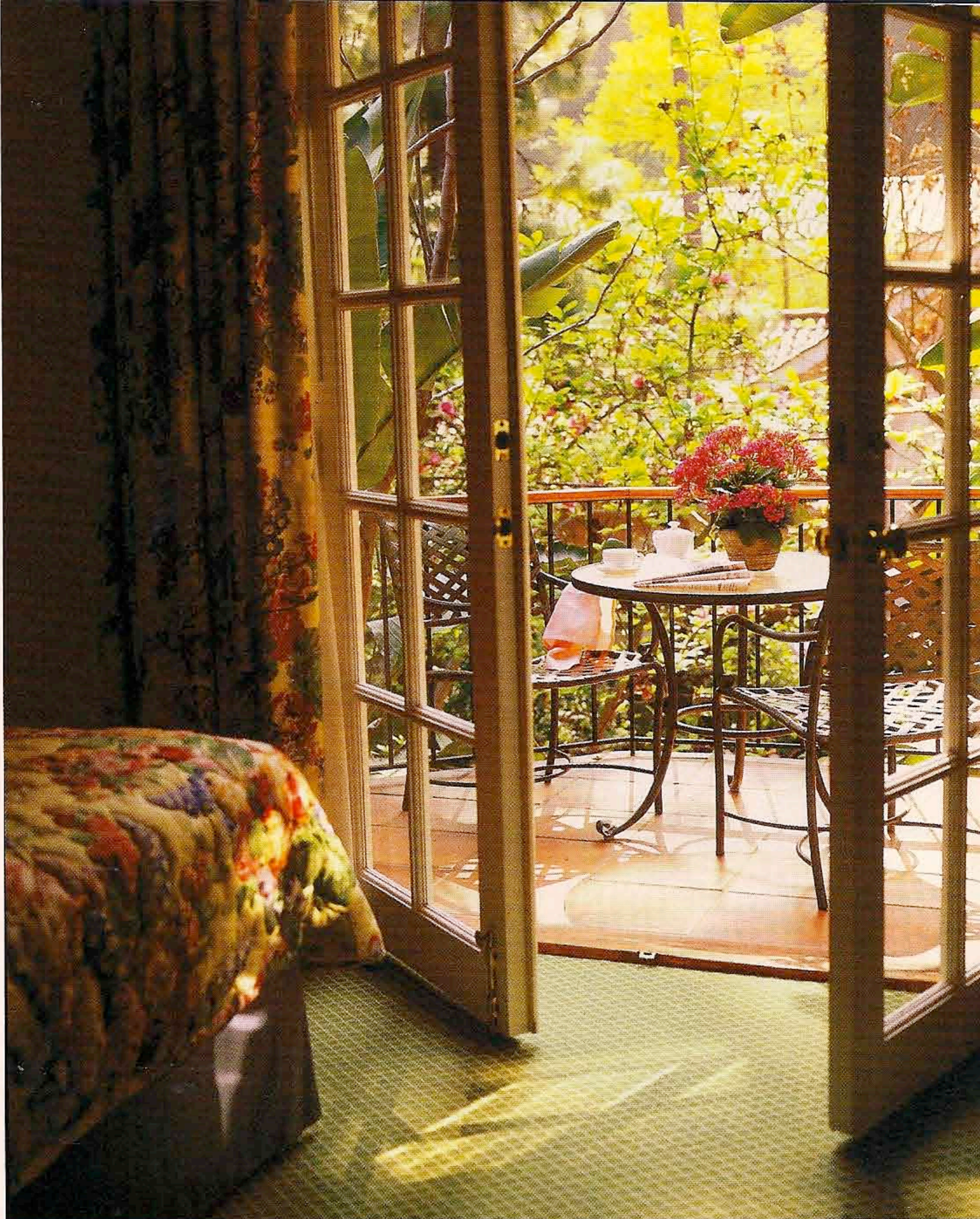
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Ed Victor, a literary agent based in London, was taking his mother to lunch at the Hotel Bel-Air, his home away from home for California deal-making. As the dining room manager greeted him warmly, Victor made introductions. "Mother," he said, "this is the woman who takes such good care of me when I stay here."

"Not too good a care," chastened Mom, "he's married."

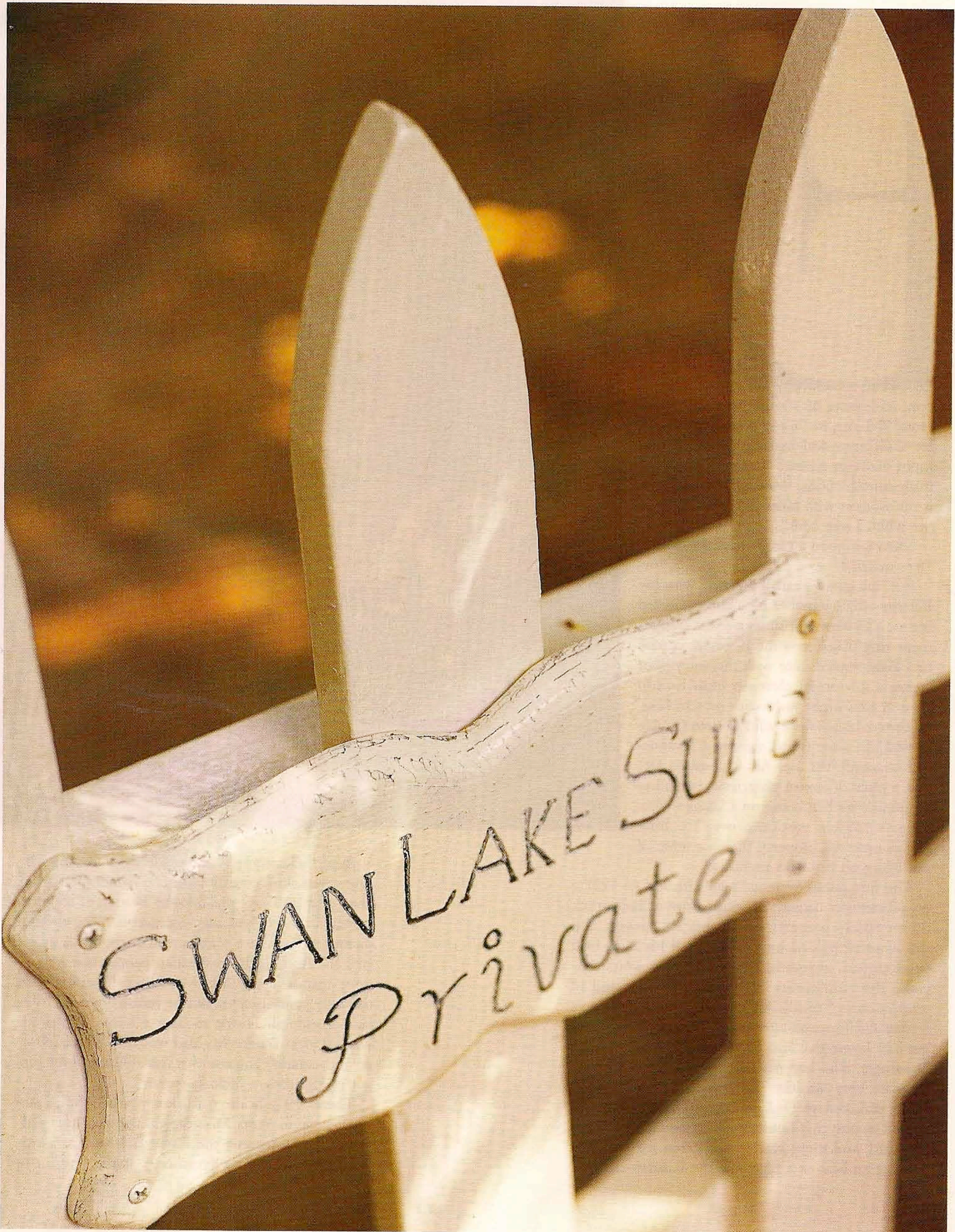
But "too good" a care is precisely what the Bel-Air offers, whether it's a triple-sheeted bed or a six-foot Christmas tree, an engagement ring baked in a room-service soufflé or a Feng Shuid suite with the entry door facing a mirror, an eleventh-hour tuxedo or an 8 a.m. Jamba Juice with protein blast. To the contented flock who are actually able to find the place (street signage is famously restrained), the Bel-Air is a serene refuge, a place of almost proprietary attention to guests. "It's like being on a voyage," Victor says. "When you cross over the little bridge onto the property, there's a sense of not being on dry land anymore."

The first guests were animals. Literally. In 1921 a gospel minister named Alphonzo Edward Bell struck oil on family property near Santa Fe Springs, and the windfall helped him to bankroll his own land development, including 1,700 acres that would become the community of Bel-Air. "It was kind of wild country," recalls his son Alphonzo Bell Jr., a former California congressman. "There was nothing but one house that had been built by a man named Danzinger, who had married the daughter of an oil magnate. Very wealthy. The Danzingers were about to get divorced, so Dad got a pretty good price and moved us into that house. We had mountain lions in our yard, and there was a rock cabin for camping out, with a bear in a cage, like the Russian circus."



As Bell cleared away the wilderness, creating narrow streets with courtly Italianate names such as Sienna and Bellagio, the bucolic beauty of the area attracted the Hollywood cognoscenti. "The motion picture industry was a little wild at the time," notes Bell Jr. "And all the real estate people had restrictions against 'show folk.' My father dispensed with that rule pretty quickly, but he refused to allow William Randolph Hearst to have a home in Bel-Air with Marion Davies. My dad was very moral-minded and couldn't tolerate that, and Hearst never forgot it. He made a lifelong enemy."

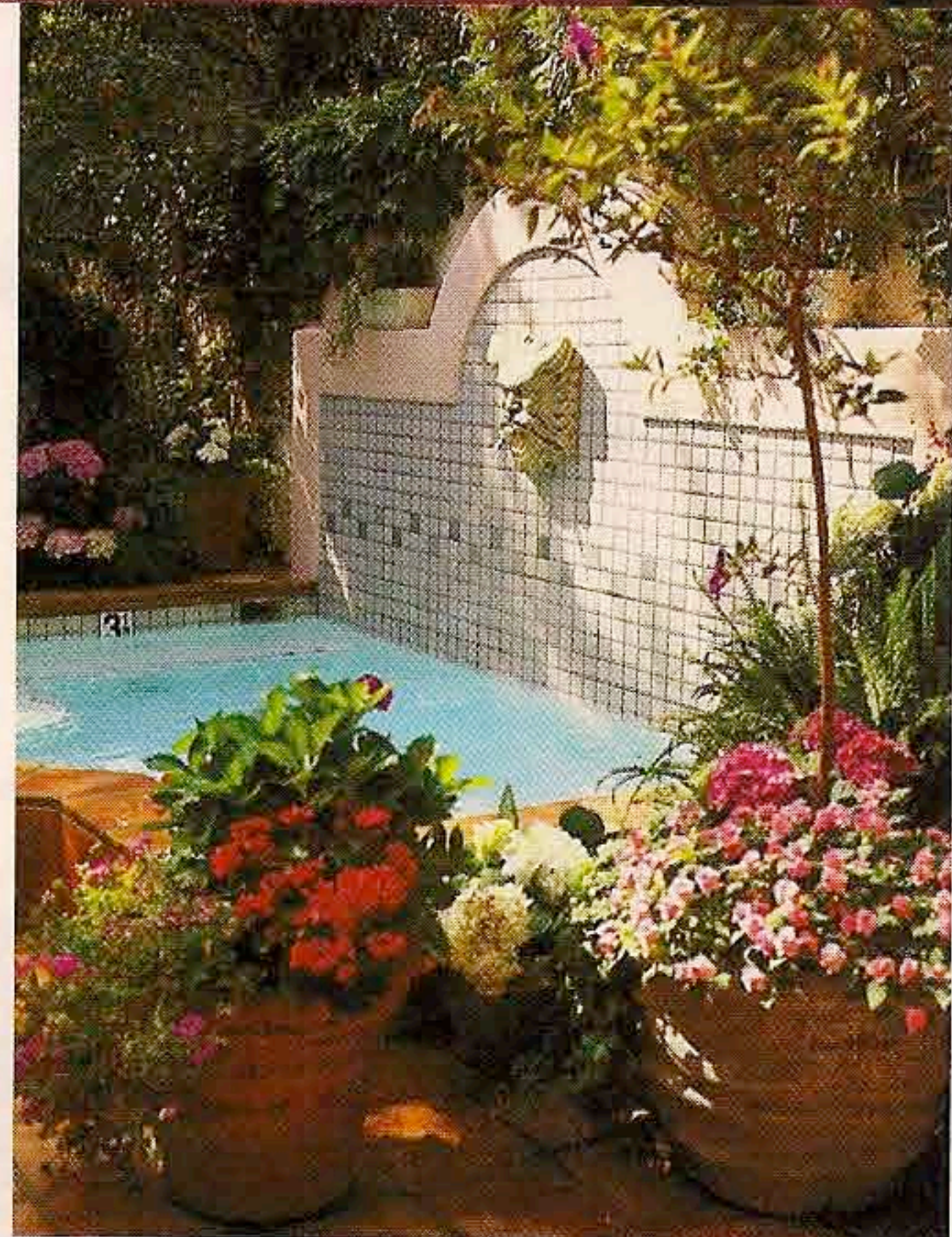
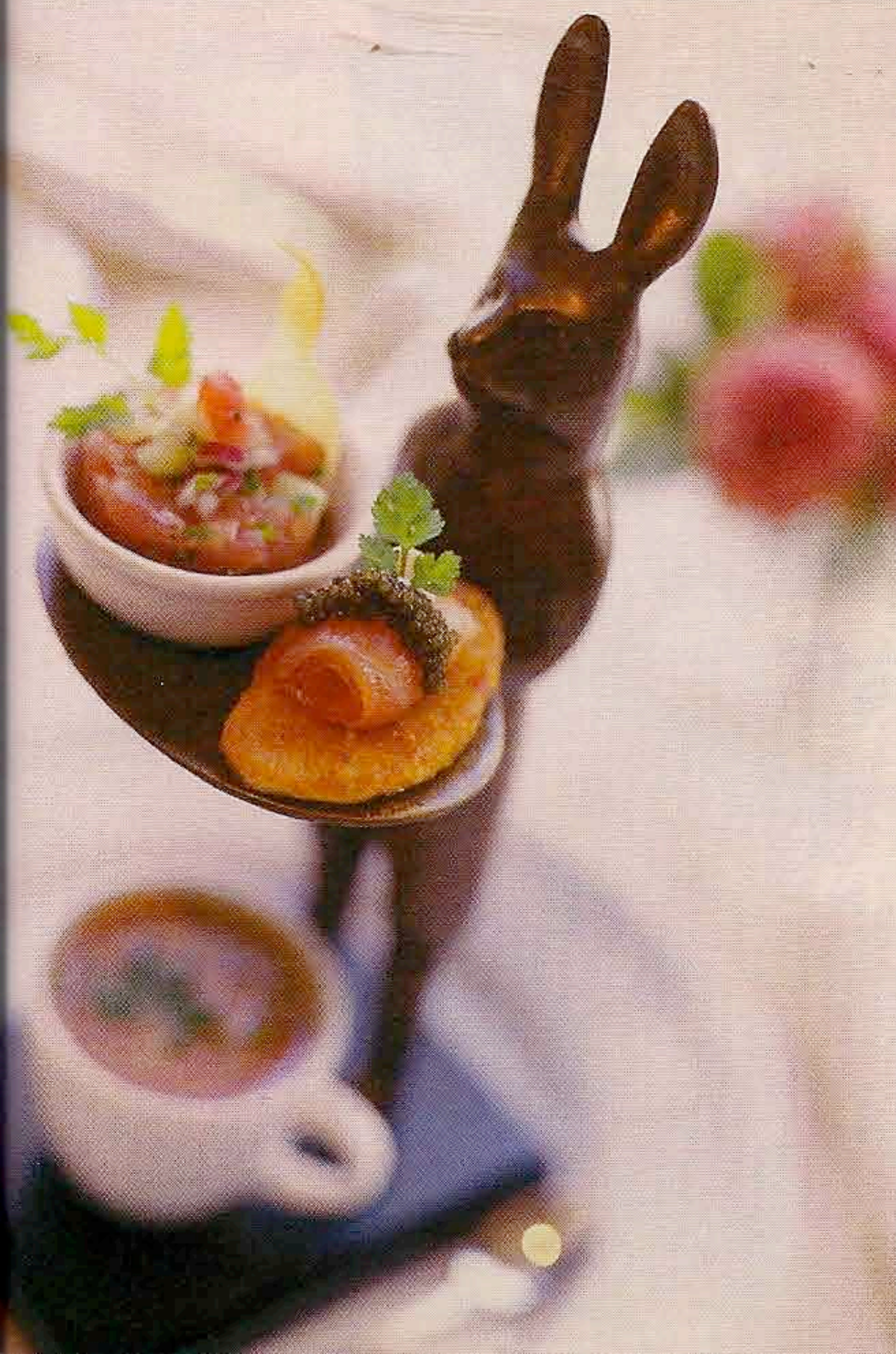
There was a bridle path down Sunset Boulevard all the way to Santa Monica, and the site that eventually would become the Hotel Bel-Air was a riding stable called The Sycamores, at the bottom of



SWAN LAKE SUITE
Private



This page, clockwise from above: Mrs. Crow, the Bel-Air's keeper of the swans, feeding Eros and Aphrodite; The Terrace restaurant, shown at dusk; a lion's head adorning the plunge pool Jacuzzi of the Presidential Suite; executive chef Thomas Hanson's Rabbit Surprise, served with lobster bisque, tuna tartare, and a potato pancake with smoked salmon and caviar. Opposite: In suite 226, French doors open onto a private terrace.





Only the occasional click of a waiter's heels as he makes his way across the Chalon Courtyard intrudes on a late afternoon's peace and quiet. And wherever you look—from the cherub-festooned gardens to the crisp white towels and bowl of green apples in the spa—no detail has been overlooked.



Stone Canyon, with a small tearoom and a few buildings for Bell's offices. Nothing much happened until 1945, when Francis Warford Drown, a tall, handsome Texan known as Joe, acquired the property and made preparations to complete the hotel. His prosperous neighbors were horrified at the prospect of commercial enterprise in their sylvan midst and ardently protested what they saw as an imminent roadhouse that would pollute the neighborhood with wine, women, and song. Greer Garson and Jeannette MacDonald showed up at meetings of the city planning commission to demand rezoning that would restrict the area to one-family residences. But calmer heads prevailed, and Joe Drown was allowed to build what has been called a motel gone to heaven: rambling pink stucco, vaguely mission-style, with an oval pool where the paddock once stood.

More than 50 years later the place is, in style and substance, remarkably true to Drown's original vision: a labyrinth of shaded colonnades and corridors, secluded courtyards and lush landscapes in which to stroll. On many weekends, the broad lawns provide a photo op for a bride and groom, posing amid the gaudy pink and red camellias, orange and lemon trees heavy with fruit, sweet-smelling gardenia and jasmine, and bodacious birds-of-paradise. A 75-foot silk floss tree is the largest in North America, and a working herb garden provides lavender for the dining room's scented ice cream. The 11.5-acre property is tended by nine full-time gardeners, some with cell phones in their back pockets. The fireplace in the wood-paneled bar is stoked year-round, oblivious to immutable California sunshine, and the underground tunnel that once led horses out of the stables is now part of the wine cellar. An arched stone bridge leads to an unconventional reception area, so unobtrusive that first-timers must be directed there, and each of the 92 rooms (including 40 suites) has a private entrance, contributing to the hotel's reputation for high-class hanky-panky—what longtime concierge Phil Landon candidly called “the biggest shack-up business in town.” (An actress once complained about her room, comparing it unfavorably to others she'd occupied there. “But this is the first time you've been a registered guest,” said Landon.)

The idea of a facelift for the Bel-Air was alarming to those regulars who loved even the ragged edges of the place, but a recent renovation is the equivalent of what plastic surgeons call “freshening up,” so that everything looks the same, only better: Concrete walkways were replaced with brick and terra-cotta tile; heating pipes were installed under the terrace floor





Perfectly Frank

A press agent was calling the general manager of the Bel-Air to reserve the Royal Suite for a client. "I have the most important guy in the world coming into town," he said, "but I can't tell you who it is."

"Then he's not coming," replied Frank Bowling. "I have to know."

Knowing every detail of operations is, some would say, what makes this elegant Englishman, now beginning his tenth year at the hotel, the preeminent "G.M." in the business. Dubbed The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, Bowling greets most guests and all 300 staffers by name.

The polished accent belies a Yorkshire background, with a mother who managed a grocery shop and a father who worked in a factory. Bowling wanted to study art, but when his father suffered a stroke he got a job at a country hotel called the Buck Inn, working his way up from stoking the Aga with coal to running the front desk. Later he moved to Switzerland to attend hotel school. After eight years at London's The Connaught he was lured to the Mayfair Regent New York; when the hotel was sold, he left to manage The Carlyle.

Bowling first saw the Hotel Bel-Air a dozen years ago when a friend took him to lunch on the terrace. "There are very few places where I get goose bumps just walking in," he says, "and this was one." His day begins with an 8:30 a.m. "arrivals meeting" where he makes sure, for instance, that Andrew Lloyd Webber has a piano in his suite; later he may help Oscar de la Renta plan the wedding of his stepdaughter to David Niven Jr. An avid gardener, Bowling can converse about each flower, tree, and shrub on the property. He has an autographed photo of Prince Charles in his office, and his scrapbook is crammed with effusive notes from the rich and famous. ("Anthony Hopkins will call to reserve for Academy Awards," writes Lauren Bacall. "I promised you would take glorious care of him.") It seems obvious that Bowling's memoirs would be juicier than Heidi Fleiss's. "But they'll have to be published posthumously," he says with a twinkle. "I know too much."

to warm the feet of those dining alfresco; a coffered ceiling in the bar covers filters that suck out cigarette smoke. There are new Fortuny fabrics as well as needlepoint rugs in the lobby, checks and plaids added to the predominant chintz of the suites. Soon new televisions will provide access to e-mail. Fountains have been added to some private terraces so guests have the sound of splashing water as they sip morning coffee, and the new model of Jacuzzi is called Tea For Two. "There's a major overhaul every ten years—like painting the George Washington Bridge," says the genial English general manager, Frank Bowling. "But it is all comfortable, no furniture made in Paris by nuns underwater, and nothing that detracts from the gardens. You can sense something's different, but you can't quite put your finger on it. Nancy Reagan said, 'It looks lovely, but what



have you done?' It was the greatest compliment."

The Bel-Air's signature Swan Lake has been home to several generations of Polish mute swans, cared for by a lovely white-haired woman of a certain age with the improbable name of Mrs. Crow, who feeds them tender leaves of romaine (no iceberg lettuce) and sometimes plays the flute for them. The swans are quite territorial, and they're none too friendly, which makes the kidnapping of one a few years ago all the more remarkable. Several hours after the bird was reported missing, a deeply abashed man pulled into the hotel's driveway and produced from the trunk of his Rolls a large gunnysack with a terrified swan. "My wife was tipping a bit," he explained.

Patti Davis—daughter of Ronald and Nancy Reagan—spent her hon-
(continued on page 254)

Pastry Chef Robert Witkoski's whimsical Artist's Rendition of Sorbets and Seasonal Fruits includes a chocolate paintbrush. Opposite, below: the Bel-Air's palm-lined pool.



Grand Hotel

(continued from page 184)

eymoon in the Swan Lake Suite after marrying her yoga instructor in a 17-minute service on the lawn. Sophia Loren and Carlo Ponti were married by proxy in Tijuana but had their wedding night at the Bel-Air. Newlyweds Elizabeth Taylor and Nicky Hilton lived in the hotel; six husbands later, Liz had her own house up the hill but occasionally called to say, "It's Mrs. Fortensky, can we come for the weekend?" Marilyn Monroe lived at the Bel-Air during her marriage to Arthur Miller, in a suite that now serves as the fitness center. Marlene Dietrich once sat next to Bell Jr. at a party and described living in a particular room at the hotel. "I hate to say this," he told her, "but that's where we used to pile the manure." Betsy Bloomingdale sent her children to dancing school and cotillions at the hotel. "It was very strict—double to the left, double to the right," she says. "A boy held his handkerchief out so he didn't have his hot sweaty hand on a girl's back." Mel Ferrer insisted on a room, not a suite, since he, not wife Audrey Hepburn, was footing the bill. Marjorie Merriwether Post sent her personal maid a day early with bed linens, towels, and toilet paper. Barbara Hutton liked her room banked with orchids and once asked the concierge to send five friends gifts: minis and sables from Saks. Doris Duke disturbed other guests by playing bongo drums. Howard Hughes didn't stay at the Bel-Air, but so many of his aides were regulars, it was widely believed that he'd had every room in the place bugged. Truman Capote rested up for his masked ball sleeping by the pool. Carl Sandburg used to demand fresh goat's milk.

The hotel is known for special favors, such as the boxes of Pepperidge Farm cookies recently left waiting in the Princess Grace suite for Mike Nichols, who'd just stopped smoking. In Lauren Bacall's room (near the pool to facilitate early-morning laps) there are her favorite brands of tea and honey, as well as smoked salmon, bagels, a kettle, and a toaster oven. She is still welcome even though she flooded the place in 1997. "It was the year I was nominated for an Academy Award for *The Mirror Has Two Faces*," she recalls. "I always hang my clothes in the bathroom to get out the creases but I was watching TV and fell asleep. When I

woke up, the room was so steamy I thought there must be a heat wave. Then I put my feet on the floor into boiling water. The tub had overflowed. They came with eight million towels, but the room was uninhabitable. I was sure they were going to throw me out."

Sometimes it is Mother Nature who wreaks havoc. In 1962 a fire that ravaged Bel-Air burned to within a yard of the hotel property line before the wind changed and blew in the other direction. Employees joined the firemen's hose gangs and carried handwritten guest records (not yet computerized) to safety in the parking lot. But shortly after the fire, with the hills behind the hotel denuded of vegetation, a heavy rainstorm created a mud slide, even seeping through patio doors into all the first-floor rooms, so that guests stepped out of bed into sludge. During earthquakes, in the insouciant spirit of the band on the *Titanic*, the staff has been known to serve coffee in the reception area at four in the morning. Southern California's propensity to shake, rattle, and roll has engendered a roster of rarefied displaced persons at the hotel: When Warren Beatty's new glass house was shattered by the quake of '94, he took up residence at the Bel-Air, along with fellow refugees Kathleen Turner and Tommy Lee Jones.

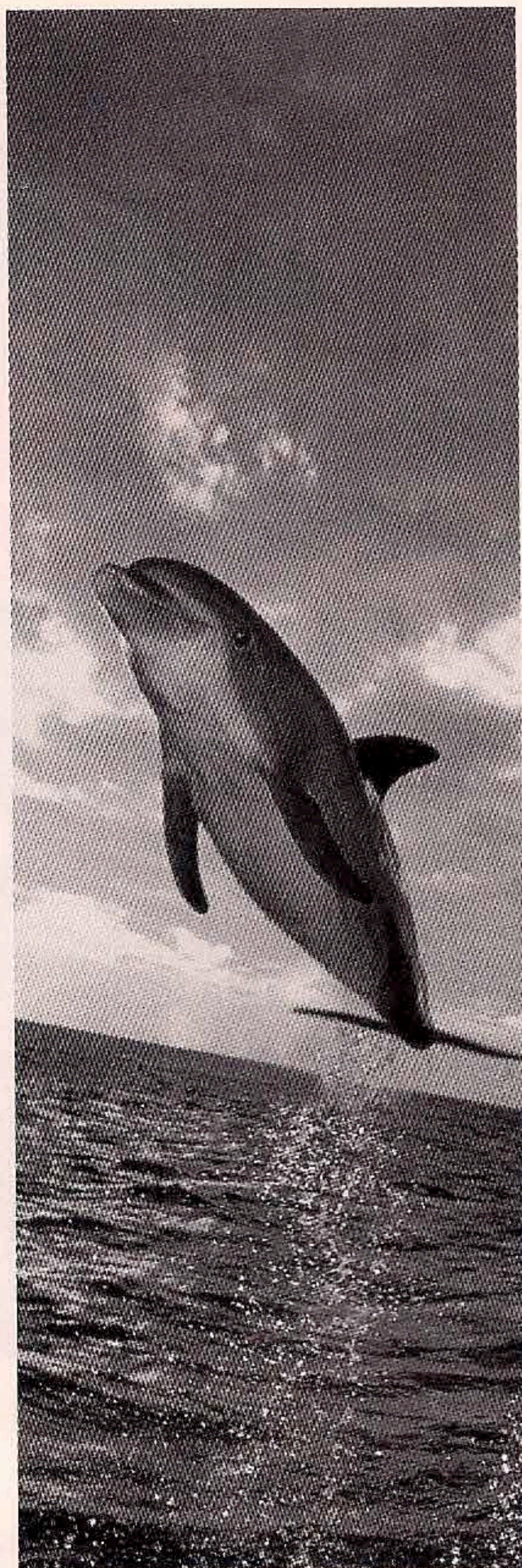
Some frequent guests rearrange travel plans if their favorite suite is unavailable. Margaret Thatcher likes room number 150, with the "No Diving" sign above the tiny Jacuzzi, as does Oprah Winfrey, who frequently brings her cocker spaniels. The Bel-Air has a tradition of friendliness to pets, declining to charge extra. (In the 1950s one actress described to the management her outrage at being billed \$10 a day for her dog at another hotel. "I could have had a man in my room for six dollars less," she sniffed.) Nancy Friday seldom arrives without her blind and deaf Shih Tzu, Bongo, whose food, dishes, and bed are kept in storage at the hotel, along with several of the IBM Selectrics on which Friday has typed her books. "There's something wonderful about being taken care of as a writer," she says. "The thing I look forward to all morning is that, sooner or later, I shall have my bowl of tortilla soup. There can be a certain franticness about a hotel catering to your every wish—but not when you don't see the caretaking, when every-

thing is done sotto voce. There is something almost familial about the Bel-Air. When Bongo goes on to his final reward, we'll take his ashes and scatter them on the grounds. Nobody will know. We'll just appear to be picking flowers."

For almost 40 years, Joe Drown refused to sell the Bel-Air, but in 1982 he was in failing health and considering an offer from Rosewood Hotels Corp., owned by Caroline Hunt Schoellkopf, daughter of the late H.L. Hunt and the second wealthiest woman in America (her sister was first). When Drown died before signing on the dotted line, the hotel went into probate court and several companies petitioned for the property, entering sealed bids. Rosewood Hotels won for slightly under \$23 million, outbidding Ivan Boesky, the Wall Street financier whose family was a primary shareholder of The Beverly Hills Hotel Corp. (Boesky was convicted for insider trading five years later).

Initially there was speculation that Texas oil money would ruin the Bel-Air (lots of jokes about longhorns hanging in the lobby), but Rosewood did a tasteful renovation before selling the hotel to a Japanese investment group for \$110 million: a record \$1.2 million per room; the exorbitant price soon ruined the foreign investors. Entertainment mogul David Geffen is said to have approached the Japanese bank that took back title in 1994, but the Bel-Air was ultimately purchased for just over \$60 million by Prince Jeffri, brother of the Sultan of Brunei and then head of the Brunei Investment Agency. (The government company now owns The Beverly Hills Hotel as well as The Dorchester in London and The Meurice in Paris. Carrying sibling rivalry to an extreme, this year the sultan sued the prince, accusing his brother of embezzling billions of dollars through the "improper withdrawal and use" of state funds while he was serving as head of his country's overseas investment agency.)

When Texans owned the Bel-Air, its elegant restaurant adopted a decidedly southwestern flavor that shocked the regulars. Jalapeño muffins, indeed! But the recently anointed executive chef Thomas Hanson is a native Californian who has returned to the tradition of fresh seasonal ingredients, exquisitely prepared: John Dory on English Pea risotto with wilted pea tendrils in a sweet corn broth; beef fillet with



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Stilton, horseradish whipped potatoes, and a pickled walnut sauce. For those who are apt to gain weight just reading about such indulgence, there's a "cuisine légère" menu, and studio heads are eating power breakfasts of raisin bread and vanilla bean yogurt, both homemade (but the lemon soufflé pancakes are worth a few extra miles on the Stairmaster). Some VIPs are known for their esoteric tastes: Cindy Crawford prefers angel-hair pasta with several ounces of caviar. Others tend to be more down-to-earth in their selections: Rocker Pete Townsend likes Swiss cheese sandwiches on plain white bread. Robert DeNiro wants a New York steak, medium rare. For Nancy Reagan it's always a Cobb salad, chopped fine, small portion. The newly refurbished restaurant is romantic, but the most exclusive reservation in town may be for Table One, a private glass-walled dining room within the kitchen where you watch the chef orchestrate a personally designed meal for up to eight guests. (Just try to get in on Valentine's Day before the year 3000.)

The Hotel Bel-Air used to prepare monogrammed matchbooks for all guests that were printed every morning from the arrivals list. Current, more politically correct amenities include Bulgari toiletries (rather perfumy for men, although surely a bar of Irish Spring would be produced on request). Every day the housekeeper puts a bookmark in the appropriate page of the TV guide and a pile of logs by the fireplace. There's a clever little safe in the closet that opens and closes with a credit card (no forgetting what code you entered), and even an earthquake survival kit, including a silver Mylar blanket, purified drinking water, and SOS Survival food packets: 3,600 calories for nine cakes ("Eat one cake per serving daily"). When Teuscher chocolates appeared by my bed on Valentine's Day, I imagined that the management knew I was alone, surrounded by cooing couples in this most romantic hideaway. (Turns out everybody got them.) There are no special, corporate, or weekend rates. "If you want to stay here, that's what it costs," says Bowling. "A celebrity will often ask, 'Can you give me a break on the rate?' Give me a break. What did he make on that last picture—\$20 million?" But Bowling is really a big marshmallow: Recently he got a note from a couple who had stayed at the Bel-Air after their wedding 33 years ago; a

copy of their bill for \$56 was enclosed. They wanted to return for their anniversary, but the hotel was now beyond their means. Bowling matched their honeymoon rate.

In the pantheon of southern California's pleasure palaces the Bel-Air has a distinctly clubby coziness. It attracts the same people who stay at The Carlyle in New York and The Connaught in London, according to Bowling, who's managed all three and has the world's best Rolodex. ("May I call you back?" he interrupts a phone call. "I know how pretentious this sounds, but Buckingham Palace is on the other line.") The Beverly Hills Hotel, a "Pink Palace" famous for stargazing, is more of a 1,000-kilowatt scene, more page-me-by-the-pool. The grand Regent Beverly Wilshire, a tiered wedding cake on Rodeo Drive, is a slice of heaven for those who want a cashmere sweater or decaf latte within walking distance. (Vitrines in the lobby display items from neighborhood vendors: trinkets by Cartier and Fendi, vintage Chaucer and *Gone With The Wind*, and various high-tech security devices, including a "truth phone" that uses digital technology to analyze voice stress and detect lies.) The Bel-Air has but one tiny shop offering a few pashminas and sunglasses—concessions to elegant disguise. ("I think it might sell aspirin," says Bobby Short, who prefers a suite without a piano. "The Bel-Air is unto itself—and it is inconvenient. But there is no better way to be inconvenienced.") Perhaps the biggest distinction is the sense of privacy. Bowling once agreed to arrange for a smitten Duchess of York to bump into Brad Pitt. ("I would like to think of that suite as mine now rather than Emma Thompson's," she wrote in a thank-you note.) But for guests who wish to avoid the limelight, the hotel is a haven: They are spared a lobby entrance, and they're referred to by pseudonyms. (I now know how to ask for DeNiro, but I'm not telling.) All three of the surviving Beatles were recently in residence, but they never knew because the discreet staff didn't mention George to Ringo or Ringo to Paul.

Not everything remains unseen. The grounds of the Bel-Air are so idyllic, so pristine and cloistered, that guests have been lured to sexy interludes amidst the foliage, forgetting that there are security cameras everywhere. Best to remember that any naughty antics caught on tape will provide late-night entertainment for the guards. ■