

# Mountain Magic

A Sugarloaf ski house anchors one couple  
to a captivating community

by Candace Karu  
Photography François Gagné



The homeowners were influenced by their travels in Switzerland and brought their ideas to their friend, Portland architect Scott Simons, who executed their vision. "The roofline is almost Oriental," says Simons of the metal roof. "It gives the house a sense of protection."





Ski resorts, like the people who love them, have distinct personalities. Maine is home to a host of ski areas, from the small and picturesque (think of the Camden Snow Bowl with its intimate setting and ocean views) to the large and bustling (the sprawling expanse of Sunday River comes to mind). At each one of these destinations, a mixture of elements—location, history, access, facilities, ambience—combine to create a unique experience that captures the imaginations and hearts of visitors, encouraging them to return year after year.

Skiers who have been enticed by the enduring seductiveness of Sugarloaf in Carrabassett Valley are as loyal and passionate a group as one is likely to find anywhere in the country. A sprinkling of “Loafers” were born and bred in the area, continuing on a path that was carved by parents and grandparents before them. More often, however, the people who claim Sugarloaf as their own have come from away, beguiled into an almost mystical devotion to this unique community.

The process of getting to the tiny town of Carrabassett Valley is the first evidence of the powerful draw of the mountain; it’s a trip that often challenges patience as well as driving skill. Most visitors arrive by car from the south, a journey that culminates on the serpentine curves of Route 27 just beyond the quiet college town of Farmington. For almost thirty miles, the two-lane road—filled during the winter months with logging trucks and eager winter-sports enthusiasts—meanders uphill, following the course of the Carrabassett River.

Past Kingfield, Route 27 is punctuated with local landmarks—Troll Heim, Tufulios, Carrabassett Valley Academy—that eventually blend into the scenery for those who travel this road regularly. Yet one sight that continues to impose itself upon the awareness of even the most jaded travelers comes two miles before the base of the mountain. Known as “Oh My Gosh!” corner,

Antique skis (top) add vintage flair to a room that is flooded with sunlight much of the day. The dining room (right), which is surrounded by woods, exudes warmth imparted by custom cabinetry, the pine furred ceiling, and a rich, red Oriental rug, an Ebay find. The homeowners scoured the online site to find many of the home’s decorative touches.







The living room (above) has an expansive view of the Bigelow range.

On weekends the homeowners often have a full house, entertaining friends and family. During the week, they have the house to themselves and enjoy the company of full-time Sugarloafers. The New England fieldstone fireplace dominates the open plan of the living room, dining room, and kitchen. Architect Simons credits the beauty as well as the efficiency of the scissor trusses to builder Linwood Doble. "They are crafted like fine Japanese joinery," he says.

it causes both newcomers and veterans to catch their breath in delight and awe. The view of Sugarloaf from the scenic turnoff—worn flat and bare by decades of sightseers stopping to take a few quick photos—is the stuff that skiers' dreams are made of. This vantage point offers the best opportunity to take in the full scope of the state's largest ski resort, which encompasses 135 trails and 1,400 skiable acres, while appreciating the sheer size and majesty of Maine's second-highest peak.

Though it is fast becoming a four-season destination, Sugarloaf truly comes to life in the winter, and winter weekends, when the town swells to capacity, exude a feeling of gleeful camaraderie. This is a place to which visitors return year after year. Many families have a Sugarloaf legacy, and remodeling projects are frequently undertaken to accommodate a new generation of skiers. On Friday afternoons, communities across southern Maine seem to move wholesale to the mountain, continuing friendships and connections made in schools and offices during the week.

Lionel Hering arrived at the mountain by way of his native France. Having first experienced Sugarloaf while studying at the University of Maine at Farmington, he now owns Happy Tunes Ski Service Center, a thriving business tucked behind Tufulios, a popular local restaurant and bar. Hering is a product of the university's Ski Industries Program. During his college career, Hering, a former French national ski racer, coached

at Carrabassett Valley Academy. Lionel (pronounced *Lee-oh-nell*), as he is known to friends and customers, put down roots in this community and plans to stay. "What I like best about this place is its simplicity," he explains with a barely detectable French accent. "It's genuine; you can take people for exactly who they are, which is different from other ski areas."

Two particular devotees are part of a group that Hering calls "the best part of Sugarloaf—the core of locals and diehards who can't leave." This couple decamp to their home in Sugarloaf in late October and stay until spring arrives in May, though Martha has to make trips back to civilization for business. Paul, who has been coming to the mountain for more than thirty years, is the very definition of a diehard: he has been known to ski more than 125 days a season.

The couple met on a blind date on New Year's Eve in 1999 and have been together ever since. They decided to build their Sugarloaf dream home at about the same time they got married, embarking on both journeys in 2003. Beginning with several specific ideas about what their house should look like, they hired Portland architect Scott Simons to







turn their ideas into a working plan. Having collaborated with the architect on a previous remodel, the couple felt confident entrusting the project to Simons.

Simons attacked the assignment with genuine enthusiasm. He, too, has been coming to Sugarloaf for almost three decades. The house he designed for Martha and Paul not only respects the environment in which it is located, but it also gives the couple flexibility in how it can be used. "They needed something that would be comfortable and inviting when they were there alone, but that would also work to accommodate larger groups for casual dinners and visiting family and guests," he explains.

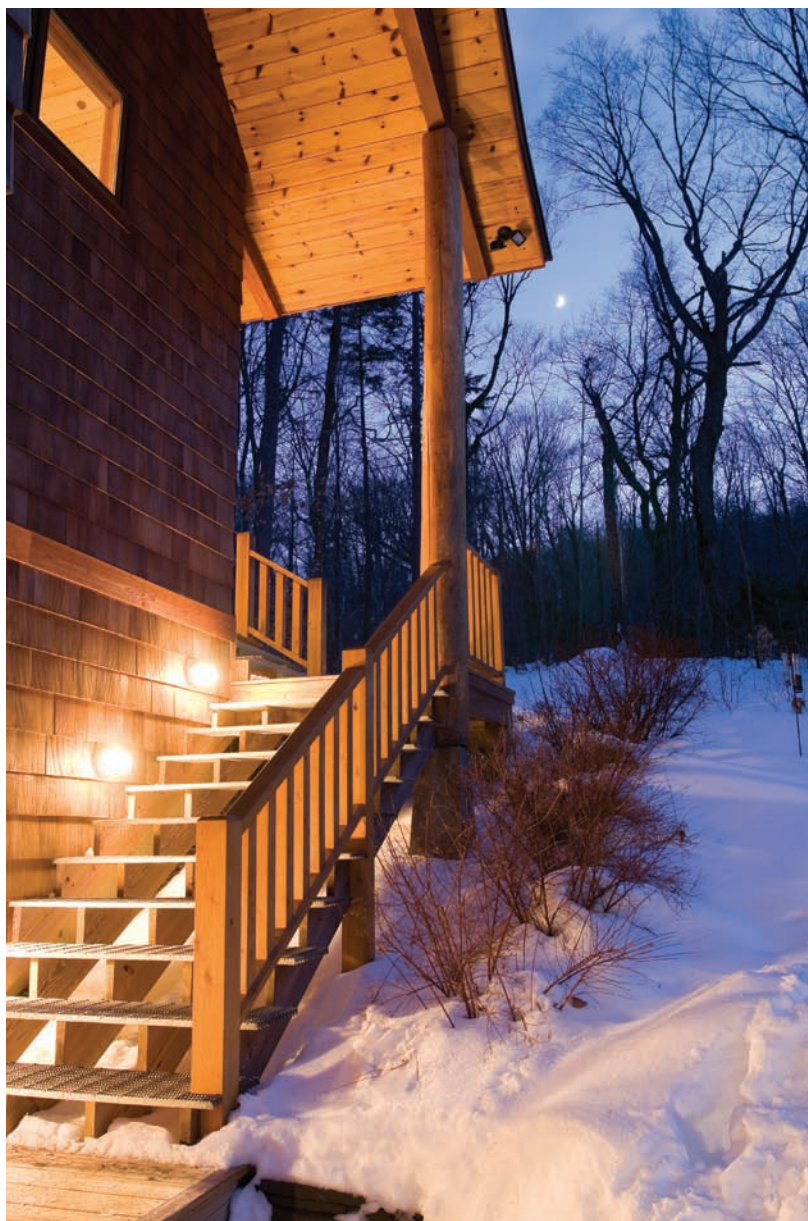
The couple called on their friend and local fixture, builder Linwood Doble of Kingfield to execute their vision. Doble, a formidable skier himself, has lived near Sugarloaf all his life. He followed his father into the building trade and was part of the crew that built the mountain's first condominiums in the early 1970s. Doble has been building and remodeling homes and condos in the area ever since. "I'm up to 181 houses now," says the builder of his prodigious output. "Maybe when I get to 200, I'll retire." His smile indicates this is probably only wishful thinking.

Like Hering and many other locals, Doble did a stint coaching at Carrabassett Valley Academy. One of the nation's most successful ski academies, the college preparatory school has a reputation for academic as well as athletic excellence. Olympians Kirsten Clark, Bode Miller, and Emily Cook, as well as other members of the United States Ski Team, are all products of CVA. Graduates have gone on to academic success as well. The school boasts graduates from colleges and universities around the country, including Harvard Business School, Boston College School of Law, Rhode Island School of Design, and Middlebury College.

For the Ritzo family, CVA has been home for more than two decades; John has been headmaster for twenty-three years. His wife, Patty, teaches art, and his daughter Jolie—CVA class of 1999—teaches English and health. "The students and faculty are a key part of this community," says Ritzo of his staff and the school's 120 scholar-athletes. "The kids live here, they're on the mountain every day, and they work hard to be good citizens."

The school has a close, longstanding relationship with the town, a bond that was strengthened in 2001 when the 20,000-square-foot Antigravity Complex opened at the base of the mountain. The state-of-the-art facility, available for use by both residents and students, not only offers year-round fitness activities, but it also encourages the ideals upon which CVA was founded: the balancing of mind, body, and spirit.

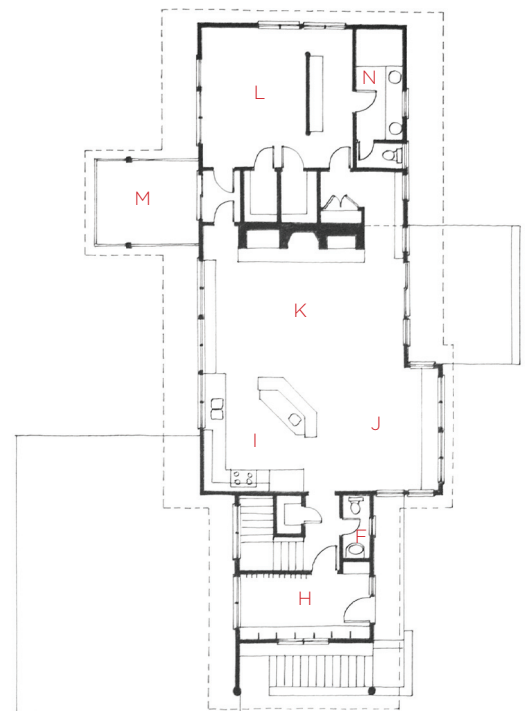
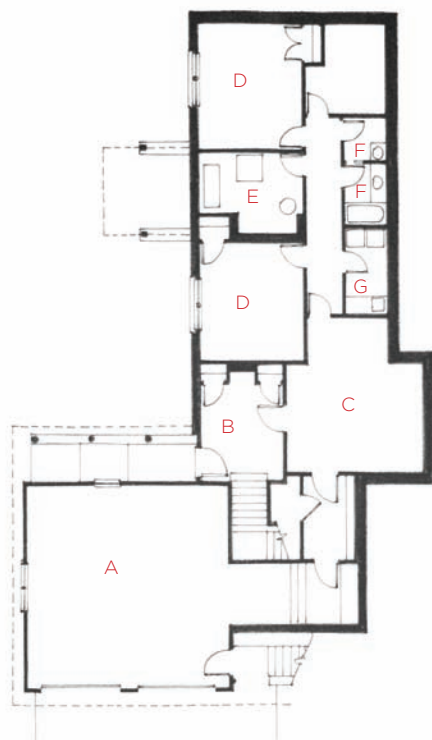
Even Sugarloaf's superstar celebrities find ways to stay connected to the community. Seth Westcott, CVA alumnus and Olympic gold medalist in men's snowboard cross at Torino in 2006, went into partnership with local inventor Jeff Strunk and veteran ski patroller Chase McKendry to



Stair treads are made of open metalwork, allowing snow to pass through the treads (above). The doorway opens into a mudroom of epic proportions that can hold jackets, hats, mittens, skis, and poles for everyone who enters. The small terrace off the master bedroom (opposite) is just large enough for the hot tub and a magnificent view.



- A Garage
- B Entryway
- C Family Room
- D Bedroom
- E Office
- F Bathroom
- G Laundryroom
- H Entryway
- I Kitchen
- J Diningroom
- K Livingroom
- L Master Bedroom
- M Deck with hot tub
- N Master Bathroom





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Lionel Hering



Apres ski means it's time to kick back, relax, and take stock of the day (opposite). The Rack, one of Sugarloaf's great hangouts, offers a place for skiers, young and old, to get a bite to eat, catch up with friends, and on most nights, listen to great live music. "This is a real skier's mountain," says one local. "Lifelong relationships are forged at Sugarloaf." Indeed, visitors and regulars can mingle with some of the best skiers in the country on these slopes. Carrabassett Valley Academy, located at the base of the mountain, has consistently produced Olympians and world champions (left and bottom).



Lionel Hering, owner of Happy Tunes (above, right) is one of the fixtures on the Sugarloaf scene. Hering came to the United States to attend the University of Maine at Farmington in 1986 and has stayed in the area ever since. He brings his own ski racing experience in his native France to his business, which is based on unfailing customer service.







open the Rack Brew Pub and Barbeque in 2005. The trio—Mainers every one—had always dreamed of opening a family-friendly, après-ski hangout with a welcoming bar, great food, and live music.

Over the restaurant's front door, a sign reads: "The Rack—Serving Questionable Locals and Those Who Are Soon to Be." On any given night the band might include Jeff Strunk's 9-year-old son, Mason, a consummate musician with a devoted local following. The room is decorated with Westcott's racing jerseys and memorabilia, including an out-of-service gondola car signed by hundreds of patrons, a moose head festooned with tinsel, and large abstract paintings by local artist Gareth Warren. There is also a corner reserved for small children to play in. "It's the kids' corner," says Strunk. "It's for the next generation of skiers and diners—we like to grow our own customers." Strunk has dreams of the day when the Rack goes completely off the grid. "We're planning for a green future," he explains. "We'll use old vegetable oil to heat water and wind to supply electricity."

In the waning light of an early winter afternoon, the day's last skiers make their way down the slopes. Taking in the panorama of bustling activity, it's hard to believe that it has been less than sixty years since Amos Winter and a group of Maine skiers known as the Bigelow Boys cut the first ski trail at Sugarloaf. In the intervening years, the area has evolved into a thriving community that exudes a palpable aura of permanence. Looming high above, the mountain, laced with trails and dotted with homes, stands sentinel over those who, for a few days or a lifetime, will call Sugarloaf home. **MH+D**