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## Chateau St. Philippe: A Holiday Retreat

By LINDA RENAUD  
*News Editor*

Imagine buying a French chateau "on a whim," which is exactly what Palisadians Chuck and Sukeshi O'Neal did six years ago when they purchased a centuries-old property at the base of the French Alps.

The O'Neals, who have been married 15 years, are from the Midwest. Chuck, a private equity investor, was born and raised in Chicago. Sukeshi's family is originally from India. The couple met through Palisades relator Anthony Marguleas, who markets the chateau for them. The three graduated from UC Riverside in the late 1980s.

When the O'Neal purchased the 17-acre compound, located in the village of St. Jean de la Porte in the Savoie region, it included vineyards, orchards, several natural springs, a barn, a stable and a dilapidated monastery built in 1032—some 30 years before the Norman conquest.

"The Romans marched through here!" jokes Sukeshi, who fell in love with Chateau St. Philippe at first sight. "When we got to the top of the long road leading to the house, our first thought was, 'There is no way we can afford this.' The second was, 'And there's no way we can afford to renovate it.'"

Initially, the young couple, in their early 30s at the time, laughed off the prospect of owning such a property. However, they decided to make an offer, knowing that the owner, who at that point was occupying the only habitable room in a rundown corner of the chateau, had to sell. Apparently the elderly gentleman, an Italian, had grand plans to turn the compound into a hotel and restaurant but not



Chateau St. Philippe, a centuries-old monastery at the base of the French Alps, was built in 1032.

Courtesy of A.M. Realty

the means, having already sold off several acres.

By the time the O'Neals took possession, the chateau had been pillaged and all of the original furnishings were gone.

"The French have a word for what had happened to the chateau," Sukeshi says.

"It's 'triste,' which means 'sad,' as it had fallen into such disrepair."

One thing the O'Neals did find, along with lots of bats and rats, was "great potential," says Sukeshi, who studied art history and anthropology in college. "It seems that every previous owner of the

chateau wanted to leave their mark. There were add-ons everywhere, most of them falling apart."

During the renovations, which took two-and-a-half years to complete, old coins, photographs, bullet shells and "bones of all kinds" were discovered.

### Chateau:

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ing through the ancient road that still exists at the top of the orchard. In the 14th century, two of the towers were destroyed. Now completely restored, with ivy cascading down the sides of the thick stone walls, the chateau is rented out for film and photo shoots, conferences and special events. The O'Neals have also donated its use

for charitable fundraisers. While the family plans to spend next summer there, Sukeshi admits to thinking about perhaps spending more time at the chateau.

"Maybe I could open a winery or a cheese shop or bottle the natural spring water on the property," she says with a laugh. "I just enjoy being there so much."

One time, when she was alone in the chateau, Sukeshi had a dream that a monk came to her room and led her downstairs to

the caves, where he opened a door that had been sealed off.

"On the other side there were pots and pans and sculptures and paintings," she says. "He then led me back to my room. I wasn't the least bit frightened until a week

later when my in-laws gifted Chuck with a sculpture of a monk. It had the same face as the monk in my dream."

Apparently there is a monk who loves the chateau as much as Sukeshi does.

Working on the property was not always idyllic, "as we had to deal with the historical society," says Sukeshi. "We were fortunate to have very talented artisans. Unfortunately, decades of rain seeping through the windows ruined the wood floors and the plaster on the walls. And while there were 10 bedrooms, there was only one bathroom in the entire chateau."

The O'Neals, who reside in the Huntington with their two children—Isabella, 11, who attends Crossroads, and Charlie, 9, who attends Palisades Elementary—initially went to France to visit Chuck's parents. His mother Patricia, an artist, had gone to Flavigny-sur-Ozerain to study 20 years ago. There she bought an old barn, where she worked and lived with her husband, Chic. It was on a family visit a few years back that Sukeshi and Chuck thought it would "be great fun" to have a large house where they could spend more time with relatives and friends. So with Patricia and Chic's help, the couple started to look.

"But we never imagined we would end up with a chateau, and in this particular area," Sukeshi says. "When Americans go to France they usually go to Paris, Provence or the Riviera. And they don't usually go there to ski. We are about an hour away from three major ski areas—Val d'Isere, Chamonix and Mont Blanc. The area also borders Switzerland and Italy. Turin, site of this year's Winter Olympics, is two hours away. We have gone shopping in Milan and been back home in time for dinner."

Several books have been written in French about Chateau St. Philippe. Apparently, in the 13th century, travelers paid the monks for the privilege of pass-

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