





A Twin Lakes street of show homes.  
'Lily Pond', right, is modelled on  
Stewart's home in the Hamptons

Photographs by Rick Giles



# The house mistress

Fans of Martha Stewart are flocking from all over America to move in to a new estate of houses modelled on Martha's own homes. But are they ready for the social one-upmanship of their neighbours, or the 'Martha police' checking on their paint colours? By Helena de Bertodano



A basket of squashes and gourds lies on the countertop of the spacious, immaculate kitchen. *Martha Stewart's Hors d'Oeuvres Handbook* has been left open on a page describing a coriander and almond relish for prawns. A very tasteful grey and maroon jacket hangs from a coatstand inside the door. You almost expect Martha Stewart herself to emerge from the pantry, perfect appetiser in hand.

Instead, Liane Coicione, a grandmother from Massachusetts dressed in bright red T-shirt, shorts and trainers, is sprawled across the sofa, her nine-year-old granddaughter Sarah, in yellow and black football garb, at her side. 'What do you think of our new home?' asks Liane, smiling broadly.

In fact, this is a replica of the home that will soon become the property of Liane and her daughter Patty, a teaching assistant. For the moment, they keep revisiting the show home at the Twin Lakes community outside Cary in North Carolina, where hundreds of houses based on Martha Stewart's own homes are springing up. In an extraordinary venture, Stewart, America's lifestyle guru, has created a self-branded housing community – the first of many – by teaming up with KB Home, one of America's largest home-builders. Where better to stow your Martha Stewart cookware, linens and recipe books than in four walls and a roof designed by the woman herself? 'It's so obvious,' says Charles Koppelman, the chairman of her business empire Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia and the man who came up with the idea. 'Martha Stewart is the person who is most respected when it comes to what goes into the home, so what could be more ideal?'

Stewart has even given the models the same names as some of her houses: 'Skylands' is named after her 12-bedroom summer home in Seal Harbor, Maine; 'Lily Pond' is based on her shingled Hamptons house; 'Katonah' draws details from her 153-acre Bedford estate and from her two colonial homes in Westport, Connecticut, and Katonah, New York. Of course, Martha's own homes are worth millions of dollars and sit on large tracts of land. Twin Lakes houses, which occupy small plots, cost between \$200,000 (£110,000) and \$450,000 (£240,000), depending on size and 'optional upgrades'.

Liane and Patty have bought a Skylands, and cannot quite believe their luck. 'Look, we even have Martha's driveway,' says Patty, tapping her feet on the concrete, which has been stamped to resemble old cobblestones. 'We're delighted because we have no vision ourselves and Martha has thought of everything for us.' They say they were drawn to Twin Lakes by Stewart's name. 'I figured the houses would be built a little better because her name's in it,' says Patty. 'After all, she doesn't want to get into trouble again.'

The project is just one part of a spectacular comeback for a woman who, two years ago, began a five-month prison sentence for lying about a well-timed sale of shares. Since her release last year Stewart has become more famous than ever, with a daily television show, a 24-hour satellite-radio network, myriad publications and a new line of home furnishings.

Twin Lakes, which will eventually comprise 767 houses, is located in North Carolina's Research Triangle, the name given to the area between the cities of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, all attractive university towns. At their centre is Research Triangle Park, a business and research complex set in a large area of pineland, drawing scientists and academics from all over the world. Crucially for Martha Stewart and KB Home, there is always a strong demand for housing to accommodate the newcomers. So far only a handful of families have moved into Twin Lakes, but 129 units have been sold since April and, across the site, buildings are in varying stages of completion.

In March 2007 construction will begin on a second Marthaville a few miles east in Raleigh. Others are planned in Atlanta, Houston, Charlotte, Las Vegas, Orlando and Southern California. 'KB would love us to be in 40 communities across the States,' says Koppelman. It is a somewhat unsettling thought: a country peppered with thousands of families



**'We're delighted,' says one new homeowner. 'We have no vision ourselves, and Martha has thought of everything for us'**

Above, there is no mistaking the creative genius behind Twin Lakes. Below, a family settles into its new house



sitting on Martha Stewart chairs eating Martha Stewart food off Martha Stewart plates in Martha Stewart houses. And it won't end there. 'We've been approached by builders in France and Canada,' Koppelman tells me. 'And there's no reason why we couldn't get together with a British landowner and home-builder, and bring the same kind of good lifestyle and great taste to Britain, too.'

I ask Stewart, who agrees to be interviewed by email, what it feels like to have people living in replicas of her own houses. 'These homes are not exact replicas of my homes,' she replies. 'They are inspired by them. And it is my fervent hope that those who live [there] are as happy and comfortable... as I am living in the homes after which they are modelled.'

Twin Lakes is located three miles from the town of Cary. The name of the community is picked out in gold swirly lettering on two brick arches surrounded by flowers and trees. A black iron fence surrounds the community but the entrance is not gated; anyone can drive in,



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Left, Martha tours a Twin Lakes house, modelled on one of her own homes. Below, residents are bombarded with a constant stream of instructions. Bottom left, a kitchen in a show home



in a mixture of styles, none quite the same, flanked by perfectly trimmed lawns. Stone urns filled with flowers stand in driveways. A weeping willow bends over a rock pool, an old wooden lounge placed invitingly at its side.

These are the show homes, which have become something of a tourist attraction. On the weekend I arrive there are dozens of visitors, most female, some here to buy, most just to gawp. 'They're like kids in a toyshop,' comments one baffled husband. There are several Martha clones: middle-aged women with highlighted blonde bobs, fawn trousers, elegant sandals and perfect smiles. And there are many more people who look nothing like Martha: overweight families waddling around in skimpy clothes of garish hues. A woman in a leopard-print shirt, bright coral lipstick and a bouffant silver hairdo is taking notes as she explores one house. A KB rep asks if she would like to be sent a brochure on Twin Lakes.



'You can mail all you like, I'm not buying,' she replies curtly. 'I'm here to get ideas, because I'm redoing the vanity in my bathroom and I just love Martha's style. She's the reason I came out here. I said to my husband,' she adds, indicating a red-faced man in a bright pink polo shirt who is trying to hide behind her. 'I said, "You can believe one thing: she would not put her name on anything that is not first class."'

According to Shirley Macy, one of the KB saleswomen, some people have uprooted their families from far-flung states to move here. 'One woman persuaded her husband to move from the boondocks of Wyoming to Cary, just to have a Martha home.' But there are a few reluctant shoppers, mostly men – this despite the stainless-steel patio grills, power showers and other lures targeted at men. 'It's too white,' one man grumbles to his wife about the kitchen, as he traipses round his sixth Martha Stewart home. 'And the dining-room is too big.' They are in the largest Skylands show home, which is dominated by a dining-room set behind columns that would not look out of place in a palace. Gregorian chants play softly on the whole-house music system. Upstairs the couple peek into the master bathroom. Their jaws drop.

**There are strict decoration guidelines. What if a customer asks for 'Silt' paint with an 'Alumina' trim? 'They can't have it'**

excitedly through the windows of their home-to-be, an elderly man offers to show me his new house which is, he says in full hearing of the couple, in a 'more upscale' part of the development. I go to see his future home, which rises out of a mudbath, a builder's Portaloo parked outside the front door. It is hard to imagine its upscale future, but he is already mighty proud of the nine columns the house will boast and the cornice he has chosen for the living-room.

Most of the houses are smaller but all have a sense of space; columns often take the place of walls to divide rooms. I visit the Stivers, who have just moved into an elegant yellow Katonah, a colonial-style house with grey-painted shutters and a large porch. Here, real life has begun. Larry Stiver, a design engineer with three children, is standing at the front door, having a conversation with a neighbour whose dog has just bitten his daughter's friend. The neighbour is apologetic and Stiver is civil and understanding. Inside the house, plastic sheeting covers the carpet but the Stivers have moved in their

own furniture: a plaid sofa, a squishy grey armchair, a kitchen table covered with a not very Martha-ish green-and-yellow vinyl tablecloth. Stiver, a tall bespectacled man with greying hair, says that his wife, Gina, is the real Martha fan. Gina, who has a round, smiling face, admits to a fascination with all things Martha: 'At Hallowe'en she made a pumpkin pie and used a cookie cutter to make leaves from the crust – I love her extra touches.'

Stiver admits that he was just as drawn to the house as his wife. 'Martha is all about entertaining. And you want to entertain in an area that's open and inviting. We are in a faith-sharing group and we thought that this large room would be ideal.'

Once buyers have decided on a model and floorplan, they can choose the finishing touches. One cannot yet buy everything exhibited in the show homes, but Martha's company is working on it – right down to the English hunting scene on one wall. As Koppelman says, 'By the middle of next year, we will be able to offer almost the entire house.' For the moment you can go with Martha's selections of cabinetry and fixtures, not to mention her line of paints and trims. Here, there are strict guidelines. The 'Silt' wall paint takes a 'Rope' trim, while 'Cumulus Clouds' is matched with 'Alumina'. At the KB Home Studio, where purchasers are guided through the choices, I ask a design consultant what happens if a customer asks for 'Silt' paint with an 'Alumina' trim. 'They can't have it,' she says bluntly.

Presumably buyers can do what they want once they move in? 'Their home is their castle,' agrees Koppelman. 'But I think what Martha is giving everyone is a curriculum, if you will, of a better way of living. And we'll be coming out with a home-keeping book, which will be a thesaurus on anything and everything one would ever want to know about one's home.'

I ask Stewart whether she minds people making changes once they move in. 'I expect that those who purchase one of



It is the size of an average living-room, with a vast bath, a shower that could accommodate the whole family, ornate mirrors and two loos. 'It's crazy,' says the husband. 'Absolutely crazy.' On the landing is a 'media nook' where, pinned to the wall, is the diary of an imaginary family with children called Lotta, Nils and Benny: the dad plays golf, the mum takes yoga classes, the children have salsa and tennis lessons. In the middle of the month the family travels to London – where they would be hard-pushed to find a studio flat for the price of their luxurious Martha mansion.

Of course, real life at Twin Lakes is never going to be as perfect as the mirage conjured up by the show homes, with their baskets of speckled eggs on granite countertops and copper kettles on the hob. Already there is a feeling of one-upmanship. As I stand chatting to a couple, who are peering

our homes will benefit from and appreciate all the wonderful features but put their own personal stamp on the space.'

Nevertheless, stringent rules will protect the exterior look of the community. According to the 'Master Declaration of Covenants, Conditions, Restrictions, Easements, Charges and Liens for Twin Lakes', gardens must be maintained 'in a neat and attractive condition'; no 'unsightly storage' is allowed; garage doors must be closed when not in use; 'outside clothes-hanging devices are not permitted'; satellite dishes must not be visible; any fence must be pre-approved and 'must be scalloped or have some other ornamental detail (plain stockade fences will not be permitted)'.

Koppelman says that his team will help owners keep the houses the way Martha envisaged. 'We're not the Martha police [but] we'll be visiting regularly to help them.'

Does Stewart think people's lives will be improved by living in one of her homes? 'Absolutely. These homes are well designed with an eye not only to aesthetics but to how people actually live – hence the decision to locate the mud room off the garage, before you enter the kitchen, as that's where children are most likely to come in with muddy shoes. We also made sure that our kitchens, which are the heart of the home, are spacious with large islands and ample counter space. And because most people feel that they could use another closet, generously

**'We are not the Martha police. But we will be visiting the houses regularly to help people'**



sized closets are an important component of our interior design.'

Ah, the closets. There are lots of jokes at Twin Lakes about 'spacious closets', most of which are larger than a standard prison cell. 'I think she thought very carefully about her closets while she was in prison,' says one new resident. 'Where possible,' Koppelman points out, 'Martha believes it is great to have a window in a closet.' ●