

[The Producers – The Bay Area's 4 top residential real estate agents](#)

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Nine of the top 10 largest residential real estate brokerages in the Bay Area are run by men. But in the upper reaches of the region's housing market, these four women dominate their respective territories. Though they emphasize that they buy and sell homes at all price levels, they are best known for trading in the multi-million dollar mansions of the rich and famous. Combined, Malin Giddings, Diane Gilfether, Mary Gullixson and **Olivia Hsu Decker** sold nearly \$450 million worth of Bay Area real estate last year.

Olivia Hsu Decker

Born: Shanghai

Company: Decker Bullock

2005 Sales: \$88 million

Home: 4,400-square-foot Mediterranean-style home in Belvedere with views of Sausalito, the Golden Gate Bridge and San Francisco (also owns two chateaus in France).

Car: Bentley Turbo R, four Mercedes in Belvedere, Paris and Provence

What's a smart real estate investment? Belvedere, because it is a small island where there is no more land to build and it has world-class views.

Quote: "I hate to say I have more fun in real estate than I would with a boyfriend or husband, but I do. If I found a man who was more exciting than real estate, I'd marry him."

Olivia Hsu Decker is a little bleary-eyed.

The petite 54-year-old has just raced down the hill from her Belvedere home to a cafe in downtown Tiburon for an interview. Her long auburn hair is pulled back in a clip and, on an unseasonably warm day in early February, she is dressed in a short-sleeve tan sweater and light Katharine Hepburn-esque trousers.

But the oversize sunglasses give her away. Decker buys a couple muffins to share, apologizes emphatically for running late and slips off her shades.

"I was out late last night at Lenny's concert," she says a little sheepishly.

"Lenny" would be Lenny Kravitz, of the soaring '70s style rock and the hip huggers.

Hsu Decker had hoped to show Kravitz -- who has stayed at her Paris-area chateau four times in the past 15 months -- some properties for sale in her neighborhood, but his busy schedule wouldn't allow it.

The next day Decker showed the fourth most expensive home listed in the United States to a couple from Hong Kong. And a mere 10 days later, she jetted off to Paris for a press tour for the "The Da Vinci Code" movie, which features her other French chateau as the setting for several key scenes.

Such is the life of one of the best-known -- and some say most controversial -- luxury real estate agents in the Bay Area.

"People thought that I was crazy or arrogant," says Decker of the reaction to her plan nearly 30 years ago to buy or sell only homes priced above \$1 million. "I just thought I'd go for the biggest prices. And the houses are prettiest."

Of the 1,000 or so homes in Belvedere -- which consistently ranks as one of the most expensive enclaves in the country -- it seems Decker has bought, sold or been to a party in nearly every one. At the moment, she is representing the sellers of historic Locksley Hall, a sprawling \$65 million Colonial estate that boasts an elevator and three kitchens in the main house, a pool house with sauna and steam bath and entry gates designed by renowned architect Julia Morgan.

It would take only that sale, and another listing -- a \$20.5 million French Normandy-style home also in Belvedere -- to roughly match the \$88 million worth of real estate Decker sold last year.

That's a far cry from the \$75,000 Tiburon condos she began purchasing as an investor nearly 30 years ago, soon after she moved from Tokyo with her then-husband, Gary Decker.

"I was used to very expensive real estate in Tokyo -- Belvedere-Tiburon was relatively cheap," said Decker, who was born in Shanghai and grew up in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Still, the road to becoming the queen bee of Marin County real estate wasn't always so easy. In the early days, Decker said her Chinese ethnicity made it difficult to break into the business. It wasn't until she was hired by a small firm, later purchased by Merrill Lynch, that her career took off.

At that time in the late 1970s, California home values were gaining more than 25 percent per year. But the early 1980s' recession put a halt to that -- prices dipped and properties languished on the market.

Even sellers of tony Tiburon houses had to resort to especially creative financing. One client was forced to pay Decker's sales commission with his two-toned 1969 Rolls Royce.

Unfortunately, the car cost Decker her license.

"Have you ever driven a Rolls-Royce?" she asks her interviewer. "No."

"They're so smooth and powerful you don't realize how fast you're going. Every time I drove the car I would get a ticket."

Fearing another license suspension, Decker donated the auto to Marin General Hospital, which she said sold it for close to \$70,000.

The 1980s brought other highs and lows for Decker. She divorced in 1981. By the end of the decade, she had become Merrill Lynch's top luxury agent in the country -- in fact, so successful that the firm produced a training video for new agents based on her methods. But differences between Decker and her manager resulted in an acrimonious split, with Decker taking \$68 million worth of listings out the door with her.

Decker insists the media attention surrounding the split helped propel her business and was worth millions more in additional listings.

In the years since she and competitor Bill Bullock joined forces in 1990, Decker has only sharpened her skill for marrying the potent worlds of society, celebrity and real estate.

"I love houses and I love people and I like pretty things, so putting people together in these beautiful houses is so much fun," Decker said.

Her client roster includes everyone from tennis star Andre Agassi to author Amy Tan to venture capital giant Tom Perkins. Beyond buying and selling their homes, Decker cultivates many as personal friends, assisting them not only with decorating their mansions, but accompanying them to opera events and film premieres and giving them the keys to her manors in France.

Amid the early 1990s recession, Decker decided to go against convention, buying the Chateau di Grimaldi in Aix-en-Provence for \$3 million. The property covers 12 acres and has a 10-bedroom, 10-bathroom main house, a 16th century chapel and the ruins of the palace of Archbishop Jerome de Grimaldi. For paying customers, the property rents for about \$21,000 a week.

"I thought, 'I'm going to buy something in Europe to entertain my clients and drum up some business,'" Decker says.

That same self-promoting streak that has helped her rub elbows with movie stars and dominate the market for the toniest properties in Marin County has also made her a somewhat divisive figure in the insular world of Bay Area real estate.

When Decker's name is mentioned to peers in her field, the first response is usually a long pause. Since agents must work cooperatively in almost any deal, few are quick to criticize Decker openly. But some clearly disapprove of her high-profile antics.

Others say she is a fierce competitor.

"I've gone up against her on many listings and she's a tough negotiator," said Stephanie Rice, a Coldwell Banker agent in Belvedere.

Decker is aware of some of the reactions she elicits. But she insists most criticism is a matter of sour grapes. "There is a lot of jealousy from others who can't stand that I'm successful and they are not, especially that I'm an outsider from China," she wrote in an e-mail from France, where she was doing publicity for the upcoming film. "I don't think I could be as successful selling in Petaluma or Nebraska, but here in Belvedere-Tiburon, my clients think I'm the best."

Perkins, founding partner of venture capital giant Kleiner Perkins Caufield and Byers, said Decker's outsized personality is a plus when selling such pricy homes. Decker has been

working on selling his Belvedere home -- the French Normandy property priced at \$20.5 million -- for about a year.

"Over many, many, many years she's cultivated a list of buyers that are capable of buying properties like this, and that's, after all, what you need," said Perkins, who after 30 years is looking to downsize.

Fans or not, Bay Area residents will probably see more of Olivia in the weeks leading up to the "The Da Vinci Code" release.

Decker bought her second French chateau outside Paris in 1999, after growing tired of switching planes in Paris to fly to Marseilles, the closest airport to the South of France property. The Chateau de Villette is even grander than its sibling. The estate sits on 185 acres and has 18 bedrooms, 21 bathrooms, a billiard room and a 17th century original carved stone buffet. It was completed in the late 1600s for Louis XIV's ambassador to Venice.

More importantly to readers of Dan Brown's religious-mystery novel, the chateau is the home of British historian Leigh Teabing, played in the movie by Ian McKellen. Last summer, Ron Howard filmed several nighttime scenes at the mansion.

All the while, Decker would sit in her dark office next door tapping away on her laptop in an effort to stay in touch with clients on California time.

"Every time Ron Howard would yell 'Action,' " Decker said, laughing, "I'd have to unplug my cell phone so it wouldn't ring."

After two weeks, during which some days 850-plus cast and crew and 87 trucks would fill the chateau and its grounds, Decker said they left the property unscathed. Under the terms of the agreement, Decker cannot disclose how much she charged to film at the chateau, but it was far less than the Louvre Museum's fees.

"One of the things they promised to do is to list the chateau and my name in the movie credits," she wrote.