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# INTRODUCTION

SOME MAY ARGUE that having opposable thumbs or a soul is what separates us from the beasts. But I'll always argue that our ability to choose a paint color, artfully accessorize a coffee table, or toss a fabulous pillow is a gift from the gods. And I believe the knack for design and the confidence to feather your nest can be cultivated. Good taste or style is something that's developed with practice and patience, and many times we just need someone or something to point us in the right direction. How we decorate the spaces we live in is an opportunity for us to express our individuality, and when there is synergy between a home's great style and its owner's personal flair, it is nothing short of divine.

So many people, myself included, can be intimidated when faced with an empty room, and rightfully so: the endless possibilities for a space can be daunting. I say forget about pulling together the perfect room and focus instead on the fun. It's time to break a few rules, take a few risks, and explore your passions. The only bad choice is making no choice at all. Don't worry. Mistakes will happen during the process; after all, that's how some of us got here!

As an actor, I like to take the same approach with home design as with playing a complex character, since both are like solving a puzzle: you have to start with an open mind, do your research (it never hurts

to learn your lines early), and then begin experimenting. When first cast in a role, I always start by gathering as many clues about the character as possible from the script, historical facts, and life experiences. This helps to create a multilayered character that is emotionally authentic as well as entertaining. Similarly, with interior design, the same rules apply. Collect information about the home's "cast of characters," study the architectural elements at play, and then embark on the rewarding journey of creating functional and nurturing environments. Whether in acting or designing, attention to detail is essential to producing a well-rounded character or an aesthetically exciting room. As any good actor knows, developing a role is ongoing and ever-evolving, which is a good philosophy to apply to every aspect of your life and home. You should never feel like the process is finished—honestly, no actor ever wants the final curtain to fall.

I have been mad for design for as long as I can remember, and my hometown of New Orleans played a large part in shaping my aesthetic as well as my approach to décor. As a young boy I played in a picture-perfect midcentury modern home nestled

*OPPOSITE Only an act of God could keep me from antiquing at Karla Katz's smashing shop on Magazine Street.*

in the Lake Vista neighborhood of the city, while my grandmother lived in a columned Greek revival home on St. Charles Avenue. Various family members and friends lived in myriad architecturally diverse homes characteristic of the city. From opulent Garden District mansions to small pied-à-terre apartments in the French Quarter, I was exposed to many different styles of design and décor. I loved every bit of it and would even replicate the various styles in my childhood tree house. Some of my early attempts at drapery did not hold up under the oaks and humidity, but my tin can sconces were killer.

My mother and I were regulars at the antiques shops throughout the Big Easy, and when my parents built their dream home, I gladly accompanied them to design meetings and buying trips to furniture markets. With this exposure, I fell in love with different periods and styles of design, which I have always accepted as a good thing.

When acting on Broadway, I find myself drawn to the design district; the Decoration & Design Building; and the humongous gift, furniture, and antique shows all over New York City for an alternative artistic outlet. When I lived in a one-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side, my closets were always crammed with luxurious fabrics, while two storage units held everything else I was collecting for my nonexistent pie-in-the-sky country house. Over the years, when not trodding the boards of Broadway,

I would assist friends and family in decorating their apartments and homes.

For years my partner, Tom Cianfichi, and I dreamed of opening our own home furnishings and fine gift shop in New Orleans. On each of our many trips back home from New York, we would devote at least one day to explore Magazine Street, one of the most charming and stylish shopping boulevards in the country, which is where we decided to open our shop. We named our store Hazelnut in honor of my grandmother Hazel Nuss (who was also a bit of a nut). Armed with my stacks of sketchpads and Tom's retail expertise, we opened our doors in 2003. Little did we know that our country house would not be a two-and-a-half-hour drive upstate from Manhattan but rather a two-and-a-half-hour flight down yonder.

We brought to the Big Easy our own take on cosmopolitan style, and if we didn't find exactly what we wanted in the market, we designed it. Almost instantly, our little boutique became a beloved destination spot for both in-the-know locals and visitors alike. Hazelnut is filled with colorful, classic, and distinctive furnishings and decorative accessories, treasures that I find bewitching. I am always overjoyed when customers feel the same way—there is nothing quite like a standing ovation.

My creative spirit is deeply rooted in the exuberance of New Orleans, which has a soul like no other city in America. Our



courageous people celebrate the unique architecture, music, cuisine, and history on a daily basis and the artistic parade is constant. There is a beloved phrase here, *laissez les bons temps rouler*, which means “let the good times roll,” a philosophy that works in both life and design. Years of performing on stage and on screen, immersed in dazzling costumes, on breathtaking sets, and under fabulous lighting have done nothing to dampen my belief that your surroundings must entertain you while allowing your imagination to take center stage.

I hope that the following chapters will encourage your inner designer as I present

what I love about stylish, easygoing spaces. The homes that grace these pages exemplify the beauty and true personal style of each home owner and the talents of the designer.

It's easy to create spaces like these in your own home. Just keep in mind the following dogmas that have never failed me: If it looks right, it is right; and if it don't fit, don't force it. Beyond that, it's your home, your adventure! Remember, just like in life, it's not where you start, and it's not where you finish, but it's the thrill of the journey that counts. Enjoy the ride!

ABOVE Tom and me in our Magazine Street shop.



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# DON'T BE AFRAID OF COLOR

Honestly, what did color ever do to you? I have never bought into the idea that we need to be afraid of color, play it safe, or tiptoe around it. Such an easy design element is not something to avoid but rather embrace wholeheartedly. After all, it can only calm, stimulate, or energize with its countless hues. It is the surest and most cost-effective way to change the entire mood of a room and create drama in your home—so bring on the color in all its glory.



a less-traveled road—you may discover something new and wonderful in something you already have.

#### MY SIGNATURE COLLECTION

I have been a fan of Laurel Wilder's art glass plates for years. In fact, when Tom and I opened Hazelnut, works by her and her lovely sister Shelley were the first we wanted to feature. Using a reverse decoupage technique—hand stamped with gold leaf, then sealed, signed, and numbered—each work is unique and food safe, so they are not only gorgeous but also functional. I knew that custom plates celebrating the beauty and history of New Orleans would be a sensation, so a friend photographed the iconic fountain in Audubon Park and I sifted through my collection of antique maps, copies of *Harper's Weekly* depicting historic scenes of Mardi Gras, and Audubon prints of Gulf Coast birds. I then called Shelley, and together we designed a collection of plates that are elegant and dazzling when displayed.

I love the graceful allure of the Audubon Muse plate just as much as I cherish our plate that celebrates the Flambeaux carriers with their fiery torches lighting up the night sky. More recently, we've created plates inspired by the majestic pelicans, egrets, and herons that have survived the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf. They remind me of great beauty and strength.



OPPOSITE *Katy's collection of Laurel Wilder platters displayed on the wall is a perfect complement to her living room's strict gold and green palette. Sentimental favorites are the trays inspired by antique maps of Vieux Carré, flambeau carriers, and Harper's Weekly images of the first Mardi Gras tableau.*

ABOVE *The Audubon Muse plate.*

# NOW THAT'S "SWELLENT"

**M**y impulse to entertain definitely harks back to my childhood, when, as a youngster, I would sneak into my parents' swanky cocktail parties. The ladies were always dressed to the nines in silk chiffon and taffeta dresses, while the gentlemen all wore ties with tie bars, cuff links, and often dinner jackets. There was a romanticism in that period: guests dressed the part. At many of these glamorous events, after saying good night to the guests at my bedtime, I would slip out of my room, procure an olive, and then make my way around the room dipping it in everyone's drink for a taste, until I was found out and whisked away. Once or twice among the din, I would sneak back undetected only to be discovered underneath the dining table in my Batman costume singing the refrain of Petula Clark's smash hit, "Downtown."

My parents' soirees seemed like the most fabulous of affairs, never pretentious, but fun and swell. There was always laughter and dancing; often my mother and Aunt Carol would break into a soft shoe if the moment was right. For the more formal events there would be a bartender and ladies

OVERLEAF *Fabulous doors from Bush Antiques were the starting point for a grand bar and wine cellar.*

OPPOSITE *Photographs of Alfred Ruffy's great grandfather making café brûlot is a sentimental and stylish tribute to a beautifully stocked bar.*

passing hors d'oeuvres on silver trays, while a smart jazz trio roamed through the house. For less formal parties, Burt Bacharach would be spinning on the hi-fi while my dad played master mixologist behind the bar, which was his pride and joy. The construction of the bar was of his own mid-century design and incorporated a serpentine, high-gloss cypress base beneath a gleaming, copper countertop. The entire back wall was beveled mirror and outfitted with underlit glass shelving that housed interestingly shaped bottles and every colorful liquor known to man. Everything was picture perfect for the period. The size of my parents' budget for entertaining was irrelevant; it was the attitude and spirit that went into decorating their home for events that prevailed.

On the set of *Mad Men*, while wearing Janie Bryant's brilliantly designed costumes and living among Amy Wells's perfectly appointed sets, my childhood memories of my parents' oh-so-chic fetes came flooding back to me with vivid accuracy. Maybe we don't need all the smoking and boozy lunches, but I have never lost my fondness for a sexy cocktail and intimate dinner parties. And in addition to cocktail parties, a return to family and friends dining together at home—at a table, with cloth napkins, and without television—is an effort worth making.





## LIFE'S A BANQUET

Dorothy Draper, the famed American decorator, once wrote, "Entertaining is fun!" I'd like to take that sentiment a step further. Entertaining *must* be fun; otherwise, what's the point? Entertaining should not be considered an obligation or chore; if it is, then it will feel the same to your guests. Sometimes the best soirees are impromptu and some of the most memorable are last-minute get-togethers with simple fare. Too much thinking leads to second-guessing, and second-guessing leads to panic . . . relax! It's just a party.

Keep the focus on what entertaining is really all about: the breaking of bread and sharing yourself and your home. Extending invitations and warmly welcoming people should be done only with great joy and the heartfelt desire to share camaraderie. Your home reflects your unique personality, and entertaining provides another opportunity to develop and share your signature style.

I love living in New York, New Orleans, and L.A., where there always seems to be a festive reason to gather. Whether a debutante ball or a crawfish boil, in New Orleans we celebrate life, death, and everything in between. Even at a christening or a funeral, there will be a party, complete with a full bar and a lavish spread. In New York and Los Angeles, I've attended opening-night parties for Broadway and glamorous award events; a highlight was the after-party for the Screen

Actors Guild awards. In an over-the-top setting, the designers managed to create intimate lounge areas where we celebrated and hobnobbed. But my favorite type of party, above all, is the self-catered dinner party at home. Preparing the house, setting the table, planning the dinner, and, of course, all aspects of the décor come into play. Besides, no one ever asks, "Who are you wearing?"

## DINNER WITH NO RESERVATIONS

It seems like what has been lost in the shuffle of our hectic lives is the beauty of a simple dinner party. Time has given way to a more casual form of entertaining, which has its place and time, but for me, there is nothing lovelier than an intimate dinner party.

As a child, I loved watching my mother prepare and attend to all the details for an elaborate buffet or a seated dinner. In college, my brother and I would borrow our parents' home to throw our own dinner parties. His were called "New Talent Night," where the mandatory rule was that each invited guest bring a date that no one else had ever met. Mine were alfresco dinners for up to sixteen friends on the patio. I'd push all available tables together

*OPPOSITE A simple farm table, heirloom china arranged around a chinoiserie mirror, and whimsical felt garland strewn through a chandelier send a warm and festive invitation to dinner.*

## My Mardi Gras Mambo

# BEFORE THE PARADE PASSES BY

I have wildly celebrated Mardi Gras since I was a baby. From my very first carnival to my senior year at Tulane, I never missed one Fat Tuesday family celebration on St. Charles Avenue. Every aspect of New Orleans history and its pageantry has always fascinated me. I am completely enraptured by the detailed ornamentation and opulently designed floats that promenade under the canopies of majestic oaks dripping with Spanish moss. The dancing torchlights, carried by the flambeaux carriers, always create a mesmerizing visual effect. Some people come to hear the bands, some love to catch the beads and trinkets, but I love to stand back and take in the beauty of the float art. Mardi Gras is the greatest free show on earth and a feast for all the senses, but especially the visual. (Interestingly enough, the organization for Rex, the king of Mardi Gras, is actually called School of Design.)

Our carriage house in New Orleans was connected to the property of a St. Charles Avenue mansion where all the

*OPPOSITE In order to let my Mardi Gras float decorations shine, I lacquered the walls in Benjamin Moore Chocolate Sundae and used my unfussy toile in Café au Lait for the drapes. But these wild wall hangings still didn't stop me from installing a beaded crystal chandelier sold through Hazelnut (hey, who says you have to choose your drama?).*

Mardi Gras parades pass. Needless to say, our home became a carnival hub during the festivities. That first year back home, I realized that I had not witnessed one of these beloved extravaganzas of my youth in more than ten years. I had forgotten how vibrant, and fun the gold leaf-tipped papier-mâché float art truly is.

As much as I love to watch a parade, I've also had the great pleasure of riding in a few. And as thrilling as that is, I always felt that living with one would be heaven. Since once a year was not enough for me, I had an idea to bring this magic into our home. I envisioned a display similar to the way people collect and display other great American folk art. I called up the captain of a carnival krewe, a friend of mine, who gave me a tour of the den and floats. He let me choose a pair of majestic blooms that I displayed on our dining room wall. Tom artistically arranged the flowers on the wall, where they were long the topic of conversation. Everyone smiled when they saw the float art—children thought it was cool, adults reveled in the whimsy—but the main effect was that it just made us happy. It was a risky choice to display gigantic tempera-painted papier-mâché flowers with a crystal chandelier and seventeenth-century lanterns, but I'm the bouncer at this club, and they made the cut.

