

Baker's dozens

By Molly Jane Quinn

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Susan Kurtzman was 19 when she began collecting two kinds of ceramics: Italian Deruta majolica and kitschy cow-shaped creamers. Little did she know then that the craft would figure large in her life, from her career to her kitchen.

The kitchen part is easy to explain. When she and her partner, author Sarah Johnson, bought their historic 1830s home near the Pamet River in Truro, friends gave the couple an Italian tile medallion depicting a Tuscan sun. Kurtzman tucked it away, knowing it would be the ideal starting point for her dream kitchen.

And the old kitchen needed someone's dream. Done up in 1950s style, complete with Formica counters and chrome trim, the room was originally a shed that was dragged from a saltworks on the river in the 1900s and tacked onto one side of the house. (It seems to get an update every 50 years or so.)

"I had seen something in an Italian magazine where the stovetop was built into a table," says Kurtzman, who wanted that feature but wanted hers to be a five-burner Thermador cooktop with a heavy-duty stainless hood. Another must: "I knew I didn't want upper cabinets, because I can't reach them. I'm five-foot-one-and-a-half."

Kurtzman looked to Provincetown designer Thomas Thompson and local builder Deborah Paine to carry out the remodeling, which required taking the old kitchen down to the studs. She showed them the Tuscan sun medallion, which inspired everything from the yellow tile backsplash to the paint on the walls – an unusual shade the color of unripe olives.

The design needed to include ample counter space in the room, which is 21½ feet long but only 7½ feet wide, as well as plenty of low storage. Luckily, Thompson had just finished a redesign for Angel Foods, a gourmet market in Provincetown, which inspired a useful idea: a wooden shelf all along the kitchen backsplash with compartments underneath to hold dishes. There are also pullout cubbies similar to ones at Angel Foods. Another touch: "I wanted a stone baking area," says Kurtzman. That part of the counter was lowered significantly to accommodate Kurtzman's petite frame. "It's probably 4 inches lower than the other counters."

Thompson also designed a built-in breadbox, placed the stainless-steel wall oven low so that Kurtzman could easily retrieve heavy casseroles, and maximized under-counter storage. A cathedral ceiling with remote-controlled skylights gives the narrow room a more open feel.

For finishes, Paine used reclaimed barn-board flooring from Maine that looked good with the wide-plank pine in the rest of the house and found a slab of veiny yellow marble to serve as baking headquarters. Since the kitchen was renovated after a heating system had been installed in the rest of the house, a Jotul gas stove was added to warm the room in winter.

Beyond pots and pans, Kurtzman enjoys displaying her collection of vintage pottery, and that's where her career comes into play. She studied ceramics at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1960s and later served as director of the Highland House Museum in Truro. That's where she met Joe Colliano of Jobi Pottery, a beloved Truro business. Kurtzman bought the company in 2003 and learned to paint Jobi's signature fish patterns from Colliano, then 85. Jobi was reborn in 2004 in a gallery and workshop steps from Kurtzman's kitchen door. She just might need more shelves.

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