

Kitchens

By Carrol Krause • Homestyle

A new kitchen for an old home



Above: The new sink has hand-made English faucets; left: The new retro-look range; top of the page: The galley kitchen is long and not particularly wide. Photos by Carrol Krause.

Betsi Grabe and Mark Deuze are the proud owners of a handsome Tudor home, circa 1930. The house has stone floor tiles, arched doorway openings and countless other original embellishments. Betsi is South African and Mark is Dutch, and the home is decorated with antiques from Africa and the Netherlands.

But the kitchen had always displeased them. "The cabinets were painted a very negative spearmint green that was clearly not meant to fit into this space," explained Betsi. "And on top of several layers of old flooring, the previous owners had installed ceramic tiles. So it took a step up to enter the kitchen."

The floor height, the ugly cabinets and plumbing problems in one wall meant a complete gut-and-remodel job. But Betsi and Mark wanted the new kitchen to reflect the spirit of the rest of the home.

They turned to Nancy Hiller, who specializes in designing and building recreations of historic cabinets and furniture.

"Nancy's a historian, and she's an artist," said Betsi admiringly. "She brought us magazines and historic pictures of kitchens. She's been in so many homes in Bloomington, she understands Bloomington houses."

Betsi and Mark had an idea of what they wanted, but it took Nancy's historic sensibilities to steer them in the right direction.

"She had the historic know-how to realize what we wanted didn't belong in this house," admitted Mark. "She was right, of course! We could have gone with stainless steel appliances and built-in counters, but I'm glad we didn't."

Nancy was instrumental in helping the homeowners select tiles, faucets and fixtures. She built the cabinets while Betsi and Mark set to work removing the floor themselves.

"If you do the hard, unskilled labor yourself, you get a good workout and save money," laughed Betsi. "It's like an archaeological excavation. It was very exciting to discover this floor beneath all the layers. There's not a square millimeter in this kitchen that our hands haven't gone over several times."

The "new" floor is simply the original pine planking, sanded and repaired and refinished. The colors are warm and new and one would never know that the floor is 78 years old. Betsi and Mark pulled so many nails out of that floor during renovations that they filled a bucket with them. Wood windows were stripped and refinished, and Nancy matched new baseboards to the rest of the home. Plumber Jim Jones carefully dropped 4 stories of cast-iron pipe inside the wall from the attic to the basement, and Tom Stocker did the tiling and finish work for the homeowners.

"Tom's a perfectionist," said Betsi. "He loves tiling and he repaired the floor and patched all the walls and ceiling. He can do anything! I worked with him and got pretty



The new cabinets have hand-forged iron hinges and simple peg pulls.

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Pictured top to bottom, left to right: Nancy Hiller designed and built new oak cabinets to reflect the Tudor style of the house; The breakfast nook with its Mission-style table and antique iron curtain rings; Betsi and her father refinished and rebuilt this antique South African hutch; The spice cabinet was made from an antique leaded glass window set in a frame and recessed into the wall; Canisters on the tiled counter create a composition in black and white. Photos by Carrol Krause

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good at cutting tiles."

The couple went about five months without a complete kitchen, as bits of it underwent deconstruction and rebuilding. The new kitchen was equipped with two new retro-look appliances: a range from the Fireplace Center that would be right at home in any early 20th century house, and a 50s-style refrigerator found online, which reminds Mark of his childhood in Amsterdam.

There are also two lovely antique African pieces, a hutch and a set of drawers which Betsi and her father refinished, that are freestanding.

"When we began thinking about a built-in stove and fridge, we were not completely comfortable," Mark remembered. "Having these other furniture pieces helped create a more freestanding feel to the kitchen."

At the back of the kitchen is a Mission-style table where Betsi and Mark enjoy their morning coffee.

"Chuck Johnson has a barn filled with Mission furniture close to Shoals, Indiana. There are exquisite pieces, even original Stickley pieces," said Betsi. "He can date and identify the furniture maker for any piece in his barn. Chuck is a true Renaissance man. I think this area around Bloomington, with its artisans and people who respect history, makes it easy to restore and furnish houses."

The overhead light fixtures are antiques, as are the cast-iron curtain rings and rods. The old clock over the back door came from the Netherlands.

"It's slow, so Mark's father spends half his time tinkering with it whenever he comes to visit," said Betsi with a smile. "It keeps him out of trouble!"

Nancy crafted new Tudor-style cabinets with handforged cast-iron hinges. Each hinge is handmade, therefore unique, which meant that hanging the doors was an extremely delicate process. The door-pulls are elegantly shaped wooden pegs. A spice cabinet was made from an antique leaded glass window that Nancy set into a frame and provided with shallow shelves, then recessed into the wall between two studs.

"It's adding the personal details that makes it truly our house," Mark pointed out. "And cleaning an old home on your knees with a toothbrush really makes that home yours. It's not like having a new home where you pay strangers to come in and change things for you."

Any advice for others considering a historic renovation?

"Patience," Betsi said at once. "Do not compromise!"

Mark added, "If you pour that much time and money into an old house, you want to do it right."

"We really loved the process," Betsi summed up. "It's chaotic, but it's so worth it. Be true to the house. Let it speak to you. You can be true to the home without compromising contemporary luxuries."

Contact Nancy Hiller of NR Hiller Designs at 825-5872 and Tom Stocker at 876-1025.

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