

FEATURE

Swooning over

OUR EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH THE INTERIOR DESIGNER,
CULINARY STORYTELLER AND ENTERTAINING EXTRAORDINAIRE.
BY KATE NELSON

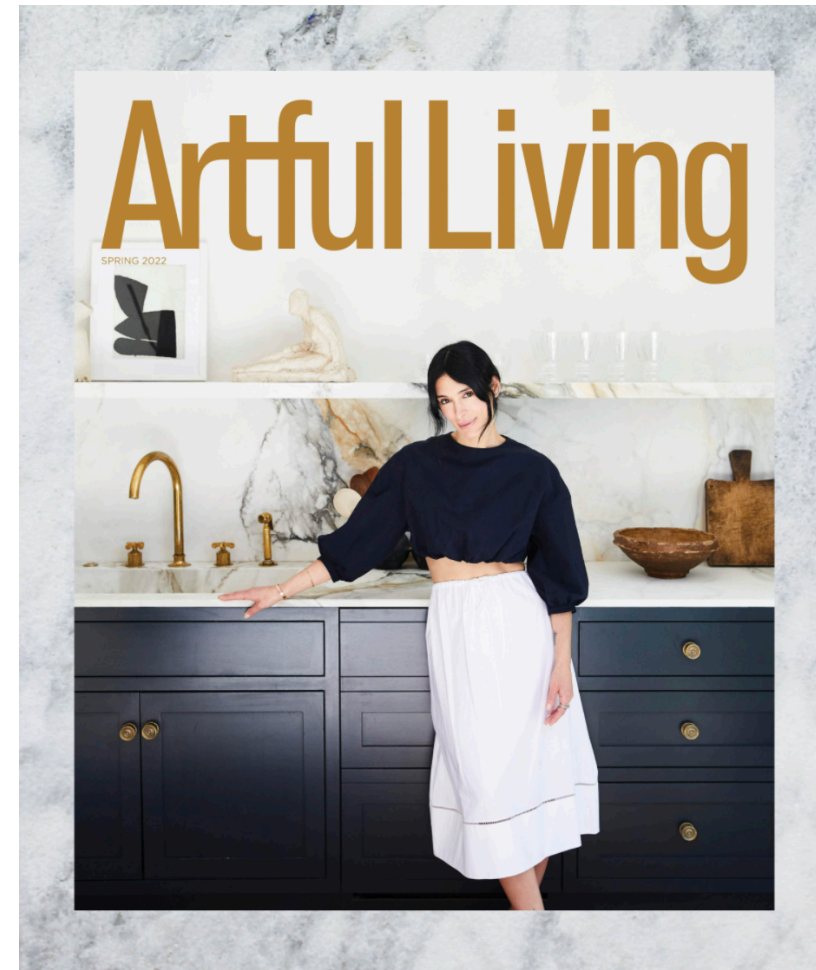
ATHENA CALDERONE

118 Artful Living



PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICOLE FRANZEN

Spring 2022 119



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She

has been dubbed “the modern girl’s Martha Stewart” by *The New York Times*. And in this elite club of domestic goddesses is an apt place for Athena Calderone. The interior designer, culinary storyteller and entertaining extraordinaire has established herself as an arbiter of good taste with her cult-favorite digital destination EyeSwoon. Her influence, however, reaches far beyond Instagram (although she has certainly amassed followers aplenty there).

Indeed, the multi-hyphenate’s accomplishments are impressive: two best-selling books, including a James Beard Award winner. Creative collabs with top brands like Zara Home, Beni Rugs and La Ligne. A popular podcast, *More Than One Thing*, where she interviews tastemakers and famous friends like interior designer Nate Berkus, fashion icon Jenna Lyons, chef/activist Sophia Roe and actress Naomi Watts. These are also the kinds of luminaries who show up for FOMO-inducing fetes at the enchanting Brooklyn brownstone she shares with her husband, DJ Victor Calderone, and their pooch, Tucu.

Part of Athena’s appeal, no doubt, is that she’s the real deal. She doesn’t just curate a scintillating social-media feed to garner likes and clicks; she gives us a glimpse inside her perfectly imperfect life. That includes sharing moments of sadness, sorrow and stress. Because those, too, are part of a beautiful life — something Athena strongly believes we all deserve.

Beauty, of course, is in the eye of the beholder, and Athena’s



PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHANIE STANLEY

definition of beauty defies expectations. It’s not impeccable or immaculate. It’s unexpected, opposing, inexact, offbeat, even at times odd (her words, not ours). Just like her, it’s more than meets the eye. And it’s this complex, complicated, contrasting nature that makes Athena, and in turn her creations, so swoon-worthy. This spring, she chatted with us about her design inspirations, her love of food, her approach to entertaining, her daily rituals — and the beauty of it all.

How do the realms of design, food and entertaining intersect in your life?

I am a multi-hyphenate at heart, which means I am equally all three: interior designer, chef, author and more! I’ve gotten advice over the years to pick a lane — food or design — but the truth is, it’s the combination of these two disciplines that led to my success. Just as I would layer flavors in the kitchen or mix design eras in a room, the essence of my creative approach was the same for both.

I’m drawn to aesthetics and I love to create beauty, but I seek harmony in the tension and the juxtaposition of opposing flavors, textures and hues. I am constantly searching for that unexpected element to add cohesion and contrast across all realms. A happy accident in the kitchen might spark a new creative recipe in design and vice versa. Seasonality also intersects each of these facets — a basket of verdant veggies and fresh fruit after a visit to the farmers’ market will inspire the menu for an upcoming gathering, the color palette of the tablescape and even the decorations. There simply can’t be one without the other.

Your Brooklyn kitchen has sparked endless inspiration. Can you talk us through the process of designing this space?

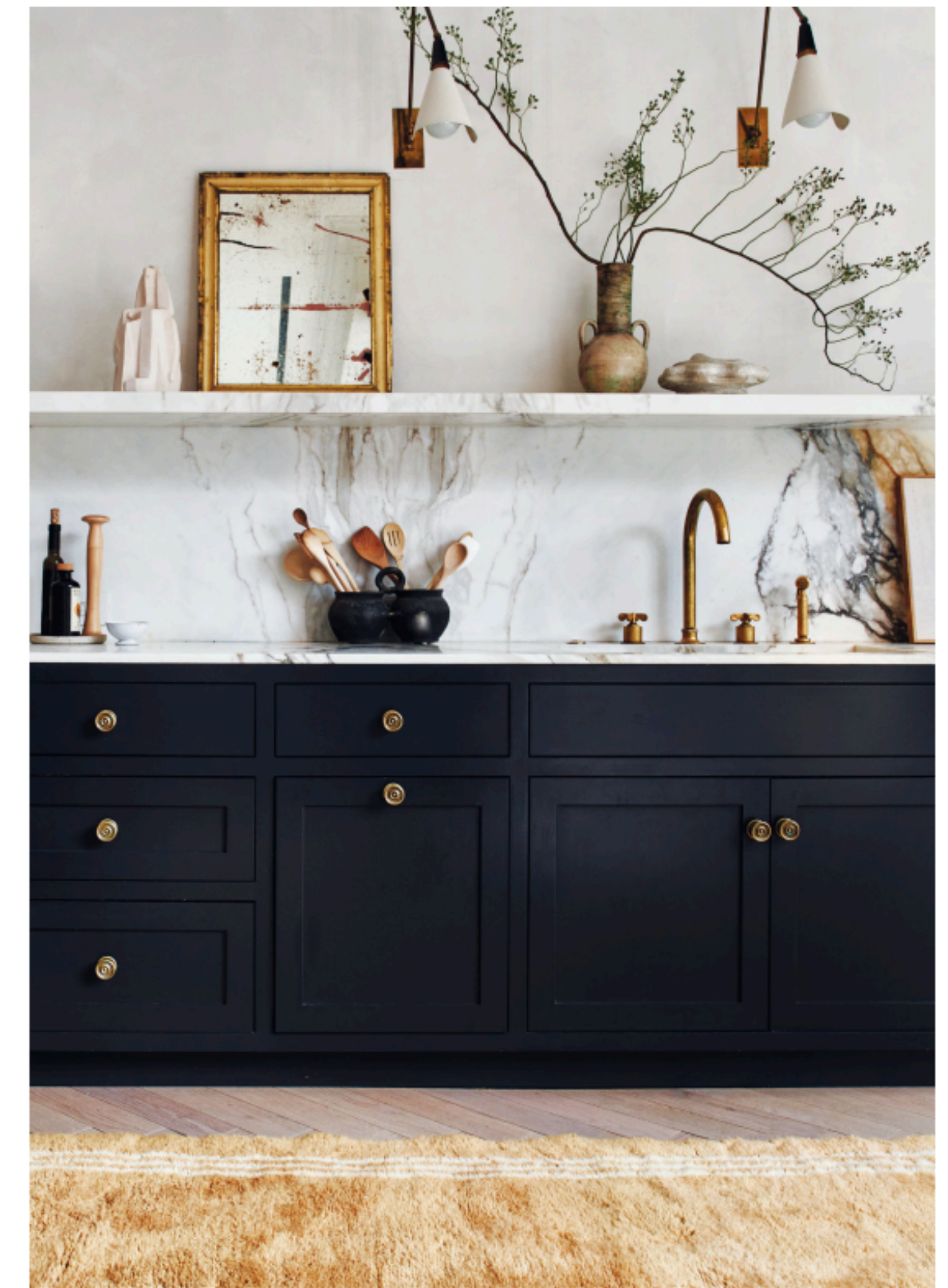
The kitchen is both my sanctuary and my workshop. I decided on darker cabinetry in Farrow & Ball Railings and Calacatta Paonazzo marble counters with Parisian-style open shelving. I purposefully kept the upper part of the kitchen light in both material and styling in order to contrast the dark cabinets. My island is an unconventional large square — perfect for photography! — set on legs so it feels more like a piece of furniture.

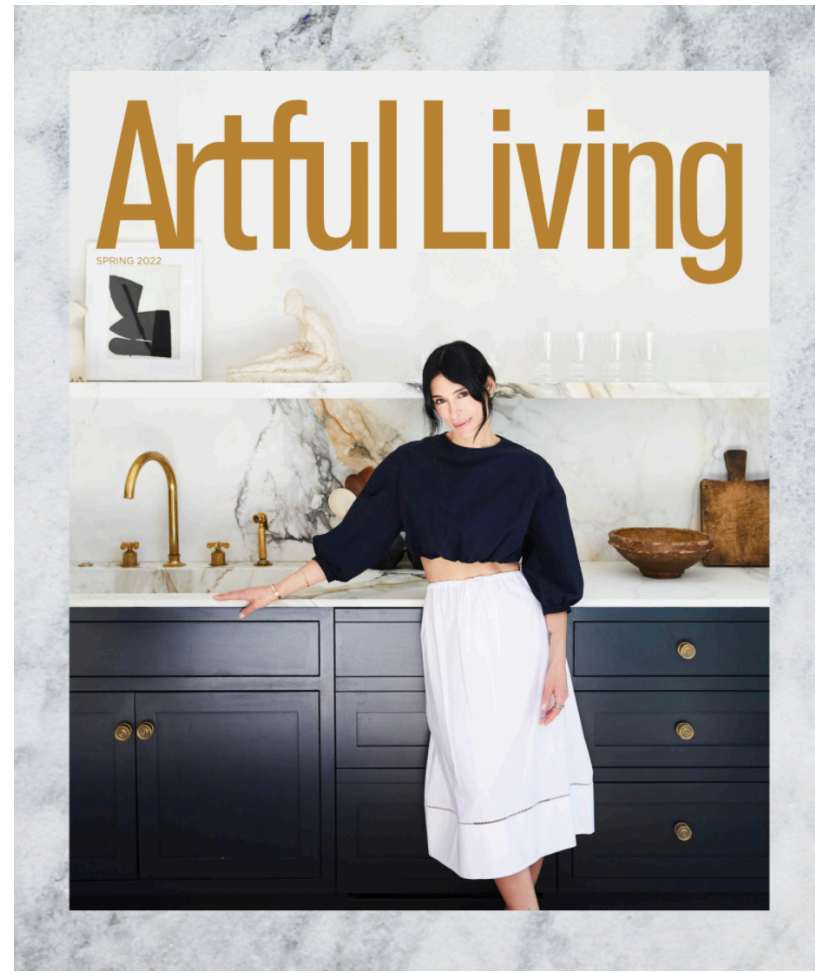
After pining after the heavily veined marble I spied in Joseph Dirand’s Parisian kitchen, I decided on a similar free-floating shelf in ours (more details on that process can be found on EyeSwoon). In my research, I learned that bracket-free stone shelving has to be supported with brace walls, so we had to address that early on in the renovation process. I also chose to eliminate upper cabinets, instead focusing on open shelves to maintain a minimal sensibility. Knowing that open kitchen shelving can easily appear cluttered, I decided on pale textured plaster on the wall behind it to create a blank canvas on which decorative items

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT

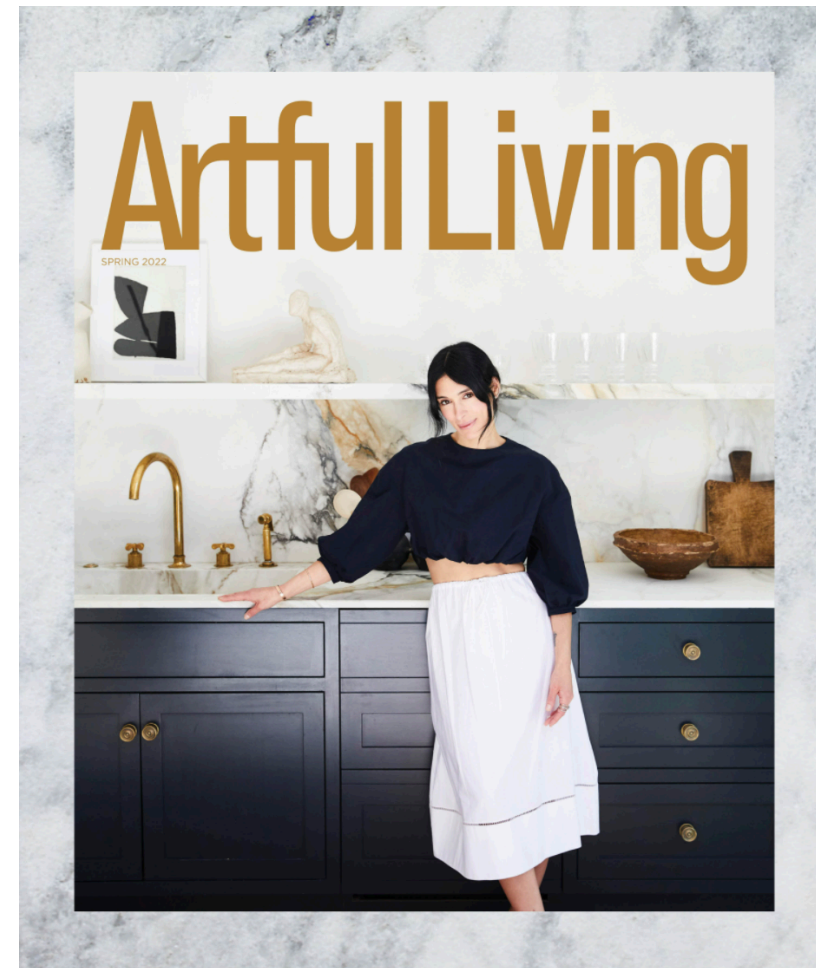
can pop and functional items, like the hood, can disappear. In doing so, the dark lower cabinets recede, bringing the layered decorative shelves into focus.

Not only is natural light important in New York for our physical health, it’s also imperative to my work photographing vignettes and shooting video. Victor and I agreed early on that we would open up the parlor floor to bring in as much light as possible. We did this by taking down the weight-bearing wall that divided the stairway from the rest of the space and inserting a wall of bi-fold glass doors onto the terrace to create a truly special indoor/outdoor experience. Not only is the terrace





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a space where we grill, lounge, dine and play with our pup, Tuco, but it's also an amazing feature when casually entertaining, too.

For you, food is about so much more than just nourishment. What meaning does food hold for you?

Food is a source of inspiration, creativity and most of all, connection: connection to food, connection to beauty, connection to gratitude, connection to one another. It nourishes our soul, our eyes and our hearts just as much as it does our bodies. Being in the kitchen provided the creative outlet I was yearning for. It became my studio and my workshop. It's where I took risks, where I failed and persevered. I learned so much about myself through food and cooking.

For me, nothing is dreamier than those late hours at an intimate gathering: Red wine rings are on the tablecloth, laughter is abundant, maybe a fire is crackling and everyone is serving themselves family-style around the table. Those lingering moments are what I love most. We come to the table to gather, to let our guard down, to open our hearts and to connect with others — food has the power to do all those things and more.

How can we make our meals look as good as they taste and why does this matter?

My true passion is creating beauty. Aesthetics guide me in everything I do, whether I'm hunting for the most vibrant vegetables at the farmers' market or setting a stunning table. I truly believe food just tastes better when it's beautiful and made with love, hence the title of my book *Cook Beautiful*. It's the reason that I strive to create a feast for the senses every time I cook. While taste and smell are obviously paramount to how we perceive a meal, visual cues are just as important. Before a single bite passes our lips, our brains are working out an answer to the question, *Does this look good to me?* Whether we're at home or out at a restaurant, we all eat with our eyes. A beautiful plate of food has emotional power and wholly undeniable magic — and my goal is to help you capture that.

Beautiful, by the way, does not necessarily mean complicated. My own style is rooted in simplicity; while aesthetic is obviously



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT

paramount to me, so too is accessibility. Even a family dinner is an opportunity to create something special that connects you and uplifts you as you dine together. I cherish those moments. I love to bring a similar family-style approach to dinner parties, too. Creating a stunning meal is about so much more than what meets the eye — it's about building community and making ordinary gatherings feel like celebrations. With a little thoughtful planning, you can execute simple ideas that appear to be far more sophisticated or difficult than they actually are.

What is it about the act of baking that you love so much?

My husband is a DJ who traveled a lot, so I didn't have that much of a social life after the birth of our son, Jivan. Rather than getting a babysitter and going out, I would put Jivan to sleep, pump up the music, then start baking and rolling out pastry. I found I enjoyed the solitude and creativity, and that led to me experimenting more with food. I would find myself making these elaborate meals, setting a gorgeous table and

luring friends to my home — so it became a creative outlet then it became a social outlet for me at the same time. I would say I really found myself through food.

What does an inspired dinner party look like in 2022?

It's no secret that I love to entertain. The prep, the planning, the cooking, the chopping — I love everything about it. When I'm planning a dinner party, I think about every granular detail. For this, I always turn to Mother Nature for inspiration. A trip to the farmers' market will influence the entire evening: the menu, the tablescape, the florals, the decorations, even the color palette. Everything should feel cohesive and tell a story. I like to curate experiences that engage all the senses, even if it's just an intimate gathering, to transport my guests into another world for a brief moment in time — one that's guided by sight, taste, smell, sound and touch! And who doesn't want a sensorial escape like that?!

I have always been a fan of using seasonal fruits and veggies as decor. There is nothing more beautiful than black Champagne grapes cascading from a pedestal bowl. Or petite pears with their leaves still clinging to them sprinkled down the table. Less is more. Inventive decor is more. And not being wasteful is most certainly more! Overall, a more thoughtful and casual approach to a table feels refreshing.

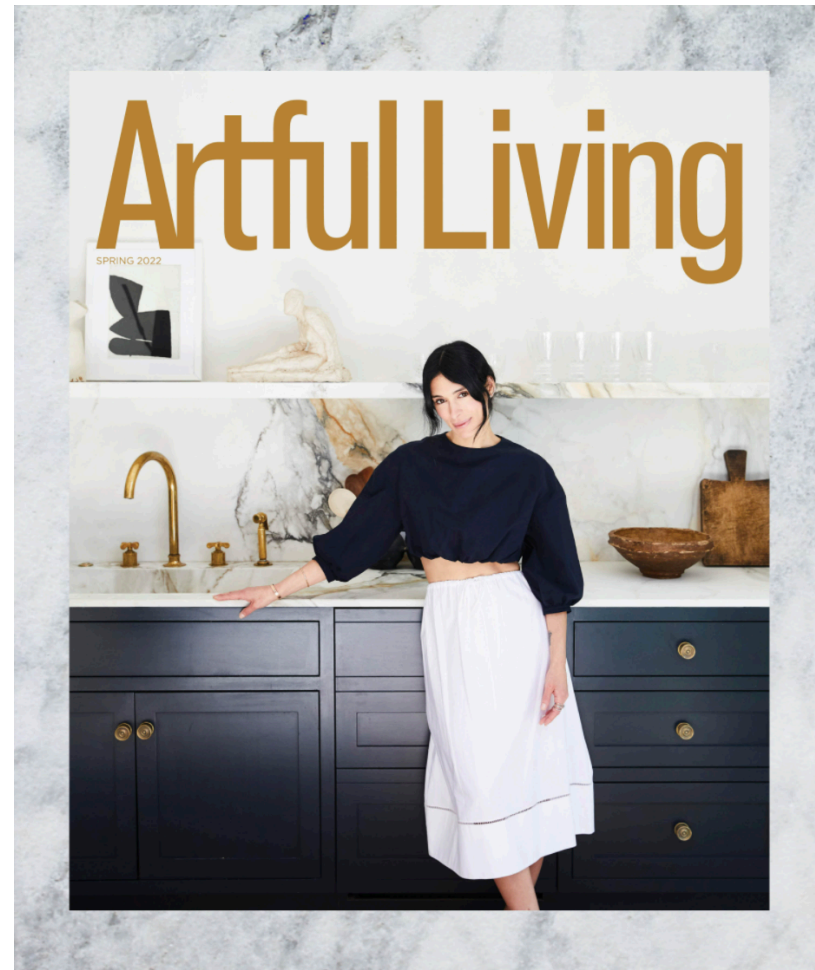
I'm also a big fan of family-style and will often set up a stylish self-serve station with wine glasses, appetizer plates and flatware to make it easier for guests (and the host!) to enjoy the food and wine throughout the evening as they please. This is also a great place to showcase decor with a vase and some seasonal branches, moody candlelight, and of course a cornucopia of delicious appetizers to graze upon — charcuterie, cheeses, fruits, bread, olives, dips and more.

How do your homes reflect your personality and beliefs? And how can we achieve this for ourselves?

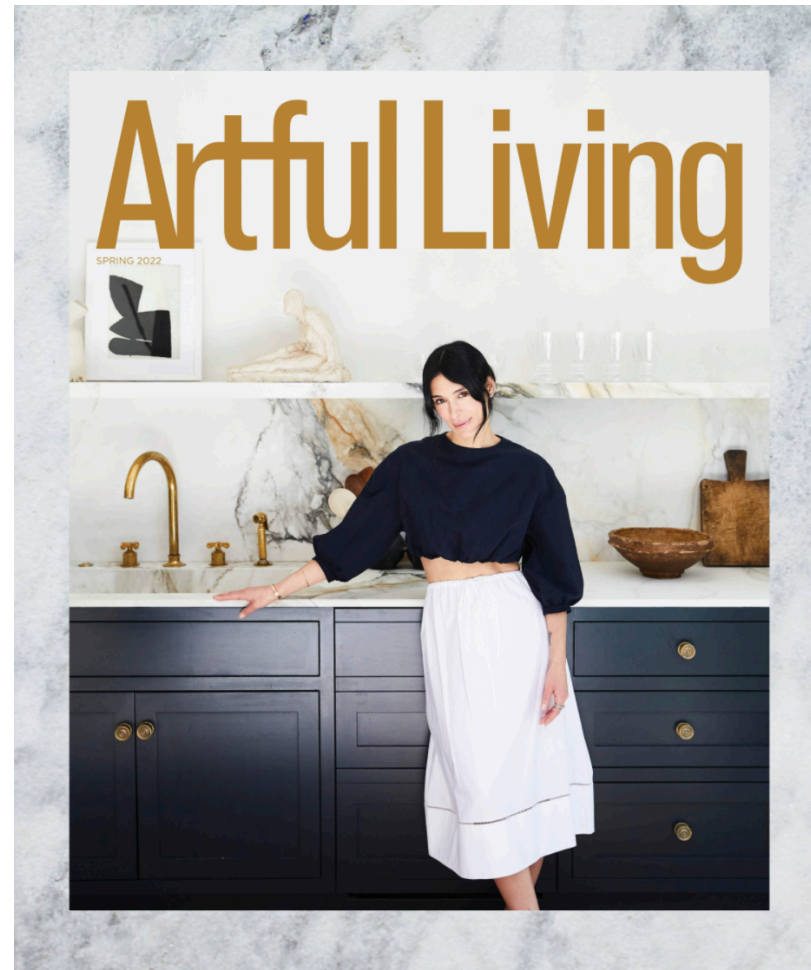
My homes are the manifestations of years of dreaming, scheming, planning and yearning for that which my eye craves. It's a culmination of the many things that make up who I am: my love



PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEPHANIE STANLEY



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of cooking, designing, curating and entertaining. It is my masterpiece. It's also a visual representation of my eye, my curious nature and my evolving aesthetic. While it may look elevated and aspirational from the outside, believe me there is a fission of beauty and chaos that ensues behind the scenes. My main message for others who want to design their own beautiful spaces is to be open to mistakes (I have definitely endured plenty of them in designing both of my homes), take risks, follow your heart and keep it simple. And remember that beautiful does not necessarily mean complicated or expensive!

What design trends and movements are grabbing your attention right now?

I have seen a move toward organic materials like travertine, terra cotta and plaster to mimic the natural environment at home. And while I love and will always love neutrals, I think they'll take a bit of a back seat this year as people start to experiment with color again. That said, the palette will stay very close to hues you'd find in nature. In our 2022 forecast on EyeSwoon, we predict paint rollers will be dipped in rosy, terra cotta tones swathing rooms from wall to ceiling for a complete monochromatic moment that envelops you in its coziness. That comfort factor can be dialed up with velvet furniture in the same tone to create a truly tranquil environment (aka the perfect spot to snuggle and snooze!). Who wouldn't want to design a room that feels like a warm hug?

You celebrate the beauty of imperfection. Can you tell us more about that?

I am always trying to offset the expected. I love to create symmetry, then break it. I love repetition and order, but I also love to resist the obvious. Somehow there is common ground and a sense of balance in those very imperfections. Take my kitchen shelves, for example. Regular dinnerware and kitchen tools sit opposite a diminutive and quirky wrought-iron lamp with a mini vintage rattan lampshade. It's unexpected and slightly odd, but it immediately draws the eye in, beckoning it to dance around the shelves.

How I designed my Beni Rugs collection, Broken Symmetry, follows the same vernacular. Trawling the souk for rugs and appreciating their texture and patina through new textiles, sun-washed hues and rudimentary

materials allowed me to see juxtaposition, symmetry and imperfection through a new lens. These artisanal rugs are of exceptional quality with a beautifully soft hand feel, but they are also tough and durable, able to withstand high traffic areas and look even more beautiful over time. Due to their handmade nature, they are imperfect in shape, the edges aren't exact, there is always something slightly offbeat about them — but that's what makes these rugs perfect. Neat edges and exact lines would be dull and flat. I'm always searching for the opposite of that. Mother Nature is perfect in her imperfection, so I'm always looking to mimic her in everything I do, from designing to cooking to entertaining.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADRIAN GAUT



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How has your personal style evolved over time, especially in the past two years?

Over the years, I have defined my core style and often go after the same silhouettes. Just like design, I gravitate toward garments that are well-

constructed, timeless, classic and buildable, but above all, I gravitate toward pieces that make me feel both sophisticated and comfortable in my own skin. In my design work, I celebrate contrast, and this definitely carries over into how I style myself, too. In fact, I will often see elements from the clothes I'm attracted to mimicked in vignettes or moments around my home. I'm constantly drawn to opposing styles. The juxtaposition of something patinaed against something slick and new is what makes a room, an outfit more interesting and complex. For me, it's all about creating that visual story to engage the eye, both in the outfits I wear and the rooms I design.

What are your must-do daily rituals and why are these so important?

Coffee, first thing with half-and-half always! Then I burn palo santo from my Beau Rush ceramic bowl and set my intentions for the day as I sip on coffee and slowly wake up. There is always a ton of beautiful light spilling in through the bi-fold doors of my kitchen, so I will often sit there and breathe in a few mindful moments before my inbox starts calling.

Rituals are so powerful. They can open up portals to hidden spaces within us, helping us to expand, exhale and renew from the inside out. It's also an opportunity to revel in some repetition. Those anticipatory moments bring us immense joy because we look forward to them each day — we savor that precious time we set aside just for us.

And finally, what lessons have you learned amid the pandemic?

For me, the silver lining has been the time it's offered so many of us for self-exploration as we all try to find meaning in this moment. I'm incredibly

grateful for the many lessons this time has taught me and continues to teach me. One of those lessons is taking better care of my emotional, mental, physical and spiritual health by setting clear boundaries to protect them and new rituals to enhance and develop them. I am also taking more time to be with family and to prioritize rest — and yes, that means shutting down my computer and leaving my phone at home while I take Tuco for a walk. Being in nature is incredibly restorative for me, so I've been making concerted efforts to bask in Mother Nature whenever I can. ●