

New Jersey

MONTHLY

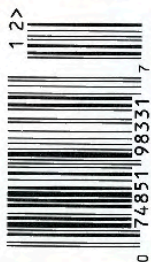
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REDISCOVERING FRANK

His strong-willed mom, his early breaks, his unsavory friends—and the Hoboken he left behind.

Christmas With Panache

It's the ideal recipe for a holiday party: She designs, he cooks. The result: an elaborate holiday spread for family and friends.

BY LAUREN PAYNE PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA MOSS

CHEF KEVIN KOHLER—whose Ramsey restaurant, Café Panache, is on *NJM*'s Top 25 list for 2015—loves nothing more than preparing elaborate at-home meals for friends and family. Luckily for him, his wife, interior designer Christy Kohler, took his passion to heart and designed a chef-friendly, lovely-to-look-at kitchen that works ideally for entertaining. Their collaboration shines brightly every Christmas Eve, when the two serve a traditional Seven Fishes Feast.

THE KITCHEN

When the Kohlers bought their Mahwah home 18 years ago, they were on a five-year plan, Christy says. They fully anticipated a move to a bigger home. But the couple, along with their son Max, now 15, (Kevin has three grown children from a previous marriage) soon discovered they loved the town, the neighborhood and the sweeping views from the deck.

The Kohlers decided to stay put and upgrade what was, admittedly, a builder-grade home. Top priority: the kitchen. Christy called in award-winning kitchen designer Anthony Passanante of Anthony Albert Studios in Waldwick, to help with the plan. "I wanted it to feel lighter and brighter," says Christy, "with sleeker, clean lines." She also wanted open space for entertaining, where guests and chef alike could gather.

The first task was removing a wall that divided the kitchen from the family room and replacing it with an I-beam for support. That instantly opened the space, says Christy, and improved traffic flow and functionality. Next, the couple had to make the tough decision to eliminate two existing windows to create room for a wall of appliances. "Everything Kevin needs is on one wall," says

Passanante. "A functional kitchen," he adds, "far outweighs certain views and natural light."

The enormous cooktop, a 48-inch Thermador with six burners and a griddle, was key, says Passanante. "That was the one thing that Kevin wanted." Adds Christy, "It's an homage to the chef. It has commercial power. It's as big as the one he has in the restaurant."

"I needed a cooktop that would perform," Kevin says. "This one heats up hot and fast." Above the cooktop is a massive, custom-designed, zinc-and-stainless hood, built by metal artisan Chris Smith. This original work doubles as the room's focal point.

The layout facilitates the sort of juggling that characterizes a busy chef. "It was exciting to create a kitchen for a



PERFECT PARTNERSHIP Christy and Kevin Kohler divide and conquer in the new kitchen of their Mahwah home.



FESTIVE FEAST Lobster tops a pasta dish, left, one of seven seafood concoctions Kevin serves each Christmas Eve. Kevin, center, at his restaurant-grade, six-burner cooktop. Right, no celebration is complete without a champagne toast, says Christy. Below, Christy insists on a sit-down dinner. The 78-inch round table accommodates up to 12; additional guests eat at tables arrayed in the den.



chef," says Passanante. There's plenty of prep space on either side of the cooktop. The double wall ovens are a step or two away from the cooktop, and the giant Sub-Zero refrigerator is within arm's reach. Directly behind Kevin's cooking space is the island, boasting an oversized stainless steel sink. "I like the idea of the sink right behind the cooktop," Kevin says. "I can turn around and get to the water right behind me. The sink and the garbage are right there. All my mess gets cleaned up right away."

Another smart feature: The faucet, chosen by Christy, is "high design and high function. It's pretty, and it has a pull-out nozzle so Kevin can hose off the pans."

The island is a hub of all things. It serves as bar, buffet and gathering spot. "This is the greatest social island," says Christy. "It's where everyone hangs out." It's also home to the wine refrigerator, the dishwasher and deep cabinets for plenty of storage for pots and pans.

"Some kitchens are just so big. This one has everything within five feet," Passanante says.

Once a functional layout was determined, Christy and Anthony got to work on selecting finishes. The handmade cabinets were designed and built by Anthony Albert Studios. Perimeter cabinets are painted white; island cabinets are a dusty grey with a hand-rubbed glaze resembling fine furniture. The countertop material is Taj Mahal Quartzite, a durable surface that's harder than granite, says Christy. The flooring is laminate, installed directly over the old tile floor, which is easy on the chef and easy to clean.

One of Passanante's favorite features

SUPER STYLE The Kohlers' new kitchen is the perfect combo of high style and functionality. Below, the Kohlers with kitchen designer Anthony Passanante, right.



is the bar. The reclaimed cedar barn beams were hollowed out to allow lighting inside. The bar counter is concrete. Passanante used antique mirrors for the back, which reflects the subtle lighting. "It's got lots of character and warmth, and with the mirror, it's full glam," he says.

"This is a hybrid kitchen," adds Christy. "It's the perfect combination of a designer wife and a chef husband."

THE FEAST

What good is a functional kitchen without fabulous food? Not a problem at the Kohler household. After setting up Café Panache for Christmas Eve dinner, Kevin returns home to cook for upwards of 30 family and friends. "My mother used to be the cook, but I've taken over." What's on the menu? "The piece de la resistance in my family has always been the pasta," he quips. "It's always about the pasta. The cheese ravioli is more important than the turkey." Everything is homemade, or more precisely, restaurant made. Kevin preps in the restaurant—pasta and sauces—and brings them home to reheat. "Most of the burners

are going at the same time," says Christy.

In addition to pasta, Kevin prepares the traditional seven fishes, starting with lobster. "My mom cooked the lobster in the red sauce," he says. "The lobster wasn't so important, it was all about the gravy." But now, as chef, Kevin boils his lobster in salted water for about four minutes. He reheats the cooked pasta in the sauce, then puts the lobster on top, almost as a garnish. "I serve it clean," he says. "I take the pain out of it."

Other components to the meal: calamari salad, squingili salad, octopus, baked clams, shrimp—hot (scampi) and cold (cocktail)—and smelts. Kevin gets his seafood delivered fresh from Peter's Fish Market in Midland Park. All he does is make the call. "He has a long-standing relationship with his fish people," adds Christy. "He gets what he wants."

"Christmas Eve is like the Super Bowl of meals," laughs Kevin.

Christy dresses the table, insist-

ing that this be a sit-down meal. Her 78-inch round dining room table expands to accommodate up to 12, "if everyone squeezes," she says. "We put the overflow at tables set up in the den." She rents tables and chairs so everyone has a seat. Virtually every space—dining room, family room/den—is walk-to-wall guests.

Dessert is served buffet style from elaborate tables in the foyer; it's a mix of home-baked goods and items from Café Panache. No one leaves hungry.

Christy is thrilled with the kitchen's design, and she doesn't mind playing second fiddle to her husband. "After 20 years of marriage, I'm used to being the Ed McMahon to his Johnny Carson," she jokes. ■

RESOURCES: Interior design: Christy Kohler, CK Design, Mahwah, 201-327-4977, ckdesigninc.com. Kitchen design: Anthony Passanante, Anthony Albert Studios, Waldwick, 201-857-2868, anthonyalbertstudios.com. Appliances: Thermador, thermador.com. Painting: MBG Interiors, 201-788-1294. Framing and construction: VH Construction, Midland Park, 201-389-6666, vhnconstruction.com. Backsplash: Calcutta Mosaic Tile, Stratta Tile Boutique, Wyckoff, 201-251-0717, strattainc.com. Antique Mirroring: Artique Glass Studio, Ridgewood, 201-444-3500, artiqueglassstudio.com. Reclaimed cedar beams: Boards and Beams Co., Fairfield, 973-299-6100, woodboardsandbeams.com. Concrete Counter: TrueForm Concrete, Wharton, 973-7500, trueformconcrete.com. Custom Hood: Chris Smith Craft Fabricators, Hackensack, 908-850-1728, craftfabricators.com. Laminate wood flooring: Floortown, Paramus, 201-261-8848. MGB Interiors is in Allendale.