

KITCHENWISE



The Lure of Fire

Cold winters are easier to handle when your kitchen has an all-purpose fireplace

BY KATHLEEN BRENNAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ANDRÉ BARANOWSKI

LONG-TIME California residents Brigit and Casey Binns had never imagined that they'd be living on the East Coast, let alone in rural New York. But while visiting friends in the Hudson Valley a year and a half ago, the couple came across an old, 28-acre mushroom farm for sale in the town of Athens, about two hours north of Manhattan, and the price included a pond and gorgeous views of the Hudson River. Something about the remoteness and the pastoral beauty of the place intrigued them, and they loved the idea of living on an expansive piece of land, but it was the price that sealed the deal. The same amount, according to Brigit, wouldn't even buy a bicycle rack back home in Venice Beach. "The good life isn't available in California anymore," she says matter-of-factly. "There are just too many people trying to do it." Fortunately, relocating was an easy proposition. The couple don't have any children, and their jobs—she's written 13 cookbooks (*The Palm Restaurant Cookbook*, published by Running Press in 2003, is the latest); he's an actor—are "flexible enough".

Within months, the Binns

were overseeing construction of their new, two-bedroom home. The 1,800-square-foot wood-sided structure was designed to resemble a barn that had been converted into a house. Its hub is a 30-by-25-foot room with a 21-foot-high ceiling, and about half that space is devoted to the kitchen. While a professional designer handled the rest of the house, the kitchen was Brigit's project.

Inspired by William Rubel's *The Magic of Fire* (Ten Speed Press, 2002), a book about open-hearth cooking that she'd read a few years earlier, Brigit decided to install a waist-high fireplace specifically meant for preparing food. "I figured that if it had to be cold outside, this would be a fun way to warm up. I was also seduced by the idea of getting back to the simple life."

As Rubel's book makes clear, you can cook over any fire, but for optimum heat and convenience you must meet certain requirements. For instance, a shallow firebox will throw the heat forward—toward the cook, so to speak. Likewise, if you want to have the option of cooking on the hearth itself (if the firebox, say, is too crowded with dishes, or if you need a steady stream of hot embers), it must be about 18 inches deep.

Brigit positioned the fireplace (the exterior of which was finished with a rust-and-moss glaze to make it resemble the exteriors found in Siena, Italy) along the rear wall between the kitchen and the dining area; to link it clearly to the former and provide a handy "back counter", she placed an island within reach. The five-by-eight-foot island, where Brigit does most of her prep work, was certainly well conceived. The backside contains a six-burner cooktop, a built-in garbage can, and several heavy-duty drawers for pots and pans; both ends feature a series of cubbyholes for storing wine; and the front holds dozens of cookbooks



on open shelves. The butcher-block top extends nine inches over the island's base so that people sitting in the surrounding chairs won't bang their knees and feet into it.

Because of a glitch with the sink installation, the counters ended up being about an inch higher than planned, which makes cutting on them a bit uncomfortable for Brigit. As for the sink area proper, upper cabinets were sacrificed in favor of three large windows that overlook the pond. The two on the right side open up to a screened-in porch complete with a conventional fireplace. Brigit designed the windows flush with the counters to facilitate the passing of dishes from the kitchen to the porch. After all, even with so many reasons to stay in her kitchen, it's hard to keep a Californian indoors for too long. (For details, see *THE PANTRY*, page 88.)

Would you like to share your own kitchen-design ideas with other SAVEUR readers? Send us photos of your kitchen, both overall and in detail, along with a few lines telling us what you think is special about it. Please note that submissions cannot be acknowledged or returned. Our address: Kitchenwise, SAVEUR, 304 Park Avenue South, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10010.

1. Primitive Force "During the cold months," says Brigit, "it seems natural to do most of the cooking in the fireplace." The Binnses grill steaks and sausages (as shown), use a rotisserie for chickens and pork loins, and bury vegetables like radicchio and artichokes directly in the embers. Although they were novices at the technique before they moved into their home, Brigit claims that fireplace cooking is an intuitive process: "You just need to practice," she says.

2. Salt Mine Brigit always keeps a selection of various salts, including fleur de sel, smoked salt, and Hawaiian red salt, next to her cooktop. "It's like an artist's palette of colors that you can pick and choose from," she notes.

3. Top Choice For their countertops the Binnses chose coral-colored honed and filled travertine tiles, a material more frequently used for floors. "I think it's beautiful," says Brigit. "It's so colorful, and you can even see bits of fossils in it." Also on the plus side is the fact that hot pots may be placed directly on the surface with no worries. The downside is that the countertop doesn't come with any trim pieces, so Brigit had to think up creative solutions for edges and curves.

4. Clean Air Because the ceiling above the cooktop is so high, installing the stove's standard ventilation hood wasn't a possibility. Instead, the Binnses put in a retractable downdraft vent behind the rear burners that works just as well.

5. Hot Stuff This footed cast-iron grill pan, which features a well in the handle for catching drippings, is both handsome and practical. Pans like this can be bought at some antiques shops, and they sometimes also turn up on the Internet.