



## The Drawing Board

# A Designer's Own Kitchen Gets a Facelift

by **Karla Araujo**

Photography by Charlie Utz

While Interior Designer Mary Rentschler of Vineyard Haven was busy helping clients create customized spaces in their homes, the center of her own was showing its age. Renovated twenty-two years ago, Mary's white-painted cabinets and white formica countertops were yellowing. The finish on her adjacent fir and oak floors was mismatched. Her cabinets lacked pull-out shelves and drawers. So when she inherited a small nest egg, Mary decided to dedicate a kitchen renovation to her late father and grandparents and not, as she put it, "pitter the money away."

"My goal was to freshen up the kitchen," she explains. "But I kind of backed into it." Obsessed with soapstone, Mary approached Falmouth countertop contractor George Bianchi of Bianchi's Tile & Marble to find out what it would take to simply replace the countertops. Soapstone, a natural rock that's quarried like granite and marble, has been used for thousands of years in both functional and decorative applications. Composed primarily of talc, soapstone feels soft and smooth but is more earthy than granite, slate or marble.

"It's an old, honest material," Mary says. "When I see it I think of the kitchens in Newport mansions. It has a great sense of history and I love its natural qualities."

According to Mary, the decision to replace all of her countertops with soapstone set the wheels in motion for what would become a larger-than-planned refurbishing. "It was hard to stop," she acknowledges, but says that she is delighted with the finished kitchen, office and storage area. Because she operates Rentschler & Company out of her home (with indispensable Associate Designer Kira Sullivan), Mary knew it was time for an upgrade.

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Recycled antique columns (left) retrieved from a family summer house flank the entry hall and sit on the island's soapstone counter, in contrast, to the clean high gloss horizontal shiplap boards and modern counter brackets and handles fabricated by Whit Hanschka. The combined levels of lighting provided by the undercounter LED lights, industrial pendants, ceiling mount lights and tech track lighting work successfully together and enhance the soapstone sink – and the soapstone's lightening-like veining – all thanks to Aurora Lighting Solutions.

The beachstone color palette throughout the downstairs, combining high gloss and matte finishes creates a flow from room to room with a couple of accent deeper toned walls. Jevon Rego's painting crew worked their magic. Blasts of colors from artwork, fabrics and l'objets d'art add punctuation and surprise.



The extra large double sink (above) with washboard detailing and a low divider allows for separate uses or can be flooded and operate as one giant sink. All stonework is the artful fabrication and installation of George Bianchi and gang! The hutch-like cabinet with a wooden counter (above middle) mimics the Belgian smoke technique used on the floors done by MV Color and Finish.



This area (above left) operates as command central with the phone, an under cabinet TV/DVD/radio system, file cabinet drawers and ample space for cookbooks. The soapstone counter continues into the pantry / bar (above right) with counters and a large, deep utility sink handy for the lobster pot cleanup or filled with ice and beer!



“I use my kitchen as a test kitchen and my home environment to see how ideas will work for my clients,” she says.

Describing her 1940s shingle style cottage as “a little bump of a house,” Mary’s classic New England kitchen had been designed with the help of Vineyard Haven architect Margaret Curtin and graphic designer Carol Kolodny, Mary’s former business partner. “It was a great kitchen plan when we created it more than twenty years ago,” Mary says. “And it still works.” But in addition to the “miles of soapstone” she hoped to incorporate were a second oven, refinished floors, painted and retrofitted cabinets, painted walls, new hardware, enhanced lighting, decorative cushions, new heating and cooling, and roofing repairs.

With the Island economy in the doldrums, Mary assembled her go-to team of home improvement specialists,

all of whom, she says, worked with her to keep the project’s costs manageable. First, she consulted with architect Chuck Sullivan, co-owner of Sullivan O’Connor Architects of Oak Bluffs, about structural issues.

“Mary likes to bounce things off others,” Chuck says. “That’s a strong point. But she had a clear vision of what she wanted.” Having worked together on several projects in the past, Chuck is an enthusiastic advocate of Mary’s design sense. “I love her style,” he explains. “It’s crisp, natural -- not a lot of frills. It’s fresh and clean.”

Woodworker Gary Reynolds of Edgartown reconfigured the kitchen’s tall cabinets (originally installed by contractor Lawrence Clancy of Oak Bluffs) with new sliding shelves and drawers, some custom crafted, some ready-made. “We wanted to maximize the cabinetry,” Mary says. “Pull-outs

change your life, just like that,” she adds with a chuckle. Fine metalworker Whit Hanschka of Vineyard Haven created the new hand-forged metal hardware.

Painter Jevon Rego of Oak Bluffs refreshed walls and transformed cabinets with a high-gloss Benjamin Moore latex paint in a light taupe shade, derivative, Mary says, of the rocks she sees on her morning walks. John and Mary Ellen Casey of MV Color & Finish blended the old and newer floors, creating a mellow driftwood tone.

A key ingredient in the new kitchen is the improved lighting installed by Jerry Baric of Aurora Lighting Solutions, Oak Bluffs. Mary, an enthusiastic proponent of well-designed lighting systems, encourages a combination of ambient (or general), task, and accent lighting in the living areas she creates.

The finished kitchen, she believes, is a testament to her development as a

designer. “I tried to keep the palette quieter and more neutral,” she says. “Food is colorful. Other things stand out. I had too much color in my house. I think the new kitchen reflects a level of maturity.”

Discussing the rebirth of her own kitchen allows Mary to offer her views on kitchens in general. “Embrace the chaos of the kitchen,” she advises. “Kitchens are the heart of the house. They used to be sequestered but it’s where people end up now. Kitchens are getting more real and it’s a lovely thing.”

Her recommendations to anyone seeking to remodel or design a new kitchen: First, get advice from a dedicated cook. Second, know your own habits. Third, work with an interior designer or a kitchen planner to fine-tune the details.

“People think they want to put away the mess of a kitchen,” Mary says. “I want to see what I have. I love deep

drawers in cabinets and cool containers in pantries. I like open places where you can keep the mess. It’s time to get the work aspect of the kitchen back.”

Mary also offers these money-saving tips: “Not everyone needs stone in their kitchen. Think about wood, stainless steel, zinc or concrete countertops, even butcher block instead of stone. Or search for remnants of stone or slabs of slate.” She says she saved several thousand dollars on her own renovation by installing an Italian six-burner Bertazzoni range that sells for about one-half the cost of a Viking or Wolf but features a similar style and a good track record for reliability.

With projects ranging from sprucing up the lobby of Vineyard Haven’s Mansion House hotel to the complete refurbishing of a home in Washington, DC’s historic Georgetown neighborhood, Mary is happily at work in her own new

space. “I’m so lucky,” she concludes. “I listen and learn about how people live, what they think they want, and guide them to what they’ll love. It’s a discovery process, helping people feel at peace in the places they enjoy most.” **vs**

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**Additional vendors who provided services for Mary’s kitchen renovation:**

**Sean Williams**, plumber, Vineyard Haven

**Alan Fortes**, Fortes Plumbing & Heating,

**Jim Brennan**, Brennan & Co., heating and air conditioning,

**Warren Mead**, shingler, roofing repairs

**Jacy Loose**, Affordable Services, handyman/landscaping services

**Valerie Reese**, designer-fabricator-seamstress

**Kate DesRosiers**, Bookkeeper Extraordinaire

**Bob Hughes**, LP Gas Installer