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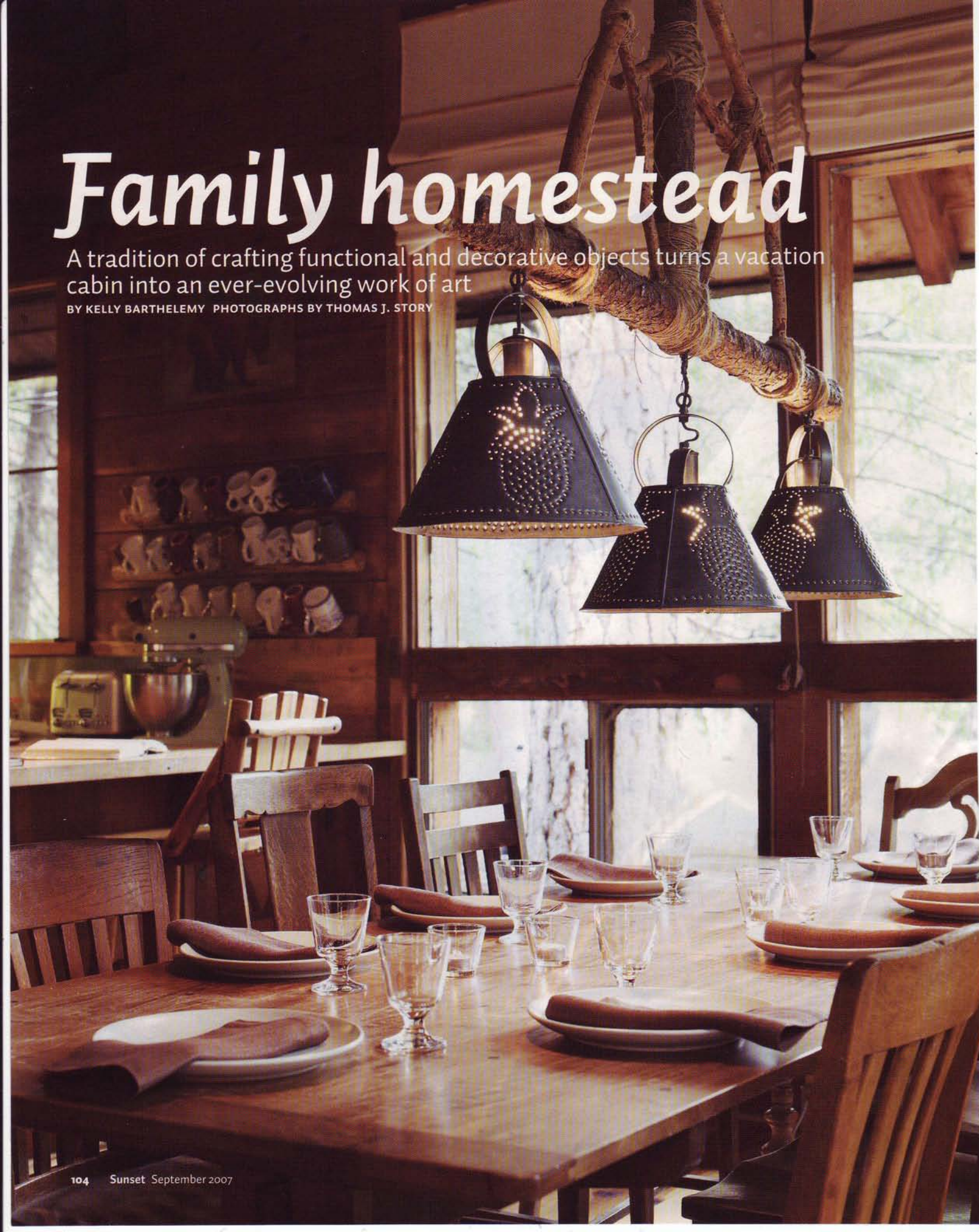
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# Family homestead

A tradition of crafting functional and decorative objects turns a vacation cabin into an ever-evolving work of art

BY KELLY BARTHELEMY PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS J. STORY







Three generations of the Pfeiffer family stand in front of their cherished cabin. From left to right, back row: Eric and Melissa Pfeiffer. Middle row: Gene, Joann, and Keegan Pfeiffer, and son-in-law Justin Burton. Front row: Son-in-law Walter Craven, wife Lisa, and their daughter, Parker, along with Luke and Jenny Pfeiffer. **OPPOSITE** Every room in the cabin is filled with one-of-a-kind handmade objects, like the "chandelier" of local pine with tin shades over the dining table.



**A MOUNTAIN GETAWAY** conjures up images of a place to relax and unwind, full of long, slow days spent doing a lot of nothing. But near Yosemite National Park, the 35-year-old vacation compound built by the Pfeiffers—a close-knit family of artists and craftspeople—is a different kind of retreat. It's more like a creative workshop that feeds the imaginative spirit of three talented generations of occupants.

Eric Pfeiffer, an Oakland-based product designer (read the March 2005 profile “New Wave Designer” on [Sunset.com](#)) and owner of 10 Grain design studio, was 2 years old when his father and maternal grandfather built the cabin in 1971. He and his sisters—Lisa, a painter, and Jenny, a photographer—spent their summers here exploring and developing their creative chops. “My grandfather had a big influence on us,” Eric says. “He taught us just to make something out of what we have.”

Evidence of that is everywhere in the cabin: beautifully crafted doors, rough-hewn log benches around the firepit, a handmade quilt on every bed. Each project comes with a story and vivid memories of its creation. “When I look back at my youth, the best times I had were here, making things with my father and grandfather,” Eric says.

Time spent at the cabin helped Eric form the basis for much of his professional design. “The direct relationship of form and function has definitely influenced my thinking—have an idea, see the potential in the raw material, then make it in the simplest way,” he says. In the kitchen, three rows of hand-carved

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wooden pegs hold a giant collection of coffee mugs; in the hallway and stairwell, family photos are clustered in whittled twig frames. Outside, a winding pathway of planks forms the route to each of three tent cabins (built by Eric and his wife, Melissa, over the course of one summer) and the shared outdoor bathhouse (built by Eric's father). It's all like useful sculpture: rational, straightforward, and beautiful. As Eric puts it, “The way things get made here—messy, dirty, and unfinished—is the purest design process of all.”

### Resourceful beginnings

Eric's father, Gene, owner of an electrical contracting business (and now an avid paraglider), has been vacationing in this part of the California Sierra since he was 6 weeks old. He purchased this land from his own father in 1966, then collaborated with his father-in-law, George Bianchi, a bridge builder, to design the cabin.

The two men had the external structure built in 1971, then did all the interior finish work themselves, including laying floors, putting up walls, and building the stairs to the sleeping loft. Gene says they “sort of camped in the house that whole winter, with tin-can lids covering knotholes in the floor,” making do with a temporary kitchen and an outhouse. After

### Elements of a great family cabin

**The Pfeiffers' Sierra retreat is full of simple ideas that create a casual, comfortable environment.**

#### DINING ALFRESCO

Cooking and eating outdoors, with informal seating and room for kids to roam, make meals for large groups easier and more relaxed.

#### HARDWORKING

**KITCHEN** Numerous work surfaces, including sideboards and a table that can be annexed during meal prep, invite multiple cooks to participate in a fun family activity.

#### IMPROVISED SETS

Hosting a crowd calls for a lot of dishes. A mismatched stock of plates, flatware, and coffee cups allows for the easy addition of new pieces.

**ROOM TO REST** A house doesn't need to be huge to sleep a lot of people. Kids love piling together in a sleeping loft. In the Pfeiffers' case, the addition of tent cabins provides privacy for adults.

#### NOSTALGIC DISPLAYS

Family memorabilia not only adds a personal touch, but also brings back fond memories of previous escapades. The Pfeiffer cabin walls are covered with old skis (some of them broken), photos from past years' events, kids' artwork, and visitors' contributions.

#### TRANQUIL TOUCHES

Invoking serenity indoors and out helps guests transition to a getaway state of mind. Peace-inducing ideas include cozy hearthside curl-up spaces and pathways that meander into the natural surroundings.

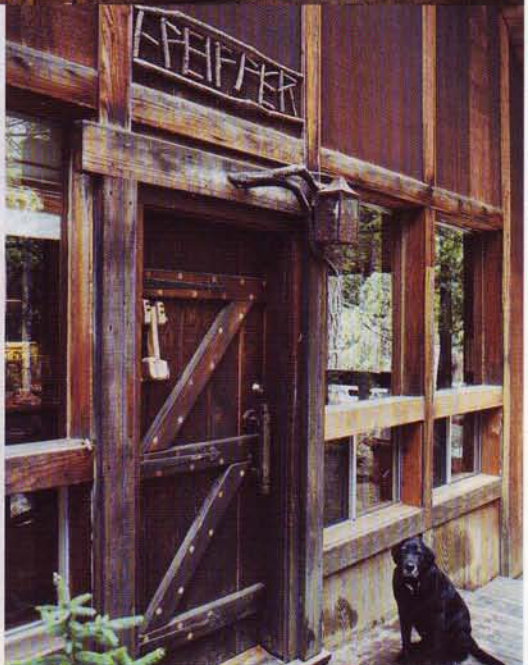






The cozy tent cabins are warmed with propane heaters and Joann Pfeiffer's handmade quilts. **TOP ROW** Dishes and flatware are stored in a cupboard, out of the way of the busy kitchen; three tent cabins and a shared bathhouse (with indoor and outdoor showers) add space for the expanding family; one of many outdoor

sculptures made from leftover building materials. **RIGHT** A motley collection of log benches and chairs provides seating around the firepit. **BOTTOM ROW** Laminated maps of Yosemite form the lampshade for this fireside seat; the family name is spelled out in twigs above a hand-crafted door and knocker.







learning “water witching” from an uncle, Gene and his brother drilled a well that produces enough water to serve their cabin and two others nearby. In the spring of 1972, they put in the permanent kitchen and bathroom, and the cabin was officially open for use.

George made the kitchen cabinets from wood scraps left over from the construction of the frame. Gene built a lot of the furniture, including most beds, the dining room table, and a cupboard that now houses a treasure trove of quilting remnants. Exposed steel bracing for the cabin frame was hand-cut from the discarded floors of the *San Jose Mercury News* printing presses. “My dad builds stuff as we need it, and it all lasts for decades,” Eric explains. “Then when something breaks or wears out, we just make another one.”

**“Coming to the cabin gives us time for creativity—something that’s often hard to come by in our day-to-day lives”**

Five years ago, the family decided some updates were in order, since the brood was continuing to grow in number, and some of the cabin’s original elements were showing their age. Linoleum flooring throughout the structure was replaced with pine everywhere except in the most heavily trafficked and water-prone areas—the kitchen, the front and side entryways, and both bathrooms, where they laid slate instead. The shower in the full bathroom was expanded, and a powder room was created in place of a closet.

Collaborative cooking had become a big part of life at the cabin, so the kitchen was refreshed. New appliances were added to handle larger meals (and more cleanup), and a bigger island was built, with cabinets underneath to match George’s originals. Now, when the kids are drawing on the chalkboard-covered refrigerator, two people are preparing lunch, and someone else is still working on breakfast, there’s enough room for everyone.

### Artistic heritage

On a recent weekend visit, Eric’s mother, Joann—who conducts a weeklong art camp at the cabin each summer for a group of Oakland public-school kids—was up early making her famous cinnamon rolls and showing Eric’s 8-year-old daughter, Keegan, how to cut them to the perfect size. “Coming to the cabin has been our one constant over the years,” she says. “It gives us time for creativity—something that’s often hard to come by in our day-to-day lives.”

After breakfast, Joann leads various family members in making homemade tortellini while others migrate toward their own creative pursuits. Lisa makes mixed-media collages with fabric scraps and paint; Jenny photographs the happenings indoors and out; Eric and Melissa (a graphic designer and owner of the Oakland-based design store Modernseed) help Keegan and her 5-year-old brother, Luke, form tiny clay sculptures at the dining table. The family legacy, it seems, is alive and well.

**RESOURCES** See page 142. ■





A full-page photograph of a woman and two children in a rustic kitchen. The woman, Lisa Craven, is standing at a wooden island counter, rolling out dough. A young girl, Parker, is sitting on a wooden stool to the right, also working with the dough. Another child, Keegan, is standing to the left, facing a chalkboard-covered refrigerator. The kitchen features dark wood cabinets, a large window, and two large pendant lights. The ceiling has exposed wooden beams.

Lisa Craven makes tortellini while her 3-year-old daughter, Parker, experiments with the dough, and niece Keegan sketches on the chalkboard-covered refrigerator.

**OPPOSITE, FROM TOP** A mosaic tile backsplash over the bathroom sink was one of the family's many weekend projects; a hand-painted piece of silkscreen on vinyl, created by Lisa Craven and Jenny Pfeiffer, hangs above the antique iron bed.



## Share your recipe



## Do you make a great healthy dessert?

We're looking for your most delicious and delectable healthy desserts for Valentine's Day. They can be lower fat, fruit filled, higher fiber, lower calorie, or a combination of the above—there are lots of ways to make a dessert that's good for you and your sweetheart on all levels. Please send us your original recipes, online or via regular mail, by September 17, 2007. You'll receive \$100 for each one published.

**ONLINE** Go to [www.sunset.com/submitrecipe](http://www.sunset.com/submitrecipe) and follow the form.

**BY MAIL** Send to Reader Recipes, Sunset Magazine, 80 Willow Rd., Menlo Park, CA 94025. Include recipe title, ingredients and directions, the origin of the recipe, and your name and daytime phone number.

## Resources

Following are sources for some products in this issue. Care has been taken to verify information, but info can't be guaranteed. Items not included may have sources named elsewhere in the issue, have come from personal collections, or have been discontinued.

**FROM THE GROUND UP** Page 77: Art consulting by Porter Associates ([www.porter-art.com](http://www.porter-art.com) or 949/722-1753). Poolside lounge chairs and ottoman from David Sutherland ([www.sutherlandteak.com](http://www.sutherlandteak.com) or 312/205-7700). Page 78 (bottom left): Painting near front door is Koan 38, oil and wax on canvas, by Larry Fodor from Porter Associates (see above). Page 79: Barcelona chairs in ivory (\$3,888 each) from Design Within Reach ([www.dwr.com](http://www.dwr.com) or 800/944-2233). Platner coffee table (\$1,213–\$1,590) available from Hive ([www.hivemodern.com](http://www.hivemodern.com) or 866/663-4483). Shaggy Raggy white rug by the Rug Market (\$48–\$338) from CSN Rugs ([www.csnrugs.com](http://www.csnrugs.com) or 800/630-6087). Abaca large baskets (\$44) from Waterworks ([www.waterworks.com](http://www.waterworks.com) or 800/899-6757). Page 80 (top left): Bateig blue limestone floor; Waterworks Arctic White glass mosaic tile on shower and wall; and Azul Makeda marble on tub and counter, all from Euro Laguna Marble ([www.eurolaguna.com](http://www.eurolaguna.com) or 714/491-1999). Page 80 (top right): India Ink duvet and shams in black (\$48–\$198) from Anthropologie ([www.anthropologie.com](http://www.anthropologie.com) or 800/309-2500). Parsons bed (\$699) and Copenhagen nightstand in maple veneer (\$499) from Room & Board ([www.roomandboard.com](http://www.roomandboard.com) or 800/301-9720). Vermillion paint in desk nook from Benjamin Moore Paints (item 2002-10; [www.benjaminmoore.com](http://www.benjaminmoore.com) or 800/344-0400). Flower pillow by Designer's Eye (\$119) from 2modern ([www.2modern.com](http://www.2modern.com) or 888/222-4410). Page 80 (bottom right): Model 2097 30 chandelier (\$1,276); Eames aluminum side chairs (\$1,598 each) and management chairs (\$1,998 each) in Spinneybeck red España leather; and Parentesi extension table (\$2,700) from Design Within Reach (see above). Entro, 2007, oil, acrylic, and collage on canvas, by Shinique Smith from Porter Associates (see above). Page 80 (bottom left): Charles chaise longues by B&B Italia ([www.bebitalia.it](http://www.bebitalia.it) or 800/872-1697). Custom throw pillows. Nathalie bed by Flou (\$4,266) available from Limn Furniture ([www.limn.com](http://www.limn.com) or 415/543-5466). Tibetan wool and silk Rosemary rug (\$7,200) from Atelier Lapchi ([www.lapchi.com](http://www.lapchi.com) or 310/967-0087). Arco floor lamp (\$2,445) from Room & Board (see above). Antique textile framed in an acrylic box by Gorman Custom Framing ([www.gormanframing.com](http://www.gormanframing.com) or 949/631-7606). Hawaii Monkey stool in Cook pine (\$1,400; between chaises) from Design Around Objects ([www.daohome.com](http://www.daohome.com) or 310/289-8717). Page 82 (top): Eames 48-inch round table in ash (\$799), Series 7 chairs in lime (\$394 each), and Gratia orb planter in bronze (\$650) available from Design Within Reach (see above). Page 82 (bottom right): Custom firepit by Artecho ([www.artecho.com](http://www.artecho.com) or 310/399-4794). Thinking Man's chairs designed by Jasper Morrison for Cappellini in terra-cotta (\$1,918 each) from Unica Home ([www.unicahome.com](http://www.unicahome.com) or 888/898-6422). Swell single-seat club chairs manufactured by Richard Schultz (\$2,200 each) from Summit Furniture ([www.summitfurniture.com](http://www.summitfurniture.com) or 310/289-1266). Tawny Day Lilly paint on accent wall from Benjamin Moore Paints (item 2012-10; see above). Page 82 (bottom left): Harry sectional sofa with asymmetrical chaise (\$11,636 for set) by B&B Italia (see above). Eileen

Gray side table (\$500) from Design Within Reach (see above).

**STORAGE WITH STYLE** Page 84: Paints from C2 ([www.c2paint.com](http://www.c2paint.com)). Direct-vent gas Majestic fireplace from Vermont Castings ([www.vermontcastings.com](http://www.vermontcastings.com) or 800/668-5323). Bar window lifts in oil-rubbed bronze (\$16 each; as drawer pulls) from H.B. Ives ([www.schlage.com](http://www.schlage.com) or 800/654-2708). Small oval cupboard latches in oil-rubbed bronze finish (\$24 each; on cabinets) from Rejuvenation ([www.rejuvenation.com](http://www.rejuvenation.com) or 888/401-1900). Page 86 (top): Custom soapstone sink and Classic Marianna 3-centimeter soapstone countertops fabricated by Architectural Stone Werkes (206/768-8305). Page 86 (bottom right): African Violet paint from Benjamin Moore Paints (item 2116-50; see above).

**OPEN UP THE KITCHEN** Page 92: General contractor was Gillispie Construction ([www.gillispieconstruction.com](http://www.gillispieconstruction.com) or 415/380-9982). Flos Romeo Soft S2 large pendant lamp designed by Philippe Starck (\$588) available from Hive (see above). Barbara Barry caned arm chairs (\$1,692 each) from McGuire ([www.kohlerinteriors.com](http://www.kohlerinteriors.com) or 800/662-4847). Page 94 (top right): Off-white storage cabinets and cherry-wood bar countertop fabricated by Elmack Cabinetry ([www.elmackcabinetry.com](http://www.elmackcabinetry.com) or 415/388-1293). Barbara Barry caned bar stools (\$1,868 each) from McGuire (see above). Page 94 (right): Satellite bowl designed by Carlo Contin (\$48) from MoMA Store ([www.momastore.com](http://www.momastore.com) or 800/447-6662). Dual-fuel 36-inch Wolf range ([www.wolfappliance.com](http://www.wolfappliance.com) or 800/332-9513). Stainless steel Broan 42-inch Rangemaster hood (\$619) from Cherin's (<http://cherins.homeappliances.com> or 415/864-2111). Honed black granite countertops from Imperial Marble Kitchens & Baths ([www.imperialmarble.com](http://www.imperialmarble.com) or 650/873-3574).

**FAMILY HOMESTEAD** Page 106: Pioneer 12- by 14-foot tent cabin (\$3,800) from Sweetwater Bungalows ([www.sweetwaterbungalows.com](http://www.sweetwaterbungalows.com) or 800/587-5054). PS cabinet in red (\$100) from Ikea ([www.ikea.com](http://www.ikea.com) or 800/434-4532). Bent Ply by Eric Pfeiffer and Dung Ngo (Princeton Architectural Press, 2003; \$45) from Modernseed ([www.modernseed.com](http://www.modernseed.com) or 866/301-9635). Page 109: Foto pendant lamp in aluminum (\$8.99) from Ikea (see above). ■

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