GIVE ME THAT OLD-TIME KITCHEN

After seeing 325 Manhattan apartments, a food writer found one with a kitchen she could work with. Then the real adventure—taking it back to its 1930s charm—began

BY REGINA SCHRAMBLING

When my consort and I set out to buy an apartment with a dream kitchen, all we were looking for was a big, bright, airy space where we could move right in and immediately start cooking. Two years and 325 apartments later, we had refined our fantasy enough to recognize potential perfection when we saw it. We seized on a co-op built in 1929 that had been occupied for the last 38 years by a single family who hadn't done much to update it.

What sold Bob and me on this kitchen, after seeing endless others outfitted with state-of-the-art dishwashers, ranges, and refrigerators, was simply its untouched condition. It had nineteen vintage wooden cabinets, all with original hardware, including one just the right size for mops and brooms and dishpans. It had 1929 white ceramic tile alongside the stove and around the one window, which had been installed in the 1980s. It had a butler's pantry, and it had a maid's room that could be converted into my office. The whole place wore its age amazingly well, more like Georgia O'Keeffe than Joan Rivers.

The kitchen, in short, bore a strong resemblance to the fantasy photos we had been collecting in between reading real estate ads and meeting apartment brokers. The one in particular that entranced us was photocopied from a 1930s home-decorating magazine somewhere around the time we had seen a mere 100 apartments and started to understand that older was better for our tastes. All we had to do to duplicate it was erase the few "improvements" the co-op's previous owner had added: the sink-cabinet-and-dishwasher combination, the
What was once a dark hall leading to a service door is now a 12-foot working/eating area (above) with a changing display of art. Truncating the maid’s room just behind the cabinets at right created a more traditional L-shaped kitchen (plan, right).

cheap 1970s gas stove, the buzzing fluorescent ceiling lights, and the window air-conditioner blocking the gorgeous late-afternoon sun. Otherwise, the traditional triangle layout was eminently workable, no less today than in 1929.

Having seen so many flawed renovations in our protracted apartment hunt, we knew we needed an architect. We interviewed half a dozen, most of whom either looked at us like Martians when we whipped out our picture or, seeing only an awkwardly shaped bleak space, just said sadly, “I feel so sorry for you.” (Part of the problem was undoubtedly our thirties budget: $30,000, more or less, for everything.) And so we instantly knew that architect Frederic Schwartz was our collaborator when he looked around the echoing white shell of the kitchen and asked: “Thirties look? No microwave? No dishwasher? You’re serious? Okay, I think I can help you.”

Working from his discussions with us, as well as our photocopy, he drew up plans to move a wall to steal space from the oversized foyer and make the kitchen even more commodious (218 square feet); shorten the maid’s room to give the kitchen more of an L-shape; and install French doors and an interior window between the kitchen and maid’s room to capture that sensational sunlight. He designed a vent from the stobe through the maid’s room and out the maid’s bathroom window so that we would not have to block that one kitchen window. He advised replacing the mustard-colored Formica countertops with butcher block and adding one 12-foot counter across the longest wall of the kitchen to make an eat-in area. He suggested installing a second sink for a bar in another section of butcher-block counter. And he added new areas of white ceramic tile to tie together the 1990s and 1920s ends of the kitchen. At Bob’s suggestion, he drew up plans that called for deepening the counters from 16 to 24 inches. The cabinets underneath were then pulled forward and extra wood was added to extend the shelves inside, while the original drawers were set into rolling extensions.

Then Schwartz focused on the design details. For ceiling fixtures, he chose Halophane lights from the thirties that had been removed from a factory and restored. For the floor, he designed a traditional thirties pattern in black-and-gray vinyl tiles and then, after Bob demanded more pizzazz, he devised a four-color, two-pattern grid including red and green. (He also wisely suggested laying a cushioning sheet of plywood over the original cement-linoleum floor to prevent backaches from standing while cooking.)

While Fred was working on the blueprints, Bob and I had to find new old appliances. We knew the antique stove we wanted, having carried around a photo for all those long months of apartment shopping. And we found it on a business trip in California, stopping over in Los Angeles at Antique Stove Heaven, a shop in a rundown neighborhood owned by a mother and two sons. The showroom was stocked with rows and rows of hulking, heavy forties and fifties Wedgewood ranges in gleaming white, pastel, or deep red enamel. (Stoves older than that are smaller, less efficient, and certainly less practical for a writer testing recipes for contemporary cooks.) All of them had been salvaged and completely restored, inside and out, by the proprietors, the Williamses. We paid $1,199 for a stove with four burners, a griddle, two ovens, and two broilers, then added $170 more for installation of a working clock and a timer ($85 each) on the stove top and $250 to cover the cost of having a local cabinetmaker build a crate for our jewel. The Williamses also advised calling a moving company back home with a West Coast delivery, on the theory that trucks need cargo on a return trip and thus will charge less—a good suggestion that saved us $200. Our bill for delivery: $600. Shortly after, our range, with nearly as many BTUs as a modern home Garland, was delivered to our door. Installing it was simply a matter of hooking up the gas line and inserting a plug to activate the stove, timer, and oven bulbs.

Stove down, sink to go. At first we wasted time trekking through architectural salvage yards in search of our fantasy: a white enamel fixture on legs with one shallow sink and one deep one where the dish drainer (Continued on page 166)
(and freshly washed dishes) could be hidden. Finally, in a flash of brilliance, we photocopied our photocopy of the thirties magazine sink with its exposed pipes to make “Wanted—Reward” signs and posted them all along Central Park West, the gold coast of big prewar apartments. After one crank call, the very next morning we answered the phone to hear the thick Irish brogue of a superintendent in a building three blocks south: “I have your sink here; it’s going out with the garbage tomorrow unless you come get it.” And so, for the low price of two $20 tips to his porters, we trundled home a 60-year-old workhorse that needed only a $240 reglazing to look newer than new.

(Unfortunately, the new finish is far more fragile than the old. It chips at the slightest provocation, which means we can never toss pots into the sink, and it takes constant care with special cleansers to keep it a lustrous white.)

For the stove hood, Fred repeatedly sketched modern-esque designs with sharp angles while Bob and I envisioned softly rounded curves to echo the shape of the stove. Ultimately Fred and his contractor threw up their hands and pointed us in the direction of Brooklyn, to a restaurant supplier that took our design, crafted out of brown wrapping paper, and re-created it in stainless steel.

The only element of our kitchen that I would concede the decades have improved upon is the refrigerator. We would have gone to the ends of the continent to find a working antique, if not for the fact that iceboxes of the twenties and thirties were all icebox and no refrigerator, with no room for much more than a bottle of milk. A relic would never do. We stuck with Mrs. Silver’s 1970s GE appliance, happily once we realized that most refrigerators made more recently are freezer-heavy and much taller than the slot under our 1929 cabinets.

Those cabinets were actually improved as a result of an accident. After a chemical stripper was left on the doors too long, the soft wood revealed under 63 years of lead paint looked as if it had been afflicted with a skin disease. We were heartbroken, but our architect was, as usual, simply inspired. He arrived one afternoon with a massive pack of paint chips and flipped through them for half an hour before finding a light but luminous green that, when applied to the centers of those old doors, could pass for gleaming glass.

And his finishing touch was just as much a mix of practicality and creativity. We asked for something dramatic to decorate the foyer, on the wall we had moved to steal space for the kitchen. First he designed an open slot across the top that would let light and air into the foyer and give guests a sense of where the kitchen is. Then he created a stunning collage. A blow-up black-and-white photograph of a cow attached to a milking machine at the 1939 World’s Fair in Queens is superimposed on a glaringly green wall with the bright red directive: Eat Here.