

A Toast to Ingenuity

Never mind that the best pub liquor is colloquially dubbed “top shelf” — most folks stow their own brag-worthy cognacs or cask-strength Macallan somewhere in dark, bottom cabinets, away from the daily chaos of cooking, dining and clean up.

Come party time, though, it’s awkward to be constantly ducking away from one’s guests to mix drinks. And even worse, absent a traditional home bar, is lining up the libations on the kitchen counter — about as elegant as a frat party.



This antique, French Country armoire has led many lives. After serving for years as an entertainment center, the interior was restructured and upholstered to create a tidy dry bar.

BY MELANIE MCGEE BIANCHI | PHOTOS BY BRENT FLEURY

ONE OF KATHRYN LONG'S TALENTS IS TUCKING ODD-SHAPED PIECES INTO REVELATORY SPACES.

Jeff and Karen Loftin of Biltmore Forest needn't worry about either scenario. With the help of their interior designer Kathryn Long (ASID) of Ambiance Interiors, the couple stirs cocktails from the upholstered recesses of an 18th-century oak armoire.

The piece originated in Normandy and was purchased by Long years ago to be used as an entertainment center. One of her specialties, she says, "is finding wonderful pieces for my clients. I spied this one at Village Antiques in Biltmore Village. We really needed an armoire for the Loftins' TV, and this worked great in that capacity for a number of years."

But then, she says, "They decided to build." During the construction phase of their new home, the Loftins concluded that they didn't want a TV in their living room. "So they wondered what they were going to use the armoire for."

Another of Long's talents is tucking odd-shaped pieces into revelatory spaces. "Before ground is even broken on a new home, I often start a plan for furniture based on the blueprint," she says. "I came up with the idea of putting the armoire behind the sofa. It is very tall — 90 inches — so it looks great on a tall wall near the kitchen."

In the Loftins' airy, family-room-feeling kitchen, where the family tends to congregate, comfy chairs and sofas vie for space with the placement of food-preparation islands. Ultimately "there was no place in the new space plan for storage of liquor and wine," notes Long. "The Loftins do entertain

quite a bit, so we turned the armoire into a bar."

"It was such a neat idea, like having a new piece," says Karen, who points out that she also uses the bar for coffee and tea when serving breakfast or lunch. "It's so warm and inviting," she says, adding that she sat down with Long in the planning phase to help tailor the armoire's new look.

With the help of a local antique restorer, Long launched into transformation mode. "All the interior was restructured," she says. "We took out what was there and started all over again." The piece's increased utility is reflected in its three tiers of various-sized shelves. Its enhanced French Country look comes courtesy of Long's upholstered interior, which is corded, throw-pillow-style, at the seams.

"I was looking for a fabric with a dark print," she says — the better to complement the armoire's original detailed carving and serve as a background for the bar's frameless interior mirror.

Thus reclaimed (or rather re-reclaimed), the armoire is a vital part of the Loftins' social flow. A strong aspect of rehabbers' etiquette is the expectation that rescued objects will carry their weight in usefulness. Conceding her "incredible practical streak," Long is proud of the armoire-turned-bar's undeniable functionality.

"I can tell you that the antique wood of the shelves is highly stained from wine," she says. "This is something they truly use." ■



A whimsical giraffe offers libations to guests. The homeowners also use the repurposed armoire to serve coffee and tea at breakfast and luncheon gatherings.