

Sweet & Simple

Whether At Work Or At Home, Domestic Diva And Mom Of Two **Katie Brown** Lives Out Her Trademark Aesthetic: Casual Comfort, Midwestern Enthusiasm And A Whole Lot Of Love

By KATIE MAIN



In an industrial-looking stretch of Red Hook's Van Brunt Street sits Katie Brown's workshop, its exterior painted bright orange with crisp white trim. Inside are shelves displaying hammered wooden mixing bowls and white ceramic dishware; a gaggle of wooden desks with iMacs; an idea board covered in notes and magazine clippings; and a spacious, rustic-looking test kitchen.

This is where Brown—host of PBS's cooking, crafting and gardening show “Katie Brown Workshop,” author of a handful of books on entertaining; designer of a line of home goods and frequent guest on national shows like “Good Morning America” and “The Today Show”—works her magic. (Well, Brown and her energetic staff, as she's quick to point out).

Brown's career as domestic diva began almost 15 years ago when, as a struggling actress and proprietor of a funky vintage boutique called GOAT, she was tapped by Lifetime to become “the next Martha Stewart” and was given her own show, “Next Door With Katie Brown.” Since then, Brown has become known across the country for her smart, simple, embrace-your-mistakes approach to making a house a home—as well as for her earnest, “you-can-do-it!” enthusiasm.

Today, as a working mom of two, Brown finds the line between work and family life increasingly hard to define. In fact, as we sit down for our interview, Brown's daughters, Prentiss, 6, and Meredith, 2, are scampering about the workshop, fraternizing with the staff and generally spreading joy and laughter wherever they go. “It's really hard to separate what I do for work from what I do at home,” Brown admits.

But it's a gray area she can live with. After all, as Brown tells her audience, it's okay not to know all the answers—but “if you keep it simple, you can't go wrong.”

Photography by MICHAEL JURICK





You grew up a member of a large family in Petoskey, Michigan. Were your parents crafty, cooks, gardeners? My mom was totally crafty. When we turned 11, our gift was that we each got to decorate our own room. That was my first introduction to things like looking at wallpaper books and choosing my favorite colors. I have 32 first cousins and 14 aunts and uncles, and we all grew up in the same town and all of them are great cooks, all of them are great gardeners. You know how some families go sailing together or whatever? We're that family who likes to talk about food and decorating. It would be like bragging rights: "How many did you cook for last night?" "Try my tomato!"

Your big break came almost 15 years ago when Lifetime chose you to host your first show, "Next Door With Katie Brown." What do you think the television executives saw in you? I think they saw my passion, I think they knew I really loved it. I think there was a youthfulness to my approach that wasn't happening then. With Martha [Stewart] everything was so perfect, and then there were people doing things with popsicle sticks. But there was nobody in-between for people who didn't have a ton of money to redecorate or wanted to do a dinner party but weren't sure how. I was the first generation who grew up with working moms and there was a lot of [knowledge] that needed to be filled in. A lot of the cooking show hosts would say, "Put it in a double boiler," and I was like, "What if you don't know what a double boiler is?" So I explained everything. "The Wall Street Journal" once wrote that I did "domesticity for dummies," and at first I was really insulted, like they were insulting my audience. But then I read on and it wasn't that they were dumb, it was that I was answering their questions, and providing people with ideas, and telling them they can do it. I was a cheerleader in high school, and I'm like everybody's biggest fan. One time I remember with Lifetime I had made this cake, it was beautiful, and it came out of the oven—this is on

camera—and I was like, "Loook at this caaaake!" and they said, "Cut, cut! Don't get so excited when you take the cake out, you're an expert!" And I was like, "No, that's when you should fire me, if I'm ever *not* excited about the cake."

Tell me how you met your husband, TV executive William Corbin.

First of all, I didn't get married until I was 40. I used to do stand-up comedy to entertain the crew in-between takes of my show, and I'd say things like, "I'm so pathetic that I have to tell everyone else how to be a wife cause no one will marry me." And one day I'm doing this and I hear the executives, who are off in their little booths, announce, "We have a guy for you." So they set up this meeting, and we're sitting at this big conference table, and this one foxy guy is sitting about halfway around the table. He got up about halfway through the meeting because he had to go, and he handed me his card and said, "I'll help you with all the website development

and everything.” And the minute he left, all the executives turned into twelve-year-olds and leaned in and were like, “That’s the guy, that’s the guy, what do you think?” And that was it.

Together you and your husband produce your show, “Katie Brown Workshop,” right? Yes. I had always wanted my show on PBS, it’s my favorite network. I grew up being a huge Julia Child fan and watching all the cooking shows on PBS and to me that was just the ultimate. So I convinced my husband, “I want to be on PBS, I want to produce it myself, I don’t want to have any bosses.” So he quit his job and he got Procter & Gamble and Kraft to underwrite my show, and we’re now in our sixth season.

Tell me about your children, Prentiss (6) and Meredith (2). What do you love about being their mother? Prentiss has a compassionate creativity about her that I learn a lot from. And Meredith has a feisty stubbornness, an original determination, that I love watching. I love watching Prentiss be a big sister; that was something we almost missed. I didn’t have Prentiss until I was 41, and I adopted my second baby, and that was a tough decision and a struggle. My husband kept saying, “Stop thinking about all that IVF stuff, let’s adopt,” and he was right, because the minute I saw Meredith I was done.

Tell me about being an adoptive mom. What impact has the adoption experience had on your family, and on you as a parent? It is a brutal process, but it’s all worth it in the end. You know how with birthing they say you don’t remember the pain? Same with adoption. And there’s something about my bond with Meredith that I think is wrapped up in the fact that I almost didn’t have her. There’s something about that feeling of, *Oh my God, how did we luck out to find you?* that is just otherworldly and so precious and so great. I feel like I have the family I was meant to have; I think you find who you are supposed to find. That’s part of the reverence that I have towards Meredith and our connection—it’s like, “Well, *there you are!*”

Until recently, your family called Brooklyn home. Tell me what your life was like there—what were your favorite things to do as a family?

The great thing about Brooklyn is it’s so family-oriented. I was able to have a house with a backyard. It was only about 10 blocks from [my workshop], so I loved it because I could go home for my girls a lot. We loved the Carousel in Prospect Park, we loved the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, we loved Carroll Park. Some of my favorite restaurants are on Court Street and Smith Street. I loved the view from the top of our brownstone; we could see over Manhattan and we watched fireworks from there. We loved our neighborhood because on one side of us was a sort of yuppie couple with a child, and to the left of us were this couple who have lived there forever—he grew up in that house, they would make us pasta fagioli—so I had two extremes. And because Meredith was adopted and she is a child of color, I thought Brooklyn was a perfect place because it’s a colorblind place, and that was right for us.

You recently relocated to a new home in Connecticut. What made you decide to move? What do you like about it? I don’t know yet! We are remodeling our house; that’s pretty much what we’re focusing on right now. I like the fact that I can walk Prentiss to the end of my driveway and the school bus picks her

Katie Brown’s Home Design Tips For NYC Families

► Fill a room with light—and not just from the ceiling. Lamps at different levels go a long way toward bringing unique, rewarding perspectives to the places you thought you knew.

► I like homes that show the struggle. Whether it’s rough-hewn wooden floorboards or a stray brushstroke on the beams above a painted wall, the unplanned quirks of a home are what allow you to relate to it.

► Every room should have something reflective in it. It doesn’t have to be a floor-length mirror, just something with a surface that reflects a depth beyond its material.

► Always have something black in the room. This is my Aunt Nan’s advice, and she’s right: keeping just a few black items around, whether as big as a couch or as small as a vase, reliably upgrades a space to classic classiness.

For more of Katie Brown’s tips for families (including easy weeknight meal ideas!), visit newyorkfamily.com.

up and brings her right back home. And we’re on four acres now, so that’s pretty nice. My husband was commuting back and forth from Connecticut for work, so I like it for him. I took one for the team, let’s put it that way!

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Did becoming a mom influence your approach to your work? Absolutely. My tagline has always been “Keep It Simple,” but get yourself two kids, and you really have to keep it simple—don’t even give me one hard thing. I have 23- and 24-year-olds who work for me and they’ll say, “We found this great scampi recipe!” and I’m like, “No, no, no, I’m a working mom with two kids, I’m not making that recipe. How can we cut four of those steps out?”

How would you describe the Katie Brown aesthetic? It’s comfortable, it’s casual, it embraces mistakes. There’s a reality to it. That’s what people see in our show and in the books I write and the stories I tell—not every tape is cut perfectly, not every ribbon isn’t frayed. I like things that aren’t perfect because you can see the life and you can see the struggle. ✨