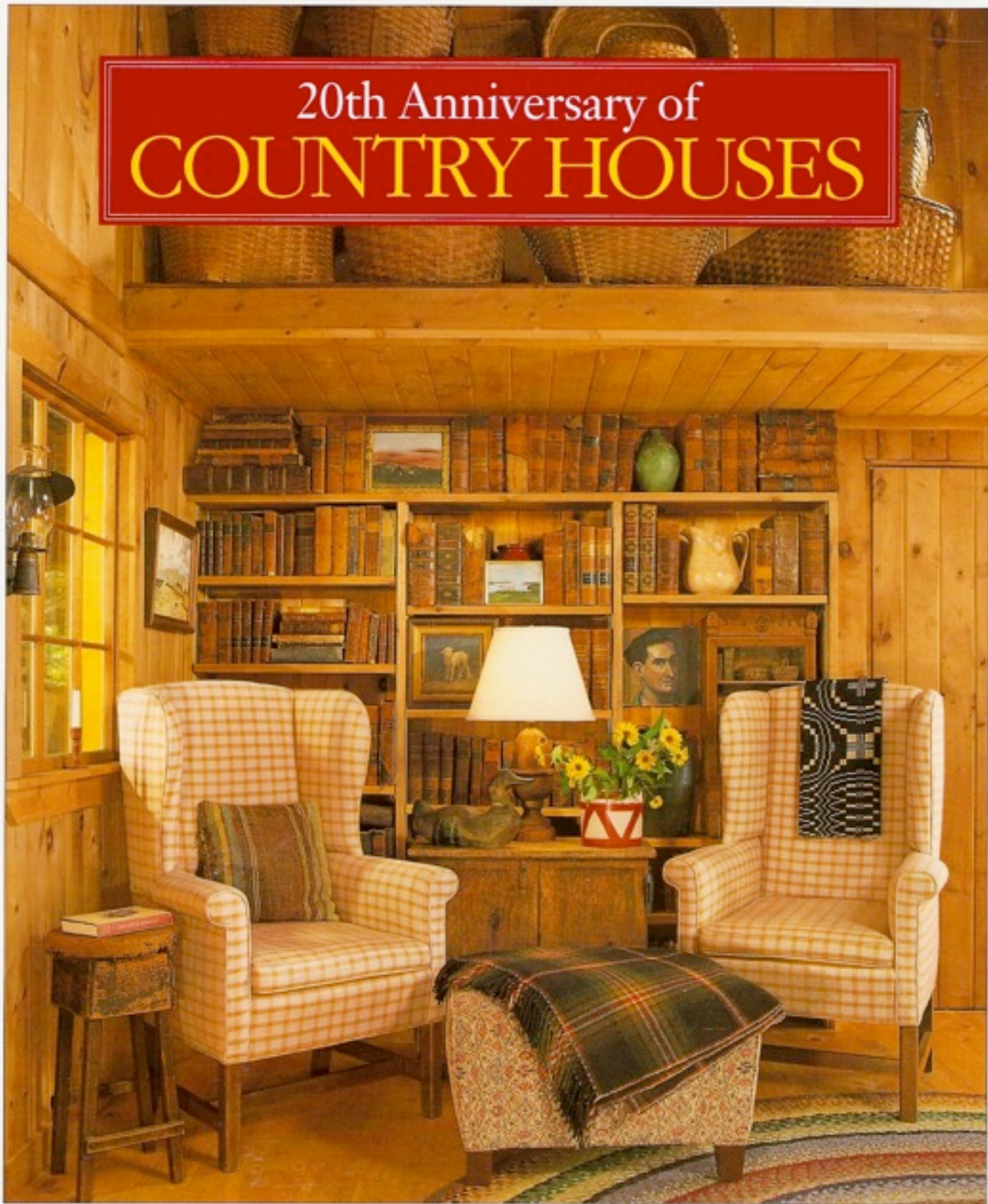


# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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## 20th Anniversary of COUNTRY HOUSES





# Elissa Cullman

Humor, Talent and the Importance of a Well-Timed Steak

By Nicholas von Hoffman

**E**LISSA CULLMAN HAS A solution to the problem that dogs every interior designer and architect: how to keep the crafts- and tradespeople on schedule. She feeds them.

"My father was a manufacturer who also owned the Peter Luger Steak House in Brooklyn. It was established in 1887, and it's been very famous ever since it got four stars from Craig Claiborne." Although



"I love the instant feedback in what I do, from the paint you mix to an antique Oriental carpet you've found," says Elissa Cullman (left).

the late gastronome's approbation could make the simplest sidewalk eatery the instant cynosure of gourmets the world over, it's also been named New York's number-one steak house in the Zagat guide for 20 years in a row. "My father's factory was across the street," says Cullman. "He ate lunch at the restaurant every day, and when the original proprietor died, he purchased it in 1950.

"I swear," she adds with a laugh, "this is how we get all our work done on time. To guarantee that the deadlines are met, I give invitation cards for the steak house to the curtain maker or whomever we need to get the order done in time, or I FedEx them a box of sirloin steak."

Two older sisters and a niece run the restaurant now. Ellie Cullman, like many another youngest child, says, "I didn't like my sisters bossing me around, so I had to find my own thing."

She spent a good portion of her childhood at the Yeshiva of Flatbush with "a lot of fun people like Wendy Wasserstein," the playwright. It was, she says, "an interesting bicultural school, where half of the curriculum was taught in Hebrew and the other half was in English. The really good thing about it was that you were always juggling 10 majors in two

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**ABOVE:** Working with Allison Babcock, of Cullman & Kravis, the designer gave the circular sitting room of a

couple's Bridgehampton house a comfortable, unpretentious feel (see *Architectural Digest*, March 2003).





LEFT: "I call it 'updated chinoiserie,'" she says about the conservatory she redecorated in New Jersey that includes a mural painted on canvas. "It's very bold, very graphic."

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languages, so I got used to working hard and being able to juggle things at an early age." Juggling, she will tell you, is something you ought to be good at if you are to succeed in the interior design business.

From the yeshiva, Cullman went on to Columbia University's Barnard College, where she studied history and art his-

tory and would eventually become a trustee. With nary a thought to becoming a decorator, she recalls, "after Barnard I was actually on my way to Harvard Law School when my husband proposed. I figured it was more important to get married to him than to go to law school. We moved to Japan in 1969. He was trained as a specialist in Japanese, and

we lived in Tokyo for two years. That was a very important time for me because I had no responsibilities. I just immersed myself in Japanese culture and became fluent in Japanese," thus perhaps becoming one of the few people in the world who can serve as a Japanese-Hebrew interpreter.

Returning to New York, Cullman entered a graduate

program in Japanese at Columbia, but fluent as she was, the written language defeated her. "The Chinese characters that you have to learn to master Japanese are," she explains, "impossible. Japanese words are so much harder to read and write than those of any other language in the world that I was a very quick dropout. But

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RIGHT: "It's modern, with a West-meets-East sensibility," Cullman says of a Manhattan dining room, which contains a Japanese two-panel screen and Biedermeier chairs.

FAR RIGHT: "High country style" is how Cullman has described the family room of a Connecticut house that features a mix of pieces and periods (*AD*, October 1999).





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## The Professionals

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then I landed at the Japan House Gallery, where I was an exhibition assistant."

After that it was on to several other cultural institutions, then cocurating two exhibits at what is now the American Folk Art Museum, "Andy Warhol's Folk & Funk" and "Small Folk: A Celebration of Childhood in America." Although she didn't know it at the time, the experience—"deciding what to include in an exhibition, what's the best of its kind and what tells the story"—was the perfect training for the future designer. But, she recalls, "I had spent all this time and had cost my husband so much money that I decided to do something that might be a little more profitable." So she hooked up with her friend Hedi Kravis to write the story of Kravis's divorce from her husband, Henry, the famous Wall Street shark.

"At first we thought we would write a novel," she recounts, but "of course, we had no training and had no idea of how to do it. Then we said, 'Let's make it a screenplay, because that's only 120 pages. Plot point one is on page 30, and plot point two is on page 90.' We spent about a year writing the screenplay. We then submitted it to our friend Stanley Jaffe, who had just gotten an Oscar for *Kramer vs. Kramer*. He read it and said it was the worst thing he had ever read; we had no

to be a lot less frustrating than writing."

Her enthusiasm for her almost accidental profession has not waned: "What I like about it is there's so much excitement to what we do. There's so much going on. Yes, we do work on some projects that are three or four years away, but there are always enough projects in the office that are immediate. There's something tangible that you can see every day—you can see the progress. That's the part I love."

Her partner died in 1997, but Ellie Cullman continues with the New York City-based Cullman & Kravis, which has a staff of 18. She says she has never lost a staff member to another firm, although, she notes, "a lot of my employees have moved, and a few have started their own businesses, which I certainly understand. We really have a great group of people. That doesn't mean I've never fired anybody, but there is such loyalty in our office." Firing, she says, "is the worst. But this is business, plus we're a service company, and everything has to be done properly and with great energy and dedication and an able compulsiveness. I think it's like dating; sometimes it's just not the right personality mix."

Cullman's firm also has to wrestle with changing times and technologies. In a house full of 19th-century antiques, do

**"I got used to being able to juggle things at an early age." Juggling, Cullman will tell you, is something you ought to be good at if you are to succeed in the design business.**

talent and we should just forget the whole thing. I was heartbroken because I had had so many different careers."

It is, to quote the old bromide, always darkest just before the dawn. "Friends had been telling both of us for years that we should redecorate or help them with their houses," Cullman remembers. "We used to go to people's houses and rearrange the furniture and tell them they had painted the walls the wrong color." Producer Jaffe, while rejecting their screenplay, asked Kravis and Cullman if they would decorate his home. "Stanley said, 'I want to be your first client.' Literally, we were in business the next day, which was October 1, 1984. It turned out

you skip low tables, a 20th-century invention, or wing it at the design board? The arrival of the flat-screen monitor has made hundreds of thousands of pieces of furniture obsolete. "All those pop-up TV cabinets that we did! All those linen presses that I made holes in the back of to take the plugs! It's so unnecessary now," the designer exclaims in her exuberant way, impervious to discouragement and on the lookout for a better tomorrow.

One tomorrow she is hoping for is to "be hired to do a Japanese guesthouse, with tatami and one scroll and the one perfect ceramic that reflects the season and the location. I would love to do that, but that one hasn't happened yet." □