

You're invited

I don't do simple

Or does she? **Susan Worts** is a practised hand





at making entertaining look easy

By Sydney Loney Photography Margaret Mulligan





The sheltered view of Lake Muskoka gives the impression that Susan (top right) and David Worts have the lake to themselves. The Wortses preserved much of the structure of their 1905 cottage to keep a sense of history, but made a few changes, including adding new windows and installing pine panelling. Inside, the decor is a fun mix of pieces, mostly picked up at antique markets; the cheery blue lantern was a thank-you gift from a summer guest.



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When you cross the threshold of this tiny, two-bedroom cabin on Lake Muskoka, you think, Ah, this is what a cottage is supposed to be. Its woodsy pine walls and antique furnishings create a rustic simplicity, while a stretch of south-facing windows showers the space with an airy light. Then you meet Susan Worts, and you know right away who is responsible for the authentic vibe. Warm, relaxed, and friendly, she's likely to greet you with a soothing cup of rooibos tea when you walk through the door. Susan spent 24 years in the film industry as a set dresser and prop buyer, transforming empty spaces into police stations and hospital emergency rooms, and here, she used her dresser's instincts and eye for detail to capture the essence of cottage living. "It's my own space, reflecting my desires, fitting my needs," she says. "I created a cottage that I would like to be in." »



Entertaining made easy

b Stick to cooking what you know; just add a twist. “Even mac and cheese can be jazzed up if you use a sharp Cheddar instead of Kraft cheese slices,” says Susan. “Serve simple food, done well.”

b Don’t worry about matching tableware. In fact, the more eclectic the better, says Susan, who buys her plates at antique shops and dollar stores. Her only rule? “Pick something that excites your eye.”

b Susan uses natural finds, such as leaves and boughs, to decorate her table, or even as serving dishes. “Clam shells are great containers for salt and pepper,” she says. “Just make sure to wash everything first.”

b Love using real table linens but hate doing laundry? “Most of my tablecloths are oilcloths, which are impervious to stains and easy to clean.” If you can’t find oilcloths in a housewares shop, try a fabric store.

b If there’s one thing Susan can’t live without, it’s garnish. Her current must-haves for her dishes are white peppercorns and feathery-textured salts like fleur de sel.



“Even the burger thing



has to be kind of special”









Susan's Croissant Bread Pudding

This rich breakfast treat is assembled the night before and just popped into the oven in the morning.

6-8 croissants

Marmalade or preserves (about 1 tsp/
5 ml per croissant)

6 eggs

2 cups whipping cream (500 ml)

1 cup milk (250 ml)

1 tsp vanilla (5 ml)

Icing sugar and berries for garnish

1. Slice each croissant lengthwise and spread one side with a thin layer of marmalade or your choice of preserves. Reassemble croissants.
2. Butter a 9" x 13" (23 cm x 33 cm) baking pan, and pack croissants in snugly. They should not spill over rim.
3. Thoroughly beat eggs, whipping cream, milk, and vanilla. Pour mixture over croissants. The croissants may initially float, but they will absorb the liquid. Cover with plastic wrap and place in fridge overnight.
4. Bake at 350° F (180° C) for about 40 minutes, or until liquid has set.
5. Using a small strainer, dust lightly with icing sugar. Garnish with a few berries for colour. Serve while still warm, topped with maple syrup and accompanied by fruit salad and bacon. **SERVES 6-8.**

Susan prefers to cook at the cottage rather than at her house, but that doesn't mean her meals are limited to burgers. Her go-to brunch dish is an easy, decadent Croissant Bread Pudding. From the forest side, you'd never guess that the cottage is less than a metre away from the water (previous pages). "Sometimes we feel like we're on a boat," says Susan.

» Thirteen years ago, Susan and her husband, David, first crossed the 43-metre cedar footbridge that links the mainland to what, on most maps, is officially labelled Norman Island. To locals, though, it has always been Eaton's Island, after the three (lesser-known) generations of that prestigious family who leased the land and inhabited the cottage for half a century.

The couple had searched everywhere for a "regular old" cottage. "People have gotten so fancy these days," Susan says. "They don't think of the cottage as a 'heart' place, they think of it as an 'ego' place." Susan and David wanted a "heart" place. Yet every real estate agent equated "old" with "ramshackle," and the pair toured innumerable dark, rundown cottages ensconced in 1960s panelling, entirely bereft of charm. By late October 1997, after countless viewings, they'd all but given up. Then Susan stumbled on an ad for an old cottage with a footbridge. She recalled admiring an island footbridge when they'd rented on the lake four summers earlier and wondered whether it could be one and the same. It was. {Continued on page 104}

I DON'T DO SIMPLE

{Continued from page 71}

“When we walked in, the sun was streaming through the windows,” she says. Better yet, there was history. The cottage was built in 1905, and it still had the original fireplace, constructed with stones hand-picked from the shores of the lake by its first Eaton occupants on their honeymoon. Susan knew at once that this was the spot they’d been searching for. “I always prefer to be in a place that has a sense of past and where things haven’t changed dramatically.”

So the couple made few structural changes. They upgraded the windows, replaced fibreboard walls with pine and, instead of adding on to the main structure, they built a yurt that is four-and-a-half metres in diameter to accommodate guests. “In a bygone era, you just pitched a tent,” says Susan, “so we built a yurt.” She even preserved the belongings of the former occupants, unearthed from under the cottage: a French ivory hand mirror, minus the glass; old newspapers from the thirties; and a broken shaving mug, all of which she stores in an antique cupboard as artifacts from the cottage’s past. “When I find things like this, I just can’t throw them out.”

Susan also stocked the cottage’s 900 square feet with her own treasures, some found while shopping for film sets (postcards of Bracebridge and Bala circa 1920, discovered while searching for old letters to use as props), others rescued from the Port Carling dump (an oil-on-canvas, paint-by-numbers landscape that hangs near the fireplace). “The trend now is toward modern contemporary, but I wanted to create the feel of a cottage that had a history.” Her favourite finds are antiques that serve a purpose, including a mahogany Victorian commode strategically situated in the yurt.

Over the years, the little island has served as a relaxing retreat. When the Wortses arrive, their worries get left on the mainland. “It’s so cathartic to have a bridge for the transition,” says Susan. “It gives you a sense of leaving everything behind.” David even nicknamed the cottage their “Fortress of Solitude,” although the “solitude” part doesn’t last for long. Nearly every weekend, there are guests. “Our tradition is entertaining:

The cottage is a place you go to,” says Susan, “to create memories, get renewed, and come together as a family.”

While she says she likes cooking, Susan confesses that she’s predominantly a cottage chef. “When you have someone to your home, it’s much more formal, but at the cottage, there’s no sense that you’re at a dinner party,” she says. “People can relax, be themselves, and just have fun.”

The couple’s enthusiasm for entertaining helped the island earn yet another nickname, “Eaton and Drinkin’ Island,” and guests often feast on meals beyond the usual cottage fare. Dinner may be duck confit or grilled pickerel, lunch may be shrimp pasta in a garlic cream sauce, while a breakfast favourite is a bread pudding made with croissants (recipe p. 71), which she preps the night before and serves warm in the morning with maple syrup and fresh local berries. There might be a chicken burger, but even then there’ll be a gourmet twist (feta, fruit compote, and fancy mustards). “I don’t really do simple meals,” says Susan. “Even the burger thing has to be kind of special.”

To some people, entertaining might seem labour intensive, but years of dressing film sets has given Susan a few tricks up her sleeve. It helps that at work her specialty was styling food. “It was always a passion for me. And with a little sleight of hand, you can turn a simple meal into something that looks more ambitious, just by how you present it.”

The Wortses try to give all their family and friends a turn on the island. “It’s about sharing the space with people who don’t ordinarily get to experience it,” says Susan. Visitors arrive to a cozy fire, Django Reinhardt playing softly on the stereo, and mouth-watering aromas wafting from the kitchen. “It’s pretty modest,” she says, compared to the elaborately equipped “mansions” that have mushroomed on the lake in recent years. “But when people who are used to more amenities walk into a traditional cottage they find it very comforting. We lead busy, chaotic lives, and we need this. It’s what keeps us sane.” 🐾

Freelance journalist Sydney Loney summers at the cottage her great-grandfather built on Mary Lake in Muskoka.