

BY KATHLEEN TRIESCH SAUL
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE SIEGEL

A Playground for Cooking



The most unusual (and exclusive) bar in Ballard may belong to Kathy Casey. Her "virtual kitchen" includes a bar and meeting space in addition to a lavishly equipped kitchen where chefs come to play.

*Chef and consultant
Kathy Casey creates a
test kitchen for the ages
— and then some*

WE HOME COOKS all have visions of our dream kitchen. Chefs hold hope of starting their own special place. But a dream "virtual restaurant"? So far, that idea belongs to just one person: Kathy Casey, the ex-exec chef of Seattle's Fullers, who set out on her own a dozen years ago in search of the usual "new creative challenges."

The quest has led her to a vintage brick building in Ballard, where she hopes to attract other culinarily and creatively inclined types seeking their own challenges. What she has made is a gonzo test kitchen and bar, with attached dining and meeting space, where clients can explore just about any element of the restaurant/food industry, from designing a menu to testing recipes to training the wait staff.

Already, Brasa chef Tamara Murphy has used Casey's wood-burning oven to try out some new dishes. PBS has been in to shoot segments for an upcoming cooking show, and Tyson Foods has done testing for its Stockpot Soups line.

While the place has the look and feel of a cook's playground, there's a bottom line: What goes on here today may well be what you see on menus, TV and grocery shelves tomorrow.

The pilot light for this dream was turned on 10 years ago when it occurred to Casey that working chefs, restaurateurs and wannabes shared a problem: They had no place to go to think, to experiment and to test their ideas — away from the everyday squeeze of time, space and hungry customers out front. For a decade, Casey scrimped and saved, scavenged the sales and wrangled >

TASTE

the deals, stuffing her house with everything from fine china to flour bins to stock the space she finally has filled at 5130 Ballard Ave. N.W.

Since they bought it in 1997, she and husband John Casey have torn out walls, scrubbed and dug, hired contractors, painted and plumbed to open up 3,000 of the building's 6,000 square feet, turning most of it over to a bar, dining/meeting space and a huge kitchen. The place is a movable feast of top-of-the-line ovens, grills, cookers and counters that allow clients to dabble in just about any cooking technique. Customers generally pay a daily rate or a retainer fee to avail themselves of the space, the equipment and the consulting expertise Casey has collected.

The toys are terrific: A big wood-burning oven and a rotisserie, both from Wood Stone in Bellingham, can cook just about anything. The rotisserie has space for six big poles with baskets that will accommodate everything from whole fish to mushrooms. "People keep trying to stop in for lunch," says Casey, when they get a whiff of what's cooking over the wood fires.

There's a grilltop that tilts up so you can cook some things close to the heat, others farther away. There's a Chinese duck cooker and a portable propane wok that rolls around looking like the bottom half of R2D2. Practically everything in the kitchen is on wheels, in fact. Even the indus-

trial-strength Montague stove with its six oversize burners and an oven door you can stand on or kick-slam shut. With its quick-disconnect gas line, the stove can be moved aside to make room for a client who wants to test his own stove.

Another oven, the "Platinum" model by Lang, is a techie's treat. From your computer, you can order up an icon for, say, a new cookie, program in how long you want it to bake, at what temperature, how many times you want the fan to go on, etc. Enter your order, and the oven obeys. If you have seven ovens in outlets around the city, you can program them all at once.

To keep things cool, there's a walk-in with movable, plastic-coated shelving, a separate "reach-in" fridge for pastry, and refrigerator carts that put cold air not only below the food but over and around it. One such cart, called a "sandwich unit" by Delfield, comes in a 3-foot model that Casey thinks is the coming attraction for home cooks.

Along with all the playthings, Casey has accumulated a list of associates and "business alliances" that can be called on for advice on everything from budgeting to food styling to choosing the right plates for a new restaurant. (Casey has more than a thousand in all sorts of shades and shapes.)

Besides her husband, who specializes in "front-of-the-house" >


TASTE

issues, the alliances include senior associate Steve Hayter, former executive with Restaurants Unlimited; Diana Isaiou, chef and food stylist for several of the "Beautiful" cookbooks; and Carol Wynn, a multimedia and graphic artist who helped create Casey's space — what she calls a "magic place" that is eclectic, funky and functional. The 1889 building is a historic landmark in the Ballard Avenue Landmark District, so a board has veto power over any changes to the outside. That means everything from the color of paint on the trim to the giant-sized fork-and-spoon door handles.

Inside, Messer Shing Architects did a layout that shuns boxed-in spaces in favor of free-flowing, open ones. Partly to honor the working-class heritage of the neighborhood, the original brick has been cleaned and remortared throughout, and many of the building's working parts — wiring, pipes, etc. — have been left artfully exposed. The concrete floor was re-poured, laced with recycled glass and sealed to a shiny finish. At the front, the dining/meeting space is open to the bar and

kitchen but can be closed off with big iridescent olive-gold and sable-colored curtains that swing around on the kind of tracking you find in hospital rooms.

All about are lovely antiques, quirky collectibles and unique, handcrafted pieces from local artists. There's silly stuff, too. Like the thrift-store silver beads and pink plastic roses adorning the shower curtain in the women's "disco" bathroom. After all, this is supposed to be a place where people can cut loose and create. "We do serious business," says Casey, "but we like to have fun doing it."

"Phase 2" of Casey's grand design won't begin until after the last tenant moves out of the rest of the building. There, she plans to install a library for the thousand-plus food and cookbooks she's collected. It'll also be a kind of "rumpus room" for clients after the work is done. She can't wait to get started. 

Kathleen Triesch Saul is a Seattle Times food writer. Mike Siegel is a Times staff photographer.



An industrial-strength gas stove on wheels is just one of the movable toys Casey offers.