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TOAST OF THE TOWN

The unpretentious nature of HELEN KLISSEK DURING'S Connecticut home is only part of what KEEPS FRIENDS and FAMILY COMING BACK for more.

PHOTOGRAPHY Matthew Williams WORDS Claire McCall

Surprising as it may seem, Helen Klissek During didn't acquire the secret recipe for Vogel's bread until 18 months ago – even though it has been in the family for decades. Helen's parents, Johan and Janna Klissek, secured the New Zealand franchise for the Swiss-developed loaf in the 1950s. "They were ahead of their time in recognising the health benefits of bread that was low in fat, sugar and sodium and high in fibre." When Helen's parents came to visit her at home in Weston, Connecticut last year, they finally shared the formula. "My first attempt at making it was a failure," she laughs. Since then she's had plenty of practice, serving slices of wheaten nostalgia to expat Kiwis, including former Prime Minister Helen Clark.

It's been 26 years since Helen moved to the US, spurred by her then-husband Matthew During's fellowship in neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Certain that she'd end up joining forces with her folks, she accepted a role as marketing manager at Pepperidge Farm, a major commercial bakery founded in 1937 by an enterprising housewife in Westport, Connecticut. Five years later, her parents sold Klissek's Farmhouse Bakeries to Goodman Fielder Wattle. "So much for my plan to work in the family business," she says.

With two young children (her boys, Max and Zach, are now in their 20s), she reinvented herself. Her degree in art history and a natural passion for the arts came together when, through social connections, she secured the rights to sell limited-edition Roy Lichtenstein, David Hockney and Robert Motherwell prints, initially to collectors in her neighbourhood.

Weston is picture-postcard quaint. "Like some place out of a Norman Rockwell painting," says Helen. Less than 100km north of Manhattan, it draws the affluent into its rustic embrace. Gracious mansions are dotted along a riverbank nestled in bucolic expanses of green space. Think towering oaks, frothy cherry blossoms, red barns, stone walls and a town hall with shutters and a bell tower. There are antique stores, grocery and hardware shops and a wine seller with more than 12 types of New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc – but no art galleries.

Helen realised that many locals would be in the market for the type of art she was promoting. She is now an international art adviser and curator who loves her job of bringing serious collectors and sellers together. >>



Helen is at home in the kitchen where she is now adept at making her own genuine-recipe Vogel's bread.



Left: A photograph of abstract expressionist Willem de Kooning as "the happy artist" hangs in the bedroom. Below left: "I make a point of keeping the art books and catalogues of all the shows I go to – from Kandinsky and Picasso to Anish Kapoor, Jeff Koons and Richard Serra. They're like a receipt of time." Facing page: In the dining room, a striking work by Mark di Suvero brings colour to the space. A Cloud lamp by Frank Gehry hangs above the Marcel Breuer tubular steel setting. "I would love to own a house in the Bauhaus style," says Helen.



She describes her two-storey, four-bedroom saltbox house as modest. "Not quite shabby chic," she smiles.

When a real estate agent showed it to her, she fell in love instantly, wowed by the two acres of land and the big oak tree complete with rope swing in the garden. "I was devastated when we had to trim back the branches and the swing was never put back."

Built in the 1960s, the home, with its symmetrical design, has a shingle roof, oak floors, a fantastic fireplace in the kitchen and a weatherboard exterior that's reminiscent not only of the Martha's Vineyard holiday retreats but, historically, of home. "It feels beachy, as if I am on perpetual vacation. But it's not fancy," says Helen. "It's like the Volkswagen of houses."

Minor renovations have made it Helen's own. She ripped up the carpet, polished the floors, put in a soapstone kitchen counter and some cabinetry handles sourced from a genuine French bistro. "Since I was newly divorced, it was important for me to create a sense of family. Many people live in such grand places – they're running from one house to another, but have no sense of home."

To that end, Helen instigated a Friday-night dinner ritual, following in the tradition of her childhood. "Our family was not religious but we were spiritual. On Fridays, the Jewish Shabbat, we'd get together to light candles, eat challah loaves and roast chicken."

In Weston, this spirit continues in a more casual manner. Special friends in the area became Helen's adopted family. People like Igor Jozsa and his wife Pamela Page, a film-maker. "Igor is an architect and their house has featured everywhere," says Helen. "So I am inspired by his criticism." Come Friday, if Helen is late completing the one-hour journey from Manhattan, Pam and Igor let themselves in and begin to make dinner – or raid the cookie container as a stopgap. "I always leave homemade cookies in a ceramic jar on the counter. As a working mother, it was important to me to have that so when I was away, the boys could come home and know the cookies were there."

Grammy Award winner Russ Titelman is another regular guest. He's worked as a producer with a string of musicians including Eric Clapton, Randy Newman, James Taylor and the Bee Gees but when he comes to Helen's place, he's just one of the crowd.

"He has been known to sit at my upright piano and belt out some Christmas carols. I make all my guests sing for their supper," she jokes.

Her pasta dishes, plump with cherry tomatoes and garlic, followed by her mama's famous Dutch apple pie are often served after exhibition openings. She's hosted, among others, documentary maker Nathaniel Kahn, Roz Chast (cartoonist for *The New Yorker*) and artist Tobias Putrih.

It's the unpretentiousness of this house that draws people back, an easygoing welcome their host gleaned from her New Zealand upbringing. Helen has furnished the place with mainly modernist pieces, softened by colourful vintage Persian rugs and, of course, art.

"I adore modernist furniture," she says. Soon after they married, the Durings emigrated, so sadly had to leave most of their wedding gifts behind in New Zealand. Helen kept a silver platter given to her by her parents, and a pair of candlesticks. But it was a colourful Rietveld-style chair made by a friend, film director Gregor Nicholas, that she missed the most. >>



Happily, she's been able to acquire more mid-century furniture, including two Le Corbusier couches, a Le Corbusier lounge, some Marcel Breuer dining chairs and an Eames lounge. These pieces have stood the test of time, the leather softened and worn as the years roll by. "I could have bought some comfy sofas from Pottery Barn but it just isn't me."

Another favourite possession is a Frank Gehry Cloud lamp, which hangs above the dining table. America's most famous architect once said of a building: "That is so stupid-looking, it's great." Those are the sentiments she shares of the crumpled paper light shade. "It's whimsical and funny." One day when Auckland art curator Jane Sutherland was visiting and the pair had put candles on the table for dinner, the cloud started to puff. "It was almost up in flames," laughs Helen. Ever since, there have been no more tall candles.

Naturally, the art here is impressive, a living gallery that Helen moves and mixes up constantly. "A lot of it was given to me by artists who became friends," she explains. This is a long-standing practice — Helen's first gift was donated by Gavin Chilcott. "We worked together at Clichy restaurant in the city. I gave him a ride home one day and he gave me a drawing that I still have, framed, in my bedroom."

Max Gimblett, John Reynolds, Gretchen Albrecht and Judy Millar are here in Kiwi camaraderie, but Helen's repertoire is also globally rich. Among others, she has works by pop artist Jasper Johns, abstract painter James Rosenquist, Winston Roeth, sculptors Mark di Suvero and Michael Rees, and Dutch artist Ronald de Bloeme.

But it is three-dimensional objects that are her new love, which is why she helped to facilitate the commission of a Cor-Ten steel Richard Serra installation at a private sculpture park one hour north of Auckland.

A self-confessed workaholic, Helen says she has two modes: "Fast and faster". As Visual Arts Director of the Westport Arts Center, she curates five exhibitions a year but can't say no to ventures that are dear to her heart. Most recently she curated the Champions to End Malaria exhibition at the United Nations. And, as part of the Hope in Haiti project, she gave 50 disposable cameras to orphans three months after the devastating earthquake. "I had the photos developed, exhibited them and then sold them to raise money for the rebuilding of an orphanage."

When she's not taking steps to help others through art, she's taking steps of a very different sort, during private ballet lessons with her 74-year-old tutor, Pan. Twice a week she heads to his studio in a rickety building in East Norwalk. It's worth the effort to clamber up three flights of stairs for, at the top, is a Parisian-style salon where she practises her pliés on a dance floor that's 465m² — and gets it all to herself. "I must be the chubbiest ballerina in Connecticut," she jokes.

His lessons are doing the trick though. Helen can be seen on YouTube, performing a Russian Cossack dance to *Fiddler on the Roof*, while flipping pancakes for her four-year-old niece, Lily.

Indeed, her life is like a wonderful oil painting — layer upon layer of surprises. She's a former national ski champion, an award-winning photojournalist and a none-too-shabby sailor. "On Wednesday evenings, I'm part of a crew that races boats in Southport. But don't tell anyone I'm petrified when the spinnaker needs to be hoisted and it's all my responsibility."

Although there's salt water in her blood, she's far more comfortable these days with her apron strings tied, behind a magnificently industrial stove. She's thrilled to navigate her way through recipes and get-togethers with friends and business colleagues — and the house is her unrelenting anchor. She likens the moments she enjoys in it to US poet laureate Philip Levine's works. "They're often pithy, tender and raw. But they leave time to find the silences." ■



"It's very rare for me to be home alone," says Helen. Here she is in her Eames lounge.