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At \$800 each, these vintage flokati rugs weren't exactly a bargain, but they earn their keep by creating two distinct seating areas in the open living room. The no-name rope chairs (which only look like Hans Wegner icons) cost just \$400 apiece at a Paris flea market. The Jens Risom sofa was purchased at a used-furniture shop for about \$900, then reupholstered in stain-resistant green faux suede. Left: The couple on their patio a few weeks before their son's birth.

# RANCH DRESSING

For newlyweds Nick Grad and Carolyn Bernstein, scoring their 1950s ranch house was a bonanza, until they realized that they weren't keen on midcentury furniture or the inflated price tags. So they branded the decor with their own frugal flair and cooked up a free-roamin', easy-livin' postwar pad.

BY JESSICA STRAND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANN SUMMA





Both the Rotary and Kiwanis signs, \$250 for four, and the Murano hanging glass lamps, \$100 each, above left, were flea market finds; an estate sale yielded the 1970s sectional sofa with its original Jack Lenor Larsen fabric, plus two matching chairs and ottomans, all for \$2,000. Above right: In the foyer, an old \$300 garden screen, now powder-coated green, is paired with a vintage needlepoint bench, \$400, and a \$250 flea market rug. Opposite: The dining room chairs—part of a \$1,000 set that also included the walnut table—were dogs until they were reupholstered in wool houndstooth check. The Danish modern wall unit holds a fish sculpture crafted by Howdy Doody’s marionette maker and a collection of Italian Raymor pottery.

Sure, it seems like the classic Southern California cliché: A young showbiz couple snap up a trendy postwar ranch house, then turn it into a virtual showroom for iconic, expensive midcentury furnishings. But first impressions of Nick Grad and Carolyn Bernstein, and their digs in the Hollywood Hills, can be deceptive. That classic Eames lounge chair? A total freebie, inherited from Grad’s late grandfather. The mosaic coffee table? Constructed by a local woodworker from a dilapidated \$75 flea market tile wall hanging. The knowingly crude outsider art depicting a girl in a puff-sleeved shirt? It’s really just a painting Bernstein made in grade school. Even the house itself was less a calculated lifestyle statement and more a weird coincidence—involving a giraffe.

“Three years ago Nick and I were house-hunting in the neighborhood when I spotted this giant giraffe topiary in the front yard of a ranch home on the corner,” explains Bernstein, 35, a programming executive at the WB network. “Then off to the side I noticed this little FOR SALE sign. We had to go in.”

What they discovered was a revelation for Grad, who was reared mainly in a Cape Cod-style house in Beverly Hills, and Bernstein, who had grown up in a New York City apartment crammed with Victoriana. Inside the rancher, designed in 1958 by local architect Edward Fickett, there were walls of windows stretching to 14-foot ceilings, an open floor plan overlooking a patio shaded with palm and bamboo trees, and an expansiveness that evoked an urban loft. “The moment we stepped in the front door, we instantly fell in love with the space and the light,” recalls Grad, 34, a vice president of programming at the FX channel.

“Carolyn and I toured the house, then huddled in the master bedroom and conspired to purchase it.”

The decorating decisions didn’t come quite so easily. Bernstein and Grad realized that their styles—hers was sort of a postcollegiate shabby chic, his was whatever didn’t obstruct the view of the Sony wide-screen TV—were all wrong for the ranch house. Worse, the newlyweds weren’t even sure they *liked* 1950s furnishings. “When we moved in, we really didn’t appreciate clean lines and minimalism,” Bernstein says. Educating themselves with design tomes they picked up at a Santa Monica architectural bookstore, the couple slowly realized that a midcentury aesthetic could be “simple and livable,” Grad says. But it could also be prohibitively expensive: Original furniture by the era’s superstars, such as George Nelson or Isamu Noguchi, easily command prices in the high four figures. That was well beyond the roughly \$20,000 budget Bernstein and Grad had allocated for redoing the entire 3,000-square-foot, three-bedroom house. Although they could have afforded a kitschy postwar look, “that’s not what we were after,” Bernstein explains. “We wanted something homier for me, yet masculine enough for Nick.”

To their rescue came friend, interior designer, and *BL* contributing editor Sasha Emerson. Her advice: Steer clear of sought-after, legendary pieces like the Egg chair or Marshmallow sofa—and their hyperinflated L.A. price tags—and opt instead for cheaper no-name postwar furnishings with elegant lines and good bones. “Name brands aren’t necessarily more beautiful,” Bernstein says. “Plus, a house with too many high-end designers can begin to look more like a furniture store than a home.”





Since Bernstein and Grad inherited the Eames chair and ottoman, above, they were able to splurge on Jonathan Adler's \$95 apple pillow. For inexpensive wall decor, the couple framed a portrait that Bernstein painted in grade school—the colors matched their \$150 Ikea rug—and hung it above a maple bureau, a flea market steal at \$125.

Another of Emerson's cost-cutting tricks was to buy fixer-upper vintage furniture that needed refinishing or restoring but was still sleek and sculptural. The designer's seen-better-days selections weren't just more affordable; they also enabled Bernstein and Grad to customize pieces to reflect their family-friendly, down-to-earth version of all things midcentury, like the eight dining room chairs, reupholstered in a practical and masculine wool with a brown-and-white houndstooth pattern copied from 1930s men's suiting fabric, or the Jens Risom sofa with its stained orange-and-green plaid fabric, which was purchased from local furniture store Futurama for \$900 and redone in a sturdy sage-green ultrasuede. Even the \$300 garden screen hung as art in the entryway was originally rust-encrusted and stacked in pieces at a Long Beach flea market before it was cleaned, powder-coated green, and reassembled.

Of course, not being strict '40s and '50s purists, Bernstein and Grad had no trouble introducing a major addition to their ranch house: son Lucas Benjamin, now 5 months old. His nursery, decorated with an Ikea rug and framed vintage baby quilts from New York City flea markets, isn't exactly postwar style. But its eclectic look sticks to Grad and Bernstein's unfussy, kick-your-feet-up sensibility. "I really wanted a home that was vibrant and fun and that wasn't painful to the pocketbook," Bernstein explains. "And this place succeeds all around." ■

With its attached nightstands and generous headboard shelf, Grad and Bernstein's 1950s maple bed, \$1,300 at a vintage-furniture shop, works as hard as four pieces of furniture. A king-size sheet, part of a \$65 set of linens from Target's Swell line, was stitched into a duvet cover, then paired with Ikea pillowcases, \$13 each.





## HOME SCHOOLING

Think decorating a house from scratch is tough? Try doing it in a style with which you're unfamiliar—when you're pregnant and working full-time. Somehow Carolyn Bernstein made it through without having a nervous breakdown or getting a divorce—and she's not afraid to share the embarrassing details.

**BIGGEST MISTAKE** "We had originally purchased this fantastic-looking Danish modern sofa for the living room. It was gorgeous but unbearable—just incredibly uncomfortable. We were seduced by its looks. Eventually we sold it to a consignment shop and luckily recouped some of the cost. But it was a lesson: When you buy furniture, you can't forget that function is as important as form."

**MOST UNUSUAL SOURCE OF INSPIRATION** "Sasha Emerson, our designer, loaned us this *Better Homes and Gardens* decorating book from the 1950s. It's a guide for housewives on how they should furnish their homes. It was incredibly helpful to see how real rooms were put together back then."

**BIGGEST SURPRISE** "How low to the ground most 1950s furniture is. We've really started to notice it whenever someone over the age of 40 visits. Of course, it will probably come in handy when Lucas needs to pull himself up as he's learning to walk."

**BIGGEST INDULGENCE** "The dining room's fish sculpture. It cost about as much as a sofa. Nick surprised me with it, and I was stunned. I had spotted the piece in this midcentury-furniture store, which I barely ever set foot in because it's so expensive, but I was looking for ideas. Then I forgot about it. But Nick kept revisiting it, drilling away at the price. What can I say? It was love." —J.S.