

The unique bar at Club 1854 in Bittners was made by their on-site master craftsmen. *Photo by Robert Burge*

A mid-century-inspired space designed by Amy Cimba of Bittners. *Photo by Andrew Kung*

I'LL DRINK TO THAT!

Local interior design professionals share their expertise about designing spaces for entertaining at home.

Written by Bridget Williams

As we've gradually started to emerge from our COVID cocoons, thoughts of spring and Derby have us thinking about (finally) swapping sweatpants for stilettos. While not everyone is quite comfortable returning to the mega galas of days gone by, more intimate at-home affairs are definitely de rigueur.

And, just as we've had to reconfigure rooms to accommodate working and schooling from home, new ways of entertaining mean that interior designers are receiving more requests to help create the aura of going out while staying in. To help navigate this "new normal," we asked local interior designers Lori Andriot, Amy Cimba, Crystal Smith, and Ron Wolz of Bittners in Louisville; Colleen Underhill of Underhill Smith Designs in Louisville; Clare Miller of Clare Miller Home in Louisville and Lexington; and, Isabel Ladd and Thomas Birkman in Lexington to weigh in on what's new and next as it relates to the design side of home entertaining.

SL: *Have you seen a rise in clients requesting a designated home bar?*

Andriot: Yes. Clients are making bar areas more of a priority these days. It seems that as the pandemic evolves, people are searching for more ways to host smaller intimate gatherings at home in lieu of going out on the town. I have had requests ranging from an entire room with a full-blown wine cellar to converting a previously used desk area in a kitchen. Client requests have ranged from chic, dark, and moody to clean lines and vivid color.

Birkman: Over the past few years (space permitting), we've designed a lot of home bars. We all discovered that going out to large functions or restaurants isn't as appealing as spending time with the people we cherish most. Also, during quarantine, many of us took the opportunity to polish up on our culinary and bartending skills out of boredom. Coincidentally, cocktail culture is alive and well, and people love to showcase their collections of bourbons and other fine spirits.

Cimba: I think bars and entertaining areas have always been en vogue! People love to show their guests hospitality and a great time!

Ladd: Yes. As people have spent more time at home, their priorities have shifted to really valuing how their home feels and operates. Oftentimes, it could be designating a specific area of the home for a bar, especially so after a "work from home day," you can move into another area of your home that suggests a more fun environment.

Smith: Most definitely, people are entertaining at home and trying to find that perfect balance of function and relaxation on a daily basis.

Underhill: Yes, clients want bar areas, but they want flexible spaces, so a bar that can also be a serving counter or buffet is a great addition to any home.

Wolz: Definitely! The challenges of the last several years have created more desire to nest at home. Clients are choosing to entertain their families and small groups of friends instead of going out to crowded restaurants or venues, with that the rise of bourbon and wine rooms in homes has accelerated.



Isabel Ladd's clients had requested a bar in their formal living room, but when space constraints wouldn't allow for a built-in unit Ladd had the interior of a tall armoire fitted to accommodate bottles and glassware. *Photo by Andrew Kung*



Designed by Ron Wolz of Bittners, mirrored subway tile showcases the homeowners' bourbon collection. *Photo by Andrew Kung*



The Champagne Room at Bittners, designed by Douglas Riddle. Photo by Robert Burge



A bar and serving space designed by Underhill Smith Designs



Designed by Crystal Smith of Bittners, this adult-oriented retreat is discreetly tucked off the kitchen.



A basement bar/lounge designed by Thomas Birkman to be a complete departure from the rest of the home.

SL: How do you stay on-trend and timeless with design?

Andriot: No matter the style, they all require a certain level of sophistication and finesse to make them function and represent the owners' personality. As with any design, you should use existing foundational elements and incorporate classic elements with a current twist, functionality, proportion, quality woodworking, and unique finishing.

Birkman: I like to create a destination in your home that feels like an escape to gather and enjoy some cocktails and catch up. A timeless bar requires multiple sources of lighting that can be dialed down low to create a smoky ambiance. Add an antique mirrored bar back with a wealth of options on display and some comfortable places to sit, and that'll keep you in business for a long time.

Cimba: Lighting is everything! I think a low, soft light from a sophisticated fixture/sconces can really set a mood at a bar. And, if you are displaying alcohol, color consistent with the bottle contents happens to help the feel. Camels and warm earth tones compliment bourbon, for example, making the space feel warm and inviting.

Ladd: Opt for statement hardware instead of "normal" pulls and knobs. Dark walnut stains and dark painted stains, like dark green, keep the bar timeless, as opposed to a trendy color.

Miller: We love to mix old and new. Too much of one style or trend will age out much more quickly than blending in those new items. Incorporating multiple styles over time lasts, which is the same throughout any area of your home. Miller cites ribbed glass, milk glass, gold-rimmed anything, and bone-handled bar tool sets as identifiable trends.

Smith: I've noticed interesting tile backsplashes and bar sinks, but the key is to keep it simple and functional to stay timeless. I'm currently working on a hidden bar that will be completely closed off by cabinetry, and when opened, it will be a functional bar.

Underhill: Julia and I strive to keep all of our designs timeless, and a key to that is clean lines, keeping the scale of the project proportional to the space, using classic materials and colors.

Wolz: The trends I see play on rustic Kentucky elements for the bourbon bars or more modern, sleek lines in wine rooms.



In this home bar, designed by Lori Andriot of Bittners, she followed the homeowners' directive to create a "dramatic upstairs bar with a New Orleans speakeasy vibe." Photo by Andrew King.

SL: How can you have a home bar when a designated space is an issue?

Andriot: If you can't dedicate an entire room, try thinking on a smaller scale. Convert an antique cabinet, credenza, or bookshelf. If you have less space than that, simply add a deep tray to a tabletop and fill it with interesting bottles and glassware.

Birkman: We have a bar cart in our home. My favorite thing about it is on the outside, it appears to be a beautiful sacristy chest, which always serves as a great conversation starter. But what's better is my guests' delight when they discover a fully kitted out bar with anything they may want inside.

Cimba: You don't have to have a large countertop to make a bar! A small chest with a stone top, a bar cart, a converted closet, a cabinet (opened or closed), can all be used to make a chic serving space.

Ladd: Convert an armoire you already have to a home bar. You can even add a small sink and faucet in there; attach an antique mirror to the back of the cabinet, and outfit in to hold bottles on top, a workstation at counter height, and storage underneath.

Miller: Bar carts are great tucked into a corner of a dining room or office and are so easy to bring out into an entertaining space.

SL: What are some essential elements of a home bar?

Andriot: Other than adequate storage and essential tools, you should have a variety of mixers, a few different flavors of bitters, spirits that you love, fresh juices, simple syrup, and garnishes. As a special bonus, add some antique or unusual glassware. Whatever you do, It's important to reflect your way of living. Whether a formal setting or a more relaxed "self-serve" approach.

Cimba: Keep the "mixers" put away, display the good stuff! Mirrors and low lighting always make a space feel elegant. Excellent barstools and wallcoverings can really help to elevate a bar.

Ladd: Beautiful glasses, napkins, and accessories to make the space unique. A statement ice bucket and barware are nice touches.

Miller: A great set of decanters, glassware dedicated to your cocktail, coasters, bar books to mix up the best cocktails, and a toolset.

Underhill: An icemaker and the perfect place to display your julep cups, which are essential for any Kentucky bar! **sl**

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