



Concrete Thinking

This imaginative New Vernon homeowner (and busy mother of five) wanted rustic and rugged in her new kitchen. Her wish list included a stone sink. Hard to find. Her vision was realized thanks to an unexpected material.

by **Lauren Payne** • Photos by **Laura Moss**

WE ARE NOT FANCY PEOPLE, says Keeneh Comizio. “How could we be—with five kids and all their friends around?” So when she and her husband, Robert, set out to redo the kitchen of their circa-1937 house in New Vernon, they hoped to meld their rustic aesthetic and desire to create a one-of-a-kind space with rugged practicality. As she puts it, “It needs to stand the test of time—take a beating.”

For the busy household—the children range in age from 11 to 17—the kitchen is command central. “Someone is always hungry,” Comizio says. “We are a very active, sporty family. We go through a lot of food.”



In the end, the Comizios got everything they needed—lots of counter space on two separate islands, an oversized cooktop, huge Sub Zero fridge/freezer, separate glass-door beverage fridge, two sinks, built-in butcher-block cutting board, baking station and wide-open floor plan. “This is a workhorse kitchen,” says interior designer Caitlin Rutkay, who helped pull the space together. “It’s used all day, every day.”

For years, Comizio had been ripping pages out of design and home magazines and tucking them into a wish-list folder. She wanted a copper-top island and copper faucets and range hood



SIDEWALK SOLUTION: Homeowner Keeneh Comizio dreamed of a hand-carved stone sink for her redesigned and expanded kitchen. Well, dream on. Then her interior designer sent her to the Randolph showroom of JM Lifestyles, a fabricator of state-of-the-art interior concrete pieces. Comizio got her stone sink and countertop (opposite, top left), except that they’re made of molded, hand-carved concrete, as are the other countertops (above). The solid wood butcher block (opposite, top right) has the house’s name, Deer Cross, carved into it. The table (opposite, bottom) has a copper top with grommets. The house’s original ceiling beams (above), which do not bear weight, were reinstalled after renovation, with others adapted as legs or facings.



for the patina copper gains with age. (Copper, she maintains, “cleans up well.”) She wanted three different shades of wood in her cabinets “to help delineate the space, break up what would be monotonous and add some interest and warmth. The kitchen is simply too big to have just one color on the cabinets.”

She wanted to retain the big, beautifully weathered wood ceiling beams. They were not structural supports, so she had them removed

during renovation, reinstalling some while repurposing others as table legs, facings for the pull-out spice drawers and a frame for the cooktop. All of that proved relatively easy to bring about.

But it took a material she never associated with interior design—concrete—to complete the perfectly practical yet personal kitchen she had dreamed of for years.

Comizio had always admired stone trough sinks, but finding one proved a challenge. While deciding on counter surfaces, Rutkay encouraged her client to visit JM Lifestyles, a concrete fabricator. That led to the kismet moment: Visiting JM’s Randolph showroom, Comizio spotted an old, beautifully weathered, wood-plank farmhouse table. In fact, it was new and made of concrete.

It turned out that faux-wood concrete was something new for JM Lifestyles, a way of branching into new forms, product developer Jeff Kudrick told them. They were old hands at making concrete look and feel like weathered stone and molding it into custom shapes. What’s more, concrete, says Kudrick, is durable and stain- and scratch-resistant. “It ages gracefully,” he says. “It’s not meant to look brand new.” The cost is comparable to upper-end granite, he adds, averaging about \$125 a square foot.

Creating the sink and countertops that Comizio wanted would not require reinforcing her kitchen floor. “We engineer the concrete to be lighter, more sustainable and perform better in general applications,” Kudrick says. “We use a recycled glass aggregate that makes the concrete 40 percent lighter” than concrete found in sidewalks. JM’s concrete uses Portland cement, but about 30 percent less than regular concrete, with no resins or hardeners. For Comizio, wish fulfillment seemed at hand.

But not so fast. There is no magic wand. Precision custom molds had to be created based on full-size templates measured on site. “We had to make a three-dimensional mock-up of the whole island and build mock cabinets to make sure what we were making fit on site seamlessly,” Kudrick says. “The sink was hand-carved to look like stone. Independently, these are very big challenges. Then, to accommodate all of them with a mold system that was not even

PURPOSEFULLY REPURPOSED: Pull-out spice drawers (top) are faced with wood from the old ceiling beams and mounted next to the stove for easy access while cooking. Old horse-shoes serve as trivets. Comizio, searching online, found doors from an old bakery truck and used them in her wood pantry (right).

built yet—crazy!”

To complete the kitchen’s farmhouse look, Kudrick designed a concrete service bar fabricated to look like natural stone. Designer Rutkay credits her client for the kitchen’s overall concept. “This was very, very much something she envisioned.”

As a treat for the children, Kudrick gave each of them a wooden box filled with clay just soft enough to be carved. He invited each to etch a personal design into the clay, which he then molded in concrete and placed in strategic spots around the kitchen.

“That’s the wow,” says Comizio. “People are always looking around to see if they can find the five carvings. It’s fun, and it’s different, and it’s very much only ours.” ■

RESOURCES:

Interior Design: Caitlin Rutkay, C.R. Interior designs, Florham Park, 973-715-1909. caitlinrutkay.com

Concrete fabrication: Jeff Kudrick, JM Lifestyles, Randolph, 973-668-5057. jmlifestyles.com

Builder: KC Halidon Custom Homes, Normandy Beach, 732-854-7030. kchalidonllc.com

Kitchen cabinets and design: Jackie Lindstrom, Living Spaces, Morristown, 973-998-6820. livingspacesco.com

Hand-blown light fixtures: Megna Hot Glass Studio, East Hampton, New York. megna.com

Pantry doors: 1st Dibs. 1stdibs.com



EFFICIENT BY DESIGN: The countertop of the baking station (left) is lower than standard to make it the perfect height for rolling out dough. The butcher block (below left) has built-in knife slots. “I never have to go looking for a knife,” Comizio says. The beverage area has its own refrigerator, icemaker and sink, with its own dishwasher concealed behind paneling.

