

J. Morgan Puett creates wood-fired feasts and edible tableaux, RIGHT, at her Pennsylvania retreat, BOTTOM.



“What we’ve created at Mildred’s Lane is a contemporary art complex that integrates living. Shopping and preparing meals become creative events here.”



J. Morgan Puett practices what she calls “creative domesticating,” giving dinner parties a fun conceptual spin and turning the food in her refrigerator into an art installation.

MORGAN PUETT BELIEVES that even the most mundane household chores can inspire provocative art. At Mildred’s Lane, her 93-acre home and artists’ retreat in rural Pennsylvania, groceries don’t just go into the fridge: Visiting artists and students are asked to thoughtfully arrange everything from the milk to the eggs in an aesthetically pleasing way. “Most people are embarrassed by what’s in their fridge. I see it as the perfect installation space. It’s an illuminated box,” says Puett, an artist and a former fashion designer who recently discussed her work at a seminar at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Unlike a typical artist residency, everyone at Mildred’s Lane works together. “We practice what I like to call ‘creative domesticating,’” says Puett. Ideas for gallery exhibits often stem from Mildred’s Lane projects, such as the fridge installations, or events like extraordinary large-scale dinner parties. “Cooking is a team sport, an event,” says Puett. “It should involve an exchange of ideas.” To encourage that exchange, she sometimes organizes daylong, Scrabble-inspired brainstorming sessions that begin with wordplay and end with a six-course menu. “My goal is to make people rethink the way we live. Art can be found in a gallery or a kitchen.”



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PUETT'S PROJECTS

Radical Apiary Last summer, Puett invited naturalists, farmers, artists and beekeepers to Mildred's Lane to participate in workshops and lectures on beekeeping. The outcome: a new apiary in the Mildred's Lane garden.

Brown-Paper Packages For a fundraiser, well-known artists like sculptor Christy Gast mailed Puett an original work to be auctioned off unopened. Bidders were urged not to unwrap the paper. Says Puett, "Over time, the collection of packages becomes an installation of art in itself."

The Mildred Complex(ity) This spring, Puett will teach a course on 21st-century retail at Parsons New School of Design. Her students will open a storefront on Narrowsburg, New York's Main Street in May and host food-and-art events there with the help of local business owners.



In the "kitchen laboratory," old flour sacks take new form as table linens and dish towels.

Kitchen as Art Studio "At Mildred's Lane, we're not recipe-centric," Puett says. "Guests work in the kitchen together, as if they were in a think tank, to collaborate on meals."



WOOD-FIRED COOKING

Puett cooks many of her dinners over fire, either in an outdoor pit or a wood stove. Each year, she uses the wood stove to boil down the sap to make maple syrup with her son.



A CURATED FRIDGE

Puett treats her fridge as an installation space. She removes food from its packaging and transfers it into pretty glassware or vintage dishes. Textiles line the shelves or hang from hooks.



DISH DISPLAY

Rather than hide dishes in a cabinet, Puett worked with a local artisan to design open steel shelves. One set of shelves showcases all-white ceramics; another, patterned and colorful pieces.



Puzzling Menus Puett is known for her conceptual “Algorithm Dinners.” For a recent “Scrabble Scramble” event, for instance, Puett had guests write their names on index cards, then scrambled the letters into ingredients. They “crossworded” the ingredients onto linen tea cloths to create dishes for a six-course menu. The group decided how to prepare and present each dish. Says Puett, “It’s so much more gratifying to eat with people who have been deeply involved in preparing a meal.”

“People with long names were particularly prized at the Scrabble Scramble dinners, as the number of options for ingredients seemed to exponentially expand.”



UNCONVENTIONAL ENTERTAINING



One saucer and two teacups hold a three-course meal. “It’s a bit of a puzzle,” Puett says.

FOOD COLLABORATIONS

Meals at Mildred’s Lane are a large-scale affair, with visitors and two resident chefs working together to create and prepare menus. Many of the ingredients come from the Anthill Farm, where Puett has a CSA share.



SERVING ON SILVERWARE

Puett sets out appetizers on individual pieces from her large silverware collection. “I use what I have rather than buying more,” she says.

Teacup Dinners Puett often serves a meal using stacked teacups from her collection. Heat from soup in the bottom cup, for instance, warms dumplings underneath the top cup; set delicately at the very top is an enoki-mushroom starter.