

# OTHER PEOPLE'S KITCHENS

photography by jason sinn

**WHEN IT COMES TO KITCHENS,** Laura Stewart of Indulge Gourmet has seen it all. After nearly a decade as a personal chef and caterer, she has turned out fabulous meals in all kinds of settings, from posh vacation homes to cramped galleys, most of which she had never stepped foot in before showing up for the job. Forget *mise en place*—for Stewart, it's all about improvisation, flexibility and thinking on your feet. We talked with the Elk Grove-based chef recently about what it's like to cook in an unfamiliar space, what the best kitchens are outfitted with and how she survived a gig in a kitchen that could have been the backdrop for a scene in "Animal House." —*CW*

**HOW FREQUENTLY DO YOU COOK IN SOMEONE ELSE'S KITCHEN?** Usually a couple of times a week, more during the holidays.

**WHAT'S THE ONE THING THAT YOU NEED TO PULL OFF AN EVENT?** I always ask if there is a double oven.

**WHAT TOOLS DO YOU BRING WITH YOU?** I always have my knife bag with me and any specialty items that I think the house might not have. I use Cutco knives, which I bought at Costco. I've been pretty lucky to have worked mostly in well-stocked kitchens. Often, the clients with the nicest kitchens are the ones who don't cook at all. Sometimes their pots and pans have never been used before. Last Christmas, I got hired to cook for a Yankees player at home in Napa. I was told to bring everything, but that's impossible. I figured it's a vacation home; it's going to have some stuff. And it did.

**WHAT ARE THE BEST KITCHENS TO WORK IN?** I like a kitchen with lots of counter space and a lack of clutter. A big sink is helpful; it's awkward to wash large pans in a double sink. I love when the stove has at least six burners. Eight is even better. A double oven is also very helpful. Layout is important, but I don't need an exceptionally large kitchen to cook in, as long as there's enough counter space. I did a five-course dinner for 28 people in a microscopic kitchen in the Fab Forties and was able to pull it off, so I know I can cook anywhere.

**ANY HORROR STORIES OR HUMOROUS MISHAPS?** Last summer, I was hired to cater a graduation party in Davis for a girl graduating from college. Her mother was coordinating the event, a brunch for 14, but did not give me a heads up that it would be at the home of the graduate and her roommates. When I arrived, there was virtually no parking and the entire front lawn was covered in beer cans. The kitchen was a horrible, disgusting, dirty mess, a total disaster. The girl was already at graduation and her roommates were just waking up when I got there. I had to ask for their help cleaning up the kitchen. They begrudgingly did it. In the end, I made it work, but it was definitely a stressful situation.

