

# “Romancing



# the Home”

Best-selling author **Fern Michaels** creates a comfortable new kitchen and dining room the same way as her novels—with a dynamite plot.



Red-and-white gingham lends an old-fashioned farmhouse flavor to a country kitchen.

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**Fern Michaels began writing historical romance novels in the 1970s, but over the years her plots and storylines evolved into another genre, mainstream women’s fiction. Like her writing, Fern’s home also evolved, from a small plantation house built in 1702 to a 6,200-square-foot dream come true.**



**W**hen Fern got her first glimpse of the South Carolina home, it was a “nightmare,” says the best-selling author and former New Jersey resident. “It was this horrendously dilapidated house with doors hanging off hinges and shutters all askew,” she recalls.

There seemed no help for the Barbados-style plantation house, whose checkered past includes damage inflicted during Hurricane Hugo in 1989 and the documented presence of a female ghost. Because the home is listed with the National Register of Historic Homes as the oldest house in Dorchester County and one of the 25 oldest houses in the state, tearing down and starting over was not an option. “I had to work with

what I had, and I could see right away that the kitchen was going to be the biggest challenge,” Fern says. In pre-Civil War days, because of the constant threat of fire, kitchens were always at the end of the house. An impracticality in modern times, Fern decided that the kitchen would have to be moved.

Having a big kitchen and dining room with good traffic flow was important to Fern, who, besides having five grown children, three grandchildren and six dogs to consider, wanted to be able to have large social events, including her famous twice-a-year soirées that bring together her family and wide circle of friends. “People always congregate in the kitchen during gatherings,” Fern says.



Centuries-old heart-of-pine flooring adds a touch of nostalgia to Fern's spacious kitchen. A door that opens onto the side porch wraps around the back of the house and blossoms into a larger entertainment veranda, which looks down onto a walled brick courtyard.

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The extended kitchen counter ends in the dining room with a multipurpose bar used for breakfasts, lunches and buffets. Red-and-white gingham place mats and bar-stool cushions, paired with red crockery, continue the homey theme.



## A New Chapter

Fern approached her new kitchen the way she approaches a new book: She plotted it out from beginning to end. Historical contractor Mike Mahoney and architect Neal Stevens suggested using the oldest wing of the house, an early-18th-century two-story structure, for the kitchen and dining room. In the past, the upstairs had been two small bedrooms, reached by steep steps from the outside porch. The downstairs appeared to have been a living area, divided nearly equally by a red-brick fireplace.

First, the upstairs floor was removed. Demolition revealed a number of hand-hewn beams made by an adz, a cutting tool that has a thin arched blade set at right angles to the handle. The beams come together in mortise-and-tenon joints and are held in

place with tapered wooden pegs. No longer required for support, the beams serve as the decorative focal point for the kitchen and dining room, crossing horizontally overhead. Leaving the upstairs dormer windows intact provided additional light for Fern to grow her beloved philodendrons.

For safety reasons, the large fireplace had to be rebuilt. Using as many of the original Charleston bricks as possible, a new two-sided fireplace with a wide, wraparound hearth was built between the kitchen and dining room. Great care was taken to preserve the wainscoting, the window and door frames, and many of the wavy window panes, a typical style of glass more than 100 years old. The heart-of-pine flooring was also saved and made dog friendly with several coats of gymnasium varnish.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR romance

*What does Fern Michaels know about romance? You might say she wrote the book on it. When asked how to bring romantic touches into your own decor, she is quick to reply, “The kitchen is the first place most people go in the morning, so it should be a wonderful place. And since everyone knows the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, that’s another reason to make the kitchen a very special place.” Here are a few tips from Fern:*

- Hang stained-glass ornaments on fishing lines in front of the kitchen windows. When the morning sun shines on them, they make rainbows that bounce around the room. Seeing a rainbow is a beautiful way to start your morning.
- A light and airy kitchen promotes good feelings. Choose light woods for the cabinets, light paint colors for the walls and brightly colored accessories.
- Smells redolent of cinnamon and spice can create a romantic mood. Try incorporating cinnamon sticks into your table decor. If you have a fireplace in or near the kitchen, sprinkle a little cinnamon on the wood just before lighting a fire.
- For a romantic table setting, Fern likes carrying her red, white and green color scheme to the table. There’s a certain old-fashioned comfort in red-and-white gingham, and when two people feel comfortable, romance is sure to follow.



A rebuilt, two-sided fireplace is an impressive divider that separates the dining room from the kitchen. Plants thrive under light from dormer windows that were once part of a two-story structure. Overhead beams give testimony to the craftsmanship of the early 1700s.