Meet the Eye

Inside the mind and aesthetic wonderland of tastemaker Athena Calderone, whose latest book examines the creative process behind the personal spaces of fellow arbiters of style.

BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER
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IT WOULD BE EASY, upon first glance, to write off Athena Calderone as yet another leggy influencer peddling perfection. But that would be too superficial. And Calderone, through her EyeSwoon (@eyeswoon) platform, has shown the world that lifestyle has meaning and depth. Through her love of food, design, fashion and all things aesthetic, including her own homes in Brooklyn and Amagansett, NY, Calderone has documented the journey for all to see—and actually learn a thing or two.

“I’m a mega-sharer,” says Calderone. “I’m not a hoarder of information.” And it is the knowledge of living well that Calderone is sharing with the world.

Come March, Calderone releases her second tome, “Live Beautiful,” the obvious-for-her pairing to her successful “Cook Beautiful,” which won a James Beard Award in 2018 for its sumptuous photography and clever focus on the art of food styling. Calderone, in fact, sold a two-book deal with interiors being her next target. But basic coffee table book this is not. Okay, sure, “Live Beautiful” features the fabulous homes of Calderone’s friends: television personalities Nate Berkus and Jeremiah Brent, fashion executive Jenna Lyons, creative director Giancarlo Valle, the design duo Roman and Williams and decorator Pamela Shamshiri, among others. “It was a really organic process, actually. Some people are really close to me; others have then become really close to me,” says Calderone, whose last name might ring a bell—her husband is noted techno DJ Victor Calderone. “A few have been in my orbit for years and I really admire them; but then others, I just went out on a limb and reached out to say, ‘Hey, I’m writing this book.’”

Although, it’s not hard to believe that Calderone collects people as she moves through the world. With her warm demeanor, she is instantly likable. Her tastes are at once sophisticated and unconventional, though neither quirky nor cookie-cutter—take fearlessly stripping and bleaching her Jacques Adnet cabinet to the horror of a few purists, which of course became whispers of envy. “Live Beautiful” is an invitation to join Calderone in her gorgeous, nuanced world—but central to the premise is how to pull it all off. “I love teaching and sharing tidbits,” explains Calderone. “The thing that excites me about what I do is offering extractable, digestible tips.”

In every home featured in the book, Calderone has coursed through each vignette, analyzing the practical magic that makes the room work.
“The book’s not just something to look at,” she says. “My whole concept was to dissect how these creative journeys and choices, and the alchemy of design, come together.”

Indeed, it’s how the author herself learned about interiors and the art of the home. “I really felt like my own homes were a foil for me to express that initial vision of how design comes together,” she explains of her own journey designing eight of her homes as a self-taught designer. (Calderone eventually enrolled in courses at Parsons School of Design.) Calderone explains how “in my twenties, when my friends were out developing themselves in the career space and figuring out who they were, I was figuring out who I was in the home,” hosting dinner parties for friends, many of whom were the who’s who of art, fashion, media and design. “I’m a super curiosity, so I’m always asking them about the creative process,” she says. “I always just want to understand the hows and whys of a creative journey: ‘How did you get there?’ ‘What were the building blocks?’ ‘What was the original inspiration?’” In the “Live” series, she’s passing on these secrets of the pros, which in her mind is ultimately “to be content and comfortable in your environment.”

“Each of my homes gave me an opportunity to educate my eye,” she goes on. Calderone has created the home as her dominion and made it a nurturing place to always want to be. “It brings me so much joy to be in my home. I love that you can look at your home and trace pieces back to a certain trip you went on or an image you saw somewhere. I’m such a believer that what you surround yourself with tells your story.”