

Someone's in the Kitchen with Glen Coben

BY ELSA BRENNER

Glen Coben has a thing for kitchens. Such a good thing, in fact, that the first thought you have upon entering the one in his Harrison home is, "Make something like this for me!"



But the Manhattan-based architect rarely designs for individuals—although he will, under the right circumstances, he says. Mostly, his firm, Glen & Company, is increasingly sought after by chefs and hoteliers for commercial jobs. Gastronomic superstars **Mario Batali** and **Joe Bastianich**, who are opening a new restaurant—Il Posto—this fall, are on Coben's client list these days.

It's a sunny weekend afternoon in the kitchen that Coben designed for himself and wife, **Caren**. The southern exposure windows are open, the warm outside air is wafting in, and the architect himself, dressed in jeans and a knit shirt, is at the large white marble center counter pouring out his special blend of ice tea. A little Red Zinger, some lemon, a few packets of Sweet 'N Low, and voila!

The atmosphere is that of old friends chatting, but isn't that what kitchens are for? First Coben talks about the pros and cons of the white marble on the countertops, which is the material found in all the best pizza parlors, so how vulnerable can it be? At least that's his take on the matter. It looks spotless but usable too, like it's ready and waiting to have flaky piecrust dough rolled out on it.

The kitchen is super-modern—lots of stainless steel, a Sub-Zero refrigerator, a hi-tech Rube Goldberg-looking faucet, everything clean and functional. At the same time, it's a comfy place to be on that day—welcoming, and in touch with the change of seasons playing out on the other side of the Cobens' wall of windows. There's a rhododendron about to burst into bloom in clear view.

Cell packs of herbs—basil, thyme, and others—are growing on a tiny table just inside the window. Daughter **Maya's** goodies

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and artwork are all around—including on a clever door that doubles as a blackboard for the six-year-old. An iPod is docked at a Bose, softly playing music in the background. The kitchen cabinets of dark African wood act as a counterpoint to the white marble. The stainless steel and dark wood kitchen stools—surprisingly comfortable—pull out from under the center island. It all works perfectly together.

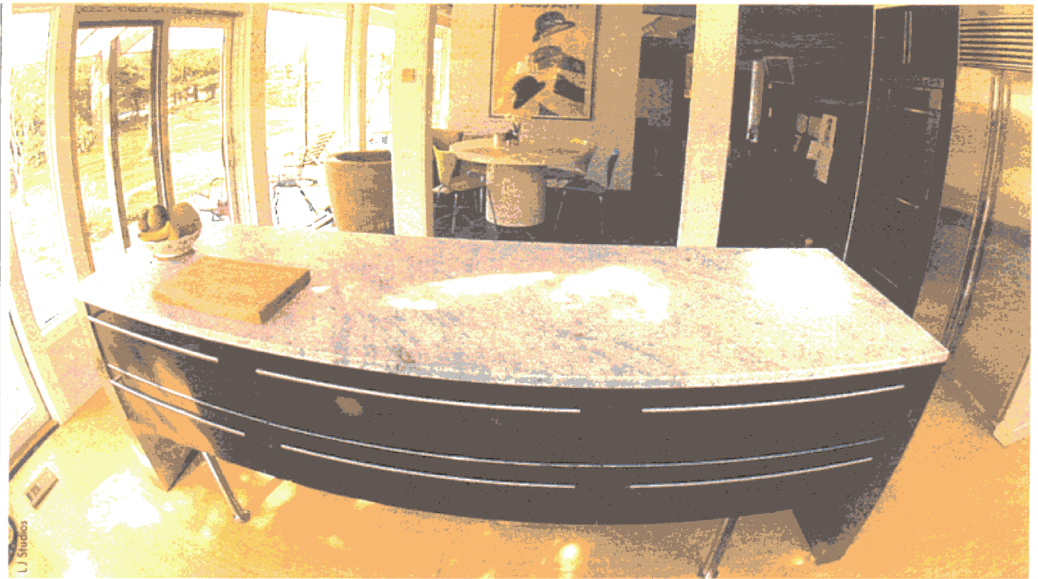
And there, as a surprise among all the industrial-looking hardware—the plasma TV screen on the wall, and the other top-of-the-line goodies—sits a humble Black & Decker toaster oven. “The idea is not to be too designy,” Coben informs. And he’s right.

Just about then, Maya bounds into the kitchen, following her mother who carries in the groceries. Caren also brings home a single red rose that looks smashing in a bud vase she places on the counter. “How about a bagel,” Caren suggests, as she unloads the groceries onto the marble.

Clearly this is a kitchen to live in, not just look at, and not some kind of residential museum. The rest of the vintage 1954 contemporary house, which is in the process of getting a makeover, reflects the same kind of design sensibility. Even the Cobens’ butler’s pantry is a combination of serious style and fun, with sliding doors of glass enclosing a wall-length closet with stainless steel shelves.

Also impressive is that the Cobens aren’t trying to transform the 51-year-old house into a colonial kind of affair that’s all the rage these days. Instead, they’re respecting the period it represents, just giving it a little early 21st-century oomph, like using Sangria red on the walls in the dining room to offset the vintage Nelson Bubble Lamp (a classic mid-20th-century design represented in the permanent collection at MoMA in NYC). The glass dining table is also vintage, International-style Corbusier, as is the chaise longue.

What Coben won’t show is the bathroom, which was featured in *The New York Times* a few years back. He put the shower head at one end of the stall and the controls at the other end. On purpose of course, so you can adjust



the temperature without standing under the water. Makes perfect sense.

“The palette is crisp,” said *The Times*. “Walls of blue Bisazza glass tiles, chosen for their iridescence, sparkle next to walls of white New York subway tiles. Beige limestone clads the counter, floor and bathtub.”

Coben brings that same almost edgy functionalism into his professional work. His company was founded five years ago as a boutique design agency. “We break down the traditional boundaries of architecture and design, in order to create an appropriate form and space to fulfill the wants and needs of both the client and consumer,” Coben explains. “This philosophy guides and motivates us to stay on the forefront with new directions and innovations in hospitality design.”

His firm is growing, and Coben is about to expand its reach to suburbs like Westchester, which are fast-becoming home to sophisticated restaurateurs and their faithful foodies, who love not having to travel into Manhattan for a good meal.

WAG: When and why were you drawn to the field of architecture?

GC: At a very young age, I remember being interested in skyscrapers, bridges, wireless technology—all things that most of us ponder from afar with some fascination. But I grew up with a father whose engineering projects caught his imagination and passion early in life and inspired him to be part of the building process.

The next step was reading *The Fountainhead* by Ayn Rand, and I was hooked. Also, I grew up during the time of *The Brady Bunch*. Mr. Brady was an architect and Greg was always imitating him, and Greg was so cool back then!

WAG: Which of your earlier projects stand out in your memory and how did they set a direction for your future?

GC: After graduating from Cornell in 1985, I joined the architecture and design office of SITE Projects, Inc. as an associate and was there from 1987 to 1992. Some of my projects included: The Plaza and Park at Ross’s Landing, in downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee; The Four Continents Bridge in Hiroshima, Japan; and The Isuzu Space Station, a

children’s park in Yokohama, Japan. Also, I traveled back and forth to Seville designing the Saudi Arabian Pavilion at the World’s Fair in 1992.

Collaboration was the key. In school, I was taught that architects were about creating an independent vision. But at SITE, the emphasis was on collaborating with people of diverse backgrounds and skills. I learned that architecture could be about story-telling rather than just about design. I was hooked on telling stories, whether the stories were cultural, social, or make-believe.

When I start working with a chef, I not only find out about the menu and the focus of the restaurant, but where he or she has worked, who has inspired them, what’s inspired them, and then I weave the history of the person, place, and food into the design.

WAG: In 1992, you joined Nike’s retail design division as director of store planning. How did that impact your career?

GC: My job was to oversee the designs of all domestic and international Niketowns. I learned at Nike how to take a global brand’s mission statement and express those values in a way that ties in with the community, using local athletes, for example. It drew on my past experience collaborating with people of diverse backgrounds and with the idea of telling stories.

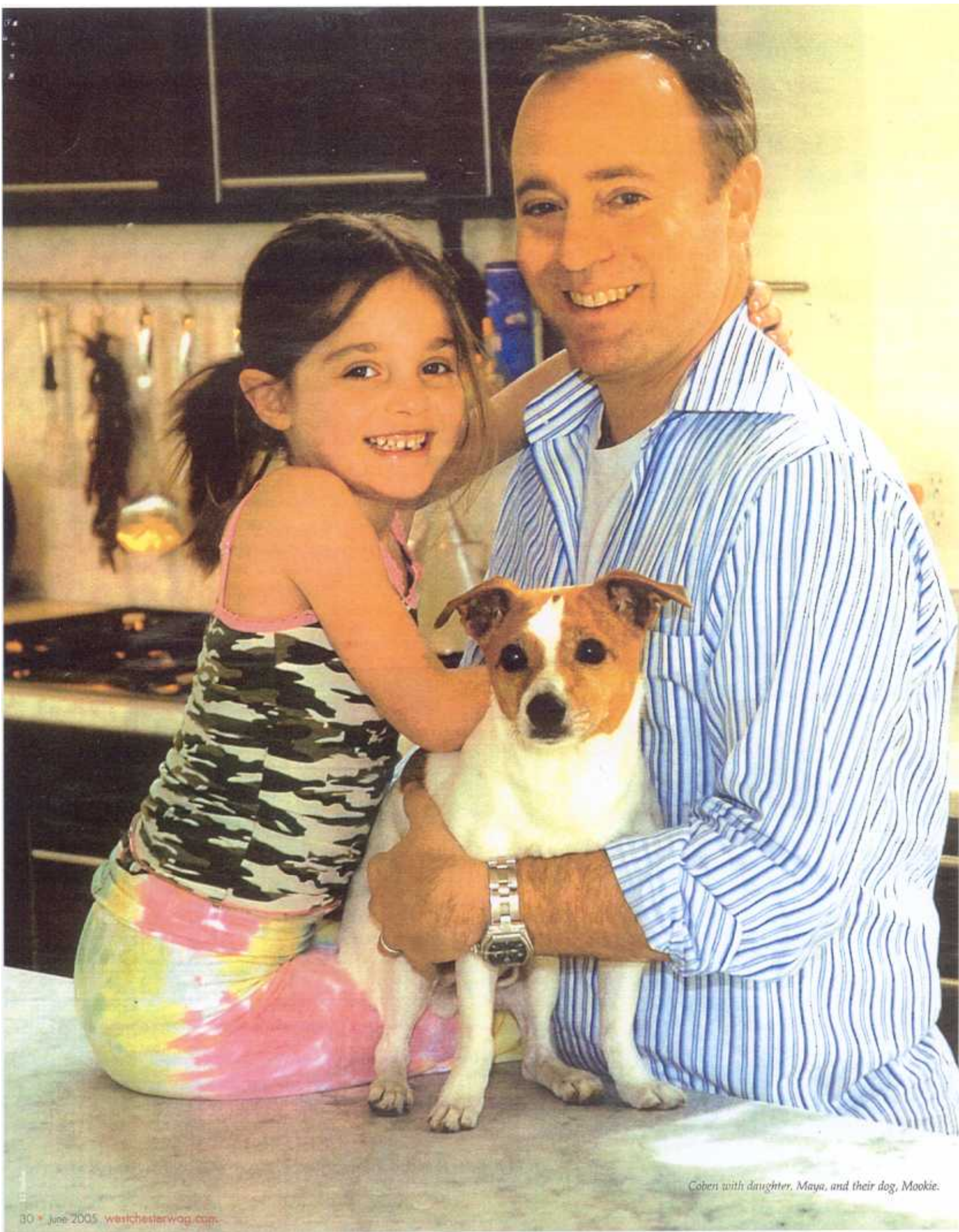
WAG: Now that you have your own architectural design firm, specializing in restaurants, who are some of your clients and what projects have you completed for them?

GC: Yumcha, a new Chinese haute cuisine restaurant in Greenwich Village; Riingo, a restaurant that opened last year from the owners of Aquavit in NYC; Esca Renovation, 402 W. 43rd Street, NYC for Dave Pasternack, Mario Batali, and Joe Bastianich.

WAG: What’s up next?

GC: Il Posto for Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich; and my firm’s latest project—designing a series of restaurants in Connecticut for Geno Auremma, the coach of the University of Connecticut’s women’s basketball team.





Coben with daughter, Maya, and their dog, Mookie.