

What Really Matters

Design mogul Nate Berkus talks about his new line at Target, his new book and how he styles his home. | AS TOLD TO IVY GRACIE

America fell in love with Nate Berkus when he made his first appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in 2002. An affable guy with no semblance of pretense, he infused the world of interior design with a sense of humor and a sense of hope, making it more accessible to the masses. Since then, he's added author, radio host, television host and home-furnishings designer to his resumé and firmly established himself as a go-to guru for all things design and lifestyle. This fall finds Berkus launching an exclusive line of home furnishings at Target and releasing his second book, *The Things That Matter*. And while both ventures mark the next stage of the Berkus brand's evolution, the underlying message remains the same: reframe the rules, picture the possibilities and reclaim the right to love the way you live.

Artful Living: You've got a new product launch at Target and a new book. How are you holding up?

Nate Berkus: I'm doing fine; thank you for asking. For me, everything is always a question of quality, so whether I'm working on a makeover on TV or a project for clients, or looking at samples from factories, or editing each page of the new book, I bring the same amount of attention to all of it. So it's a balancing act.

AL: How do you balance so many significant projects at the same time?

NB: For one, I surround myself with really smart and talented people. And two, the message of everything is all the same: that your home should tell the story of who you are. It applies to everything I do.

AL: What if you don't think you have a story?

NB: Everyone has a story.

AL: So where do we find our story?

NB: Your ethnicity, where your family comes from. A vacation that you took that reminds you of a beautiful time in your life, a vacation that you aspire to take, a place where you felt happiest. The way your grandmother used to dress, or the way you dressed your children when they were little. All of those things can be recreated in your family room or in your living room.

AL: You are a big name. You could have developed a line with any company in the world. Why Target?

NB: I chose to work with Target because they're very fast-moving, they're very energetic, and they're very interested in what's new, what's next and what hasn't been done before. Their whole philosophy is very

similar to my own; it's about providing opportunities for people to create something that they're proud of and makes them feel good, whether it's a new lipstick or a new outfit, or being right on the cusp of every trend. And I like to see tangible things quickly, so I wanted to work with a company that's fast-paced and forward-thinking.

AL: Is there a look that defines your line?

NB: I've never had a signature look, but there are some common threads between everything I do. I've always believed that the things that I design should give people the freedom to create their own signature look. So, whereas a lot of people in design feel very strongly that a space should only feel a certain way or be inspired by a certain feeling, this collection actually touches on lots of different periods, different feelings and different ideas. The point is for people to bring some things home and combine them with the things they already have, and really express their personalities within their spaces.

AL: Are there any colors, fabrics or materials that figure predominantly in the line?

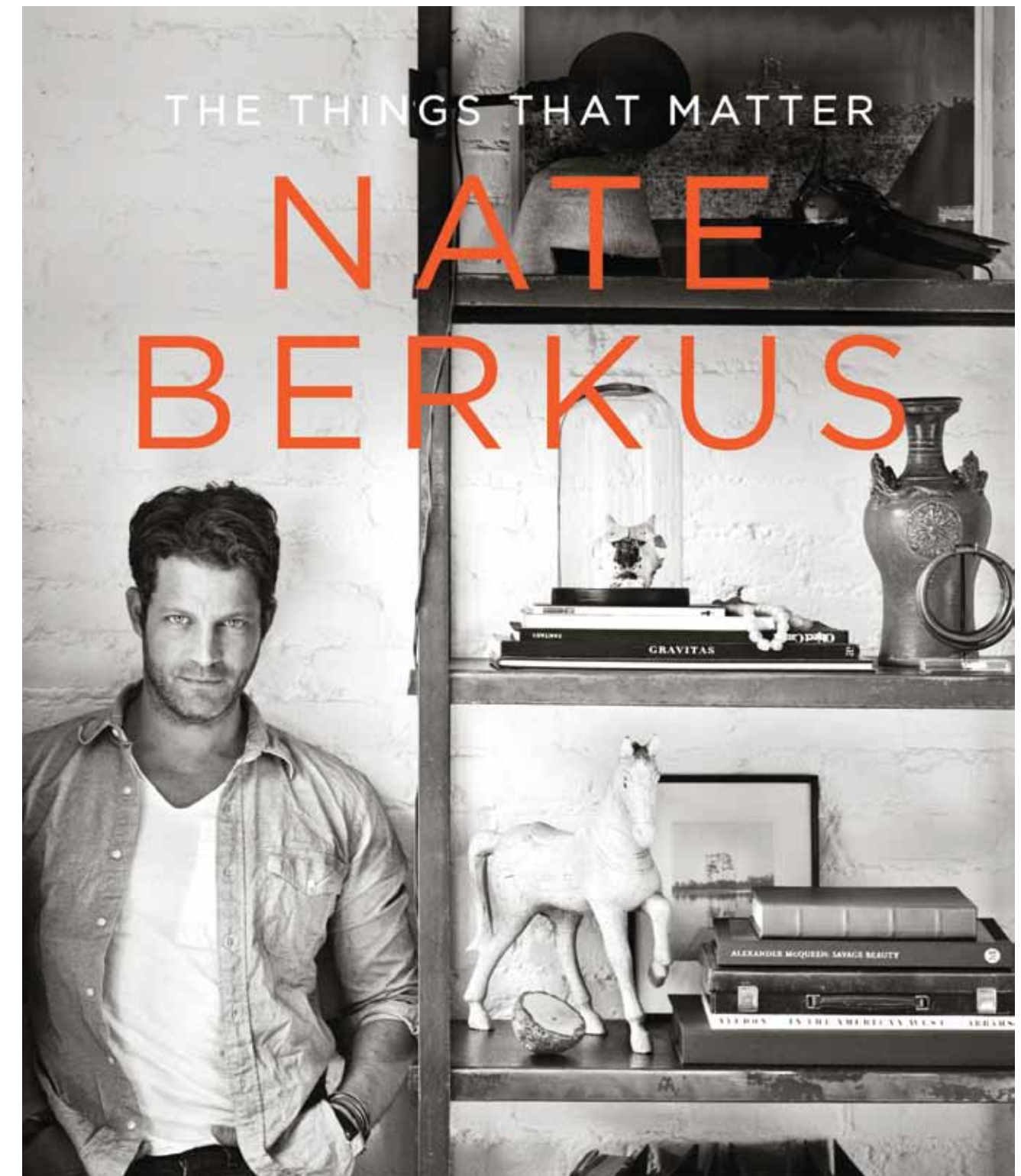
NB: Definitely lots of natural materials — lots of washed oak, snakeskin, cotton and linen — and details like metal studs. And I'm using a lot of lacquer in very deep colors like hunter green, dark yellow and bright white.

AL: What were your influences for the line?

NB: I collect vintage furniture and decorative arts, and one of the periods I'm really interested in is the French 1940s and 1950s. A lot of the materials — the snakeskin, metal studs, washed oaks and heavy linens — were used a lot in Paris in the '40s and '50s. But there are more than 150 different products in the launch collection, so the inspiration came from everywhere.

AL: Were there any Minnesota influences?

NB: Growing up in Minnesota, my mom had a tortoise shell that she brought back from a trip to Mexico and had preserved. It always hung over our family-room fireplace, and I'm on record that I want it someday. It's such a great, iconic form. We see so many animal influences in design, and I thought, why don't we recreate that tortoise shell to give people solutions for what to hang over their fireplace or for what to hang over a sofa or over each nightstand? So the first attempt was to recreate the tortoise shell that sits in my mother's house in Minnetonka, but it didn't work because it looked fake and I didn't like the idea that it was faux. But then I thought, why



don't I embrace the fact that it's not a real tortoise shell and do it in high lacquer colors that match some of the other accessories in the line? So we did it in bright white, dark forest green and yellow lacquers, and they're amazing.

AL: One design tip we all know is to mix timeless pieces with what's on trend. Where does your line fit with that philosophy?

NB: This line gives people the opportunity to be very current. Nothing is over \$129, because I want people to be able to embrace the trends and new ideas that they're seeing but do it in a way that doesn't feel like an enormous commitment.

"For me, the things that matter are the things that we have a connection to. They remind us of a person or a place or a time that made us happy, that brought us together in some way." — NATE BERKUS

I think that's what we all want to do. It's the same philosophy as buying a big, chunky costume-jewelry necklace to wear with a white cotton shirt you've had forever. So you should keep searching for the perfect chest of drawers or the beautiful antique mirror, and then flank that mirror with a pair of lacquered tortoise shells. Hopefully, I'm giving you an opportunity to create something new and fresh that really sings when you look around your own space.

AL: Tell us about your new book, *The Things That Matter*.

NB: When I think about it, there really are two types of books on design. There are the beautifully photographed coffee-table books of one person's work, which I could have done and maybe will do eventually. And then there are the how-to books (similar to *Home Rules: Transform the Place You Live Into a Place You'll Love*, which I wrote in 2005) that have design ideas that everyone can follow as they're trying to create their own space. *The Things That Matter* is a new way of looking at design. It's meant to inspire people to really get creative, to make their own decisions and re-establish a connection to the things that they allow through their doorway and the choices they make about what they're going to live with, touch, feel and see every day. I wanted to share with everyone that it's not about keeping up with what everybody else is doing and it's not about following every single rule that we've heard in design.

AL: How does the book inspire readers?

NB: The book profiles several interiors, all vastly different from one another. And the people and the interiors in the book are rule breakers, and I think that's one of the best places to start. The common thread between all of the interiors is that the personality behind each room is pure, which is really at the heart of what good design and living well are all about — to have a space that not only rises up to greet us every time we walk through the door but that is individual enough to be able to walk someone through the story of your life by the choices you make for your home. That's the philosophy behind the book.

AL: So, what are the things that matter?

NB: For me, the things that matter are the things that we have a connection to. They remind us of a person or a place or a time that made us happy, that brought us together in some way. When I look around the rooms in my home, I can tell you exactly where I bought each thing, what I was doing and who I was with. I think it's possible to tell our story through our things.

AL: You've always made interior design look accessible, even somewhat easy. Is there a trick to that?

NB: The trick is it's not easy, but it is accessible. It takes practice, just like anything else. You're not going to walk into a gym and have perfect form lifting weights or keep up with the rest of the spinning class the first time. Design is a bit of a mental exercise. You have to keep trying at getting a room to feel correct and look good; it's a constantly evolving process.

AL: So what's the one design tip that everyone overlooks but shouldn't?

NB: Oftentimes we get an inspirational image stuck in our head, and we work really hard to try and achieve something that looks like it. We start decorating kind of mindlessly, buying things we think fit that image. Don't get tied too closely to one idea. I think the most important

factor in any interior is experimentation. You may come across something that you really love at a flea market or an estate sale, and if you love something, you'll figure out a way to make it work in your home. Explore and experiment. Bring things home, keep the receipts, keep the tags on them and see what you can create on your own. There's a lot of fun in that, and when you get it right, you know it.

AL: In Minnesota, we have a tendency to "beige up" our homes. Any tips for bringing in color?

NB: I think the easiest thing to do when you're trying to incorporate color is to take a look at what you wear. If you have a favorite dress, blouse or sweater that's a certain color, chances are that's a really good place to start. And if you haven't worked with color before, start with deeper, saturated tones as opposed to bold primaries. It's a little bit softer on the eye to add a dark green, a black or a deep yellow — even a soft pink or gray. It's easier to start embracing color by working with colors that aren't quite as bold.

AL: You once said, "I wasn't going on Oprah to pick sofa colors and paint chips; I was there to lift people up through the way they live." Tell us about that.

NB: If you really stop and think about it, our environments really affect the way we feel. They affect our self-esteem; they affect the way we view ourselves. When you leave your home in the morning, if it's in complete disarray, you act differently. But when you walk through your door and the dishes are done, there's a new pair of pillows on the sofa, and you've taken the time to choose a paint color and paint the walls, you feel a sense of accomplishment and a sense of belonging. It happens to me every single time I come home. Home, for me, is defined as an explanation of how I really want to live every single day.

AL: So where is home for you now?

NB: Home is New York City. I'm back and forth to Chicago; my design firm is based there and the operations of my companies are based there.

AL: And how often do you get to the Twin Cities?

NB: I'm back and forth there as well. It's very funny — I come in as a grownup with big Target meetings about marketing and samples and editing the line, and I stay in my childhood bedroom and borrow a car from my parents. I feel like I'm 17 again. But the benefit is I get to stop at Dairy Queen on the way home from the meeting.

AL: You have accomplished so much and touched so many lives. What do you still need to do?

NB: I'm sure there are lots of things. There's lots of travel. I haven't spent a lot of time in South America, and I'm fascinated by that. There are a lot of museums I'd like to see, books I have left to read and people to meet.

Career-wise, I'm always interested in doing and learning different things. That's why I was one of the executive producers of the film *The Help* this year. I'm definitely interested in producing more films that are based on stories that I believe in.

I'm very grateful to have had the opportunities that I've had, and I'm very grateful as I think about what's happening this fall — to have the new Target collection and the book coming out. But really, my life is all about the relationships I have with my family and friends and co-workers. I've learned from Oprah to come from a place of abundance as opposed to a place of always wanting more. And I'm happy with where I am right now. **AL**



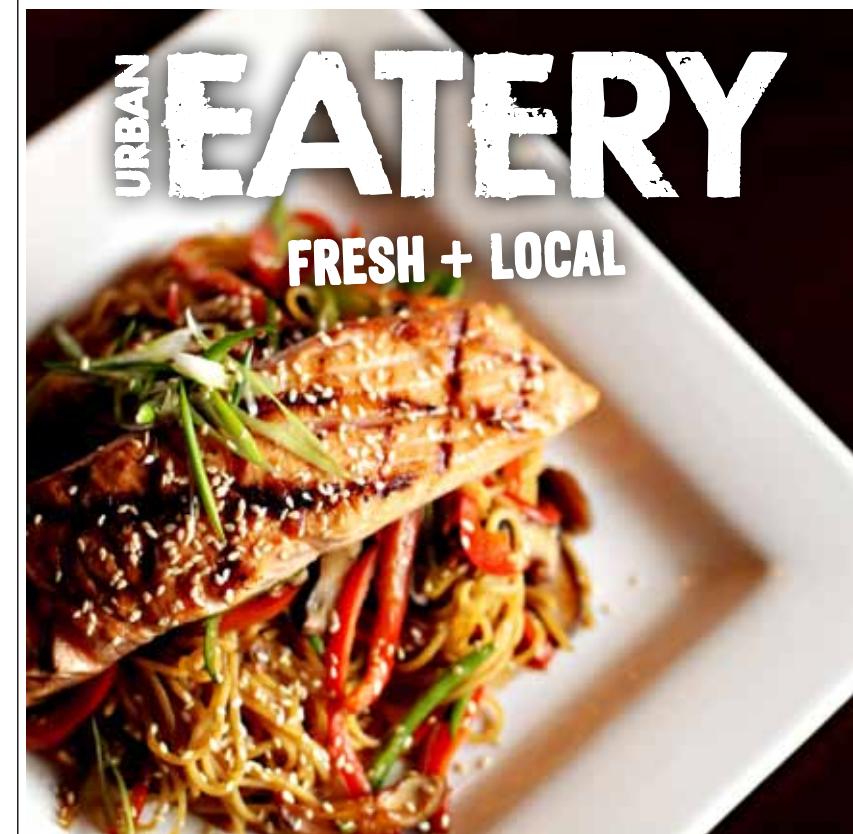
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