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AT HOME

east side story

With a sharp eye for colour and texture, creative guru Cristina Azario has made a chic but cosy family home in Manhattan, says Rachel Meddowes. Photographs by Michel Arnaud

STYLED BY RACHEL MEDDOWES, HAIR BY GEOFFREY FIRTH FOR JOHN FRIEDA SALON NY, MAKE UP BY LEANNE HIRSCH FOR HIRSCHKINCARE.COM AT THE AGENCY





Cristina's bedroom with bedlinen from Frette, and antique Japanese embroidery hanging above the bed. Above: an antique chair upholstered in Napa leather, with a pair of Cristina's Dolce & Gabbana shoes. Opposite: Max in his bedroom. Previous page: Cristina in her office

Cristina Azario has an energy about her that is totally infectious. On Manhattan's Upper East Side, the spacious apartment she shares with her Internet executive husband, Joshua Abram, and their young sons Max and Harry, showcases the many new concepts and ideas she is experimenting with as creative director and head designer at Frette. The overall feeling is one of extreme comfort and luxury; sumptuous bedding, silk curtains, fur throws, deep sofas, quilted cushions and working fireplace all make for a wonderful snugness.

Frette is one of the world's most innovative linen companies. Established in Italy in the 19th century, it has shops all over the world. But, just over two years ago, following a takeover by Italian conglomerate Fin.part, it was judged to have become a little staid, and Azario was approached to freshen it up. Although keen to continue pleasing Frette's loyal clientele, Azario was determined to attract new customers so that the brand would fit into a wider spectrum of lifestyles. 'Everything from city and country houses, to yachts, Learjets and lofts,' she says. It goes without saying that the bespoke service is very developed; and anything you can think of will be dyed to suit your desired shade.

Azario spent 15 years working in fashion, on the fabric side – with Donna Karan – and she says: 'Any colour you use can look flat, but when you play with shades you get a feeling of texture and movement. Being able to mix it all up makes the look modern.' She has worked this theory hard in developing the new bedding, table, baby, spa and clothing ranges, creating an entire Frette home and entertaining world that works as an integral whole. 'I look after the night shift: everything you need, from the moment you enter your home at night, right through to the next morning.'

Azario's Italian roots are key to her love of entertaining. 'Europeans traditionally spend much more time at home with guests than their American counterparts,' she says. However, since September 11, New Yorkers have tended to stay in more than before. A surprising number enjoy the experience and are cultivating their new-found interest in the home, making it a comfortable place to spend time. But there's another reason why Azario loves home: her job requires her to travel a great deal throughout the year, so when she gets back she wants to stay in, spend time with her family and have her friends over.

The apartment lends itself well to family life. By day, the compact library is taken over by toys, the Cartoon Network and the children's tea; by night, when the grown-ups return from work, it turns into a quiet haven, perfect for reading or watching movies. Azario has a natural instinct for colour and texture; the walls throughout are warm – taupe, grey, brown, green and beige – the carpets uniformly sisal, and the paintwork is white. Although the colours are muted, the combination is cosy and practical and, says Azario: 'It conceals a great deal more than the eye can see.' When decorating a room, Azario starts with colour. 'I develop a sense of proportion from that, and then build on it with furniture and other pieces,' she says. The drawing room-cum-dining room is the entertaining centre, and is full of the fabrics Cristina has designed, plus the antiques and books the Azarios have collected between them. 'As you start accumulating pieces, you put together a home environment that you can then build on,' says Azario. This is her vision for the Frette customer of the future. □

