



**STRIPE FORCE** The living room's striped dhurrie rug sets the stage for such finds as an orange-leather chair from Italy's Poltronova, and a mod coffee table by Isamu Noguchi for Herman Miller set with a vintage African basket and soup cans signed by Andy Warhol. In the dining space, at right, a Florence Knoll desk once owned by restaurateur Smith's father serves as a table; the wall art is by Shaun O'Dell.



## Out on a Limb

**A hip restaurateur and in-demand designer branch out, with coolly comfy home and commercial spaces inspired partly by the city's majestic oaks.** | *By Chris Kelly* | *Photography by Julie Soefer* |

It's 2PM and, somewhat ironically perhaps, restaurateur and trained chef Claire Smith—owner of Heights classic Shade and Montrose's newer Canopy (3939 Montrose Blvd., 713.528.6848), both of which serve what's called "global home cooking"—has not had a bite to eat all day. "I'm hungry," she declares as she joins architect Dillon Kyle for some light bites—flatbread pizza with spinach, and five-spice-crusted calamari—at Canopy.

Kyle designed the spare, green-splashed, raw-wood-accented restaurant in collaboration with Smith a couple years back, just as he more recently did her 2,100-square-foot ranch-style house near River Oaks. Both spaces, echoing an approach Kyle has become known for, offer updated takes on a warmly mod look, filled with sunlight, pops of hip designer colors, contemporary art, and references to nature, especially trees.

It's a small wonder that Smith, 45, nibbling on her late lunch, is so slender, with a fresh not-a-speck-of-makeup look. She's constantly busy running two popular restaurants—with her husband and biz partner Russell Murrell—and being a devoted mother to CONTINUED...



**A NEW LEAF** At Canopy, above, photos of oaks—and a color scheme of grassy green and earthy brown—are “an allegory of landscape,” says Kyle, below with Smith, outside her home.

The focal point in the dining room is a wooden sculpture that is suspended by ropes of steel from the 22-foot ceiling. The piece incorporates long strips of natural lumber that crisscross artfully and appear to float in the sky.



...CONTINUED their active 8-year-old son, Jack. For his part, Kyle, also 45, is a self-described “workaholic” with degrees from Princeton and Harvard who throws on khakis and a shirt and is good to go. He spends free time with his longtime partner, Sam Lasseter, and their three dogs, and enjoys working in their garden.

Smith and Kyle are a creative match made in low-maintenance, high-energy heaven. They not only move through life at a similar pace, but they also have similar backgrounds as native Houstonians. They grew up in leafy old neighborhoods, Smith in Southhampton and Kyle in River Oaks, and continue to be inspired by the easy grace of classic Southern landscapes dotted with mature trees.

For her home, Smith worked with Kyle in taking what they both describe as “a dark house” down to the studs and opening it up with a series of French doors with views of both the backyard and the big oak in the front. White oak floors were installed and stained an earthy brown, as walls were knocked out and spaces given room to breathe. Smith’s gourmet kitchen was newly appointed with blue-green Jurassic marble, the ceiling lifted from 8 feet to 10.

The dining area is now open to the kitchen, with a “table” that was once Smith’s father’s desk now surrounded by simple Danish rosewood chairs from ABC in New York. The room is accented by a large surrealist gouache-on-paper piece by local artist Shaun O’Dell, which hangs upon a pale blue accent wall.

Sofas in the nearby living room and den, which flow breezily into each other, are sleek, vintage ’60s pieces re-upholstered in durable white fabric and surrounded by whimsical folk art. Smith describes the look she and Kyle were going for as “chic, practical and comfortable.”

The house is dotted with contemporary art pieces, and among Smith’s prized possessions are a signed and numbered print by the legendary surrealist, Max Ernst, and three Campbell’s soup cans signed by Andy Warhol. With a young son and a rambunctious English Rabbit Hound named Lola, Smith keeps the good stuff on the walls or out of reach. “Lola will go for anything,” Smith laughs as she holds up a lovely yet mangled turquoise vase that her dog decided was a chew toy.

That same playful, nature-loving energy turns up here today at Canopy, which Smith calls “relaxed and not overly serious.”

Kyle went for a design that would be “an allegory of landscape,” he says. The banquettes are upholstered in bright green fabric, the curtains are green, and the custom-designed walnut tables are topped with matching green ribbed Formica from Abet Laminati. All of it is the grass to go with the pale sky-blue walls, which include walnut panels that accentuate the theme of trees and pick up the brown of the stained concrete underfoot.

A series of tall 500-pound sliding doors, which can close off the back of Canopy for private parties, are laminated with large-scale photographs of stately oak trees. The mural-size photos were taken at Smith’s home and on the campus of her alma mater, Rice. The nearby bar area, accented with natural-looking strips of timber, is backed by another massive tree photo.

The clear focal point in the dining room is an enormous wood sculpture designed and engineered by Kyle—in association with others—that is suspended by ropes of steel from the 22-foot ceiling. The piece incorporates more long strips of natural lumber that crisscross artfully and appear to float from the sky; Kyle says his inspirations were “birds’ nests and pick-up sticks.”

It’s not surprising that the designer’s jumping-off points were a simple bit of nature, and a children’s game. Both speak to the essence of the beautifully realized Smith-Kyle collaboration. “Claire loves design,” says Kyle, smiling at his restaurateur pal over bit of pizza crust. “Our philosophy was ‘Come on in and play!’” ■