



**INTENTION** For those interested in refreshing their space, designer Gina Caulkins suggests starting with intention—not ambition.

# Designing the Dream

LARKSPUR DESIGNER  
GINA CAULKINS BRINGS  
LAID-BACK LUX LIFE TO  
NORTH BAY FAMILIES

**I**n a world of aspirational interiors built more for Pinterest than people, Gina Caulkins is designing for real life—and all the spilled juice, soccer gear and family chaos that comes with it. As the founder and principal designer of Larkspur-based California Daydreams, Caulkins has made it her mission to turn houses into homes that work for families without sacrificing a sense of calm, comfort or style.

"We're all about real family homes, not museum spaces," she says with a laugh. "When I became a mom myself ... it was eye-opening just how much kids impact the way we live in our homes."

She remembers cradling her newborn son and suddenly noticing just how unfriendly her living room had become—sharp marble corners, a sofa that couldn't handle a spill and nowhere to stash the daily avalanche of family life. "Being a working mom myself has really made me passionate about designing homes that really function for the families that live in them," she says.

In just the past year, Caulkins has opened a new studio in downtown Larkspur, expanded her team and completed a number of standout projects across Marin and Sonoma counties. Her latest: the Coastal Cottage in Greenbrae, a family home that balances easy elegance with a heavy dose of utility.

"They have three active kids in elementary and middle school, so incorporating intentional storage was a must," she explains. Think: a mudroom cabinet with a section for each child, complete with hooks, cubbies and charging stations for Chromebooks.

Even the kitchen received a dual-purpose upgrade. "We designed a hutch that does double duty ... extra storage for entertaining essentials and also serves as a family command center for the mom," says Caulkins. Permission slips, schedules, bills—all filed away, all out of sight.

This is the essence of California Daydreams: beautiful spaces that don't pretend children don't exist. Caulkins' signature style combines bright, breathable aesthetics with deeply practical design thinking. "It's all about selecting the right materials that can withstand kids and pets," she says. That means performance fabrics, textured

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lighting fixtures and synthetic woven chairs that can be—literally—hosed off. "Though we get asked all the time, we often shy away from white or cream sofas," she adds. "You're still going to see every mark until they're cleaned."

Instead, Caulkins prefers to start with white or off-white walls to create an airy base, then build a layered palette of neutrals, natural textures and soft pops of color. "We love to bring in texture on lighting (since it won't be touched by kids) and accessories," she notes, leaning into practicality with a relaxed elegance that feels thoroughly Northern Californian.

The studio's name, California Daydreams, is more than a nod to a design ethos—it's a reflection of place. "Our surroundings heavily influence our design," Caulkins says. "From the colors and materials that are grounded in nature, to the more informal way people live in their homes, to making choices that are more sustainable and kinder to our planet."

That regional sensibility is part of what makes her work resonate so strongly in Marin and Sonoma counties. "Our clients are more laid back and influenced by the beautiful natural landscape," she says. "I think we're the product of our surroundings."

But creating dream homes also means running a dream business—and opening a studio brought a few surprises. "The biggest surprise ... is just how much I missed collaborating with a team in person," she says. After fully embracing remote work during and after Covid, Caulkins was caught off guard by how

fulfilling it felt to return to a tactile, in-person workflow—meeting tradespeople, working side-by-side with clients and designing together with her growing team.

For families looking to dip a toe into refreshing their space, Caulkins suggests starting with intention—not ambition. "Think through how you really live in a space," she advises. "People make choices that aren't right for them because they're being aspirational or thinking far in the future."

Her rule of thumb: Prioritize closed storage, choose materials that will wear well and skip natural stone if one is not into patina. "Everything in the space should have a home," she says.

Looking forward, Caulkins sees California Daydreams continuing to evolve alongside the families they serve. "We're excited to continue working with local families ... via a tried and true + efficient process that makes the experience enjoyable," she says. Innovation is also on the table—new materials, new technologies, new ways of working that help families feel more at ease in the places they live. "We love pushing boundaries," she notes.

And so, in a design world still too often caught between showroom perfection and real-world function, Caulkins and her team at California Daydreams are carving out a third way: stylish, thoughtful spaces that are built for actual life.

Not a showroom. Not a fantasy. Just a really great daydream—brought to life in the North Bay.

— North Bay Magazine Staff