



- TCW Shopping & Services
  - Current Issue
  - Archives
  - Media Kit/Advertising
  - Distribution Locations
- 
- TCW Foundation
  - Subscribe
  - Work for TCW
  - Contact Us
  - Home

## jobs & money

### MAN OF THE MONTH

# Nate Berkus

By Dawn Reiss



Chicago's debonair designer, Nate Berkus, is lounging in his expansive office housed in a former horse barn turned into a spacious urban design studio. On his desk sits, among other things, Jon Krakauer's book *Into Thin Air*, the product of an ongoing cross-country book trade with a friend from California. Nate, fresh off his most recent Oprah Winfrey Show appearance where celebrity chef Giada De Laurentiis tried to teach him how to cook panini with brie and chocolate, is relaxed and down-to-earth, like an old high school friend. Recalling the show, he jokes about how he'd probably catch his apartment on fire if he tried to use the stove.

Other than cooking, Nate can pretty much do anything. A self-taught designer who graduated from Lake Forest College, he formed Nate Berkus Associates in 1995 at the age of 24. From Barney's New York to W hotels and Wolfgang Puck's Spago, Nate designed his way into stardom. Oprah Winfrey hand-picked Nate to make over a small space for her show's set in 2001. Since then, Nate has catapulted to success as a featured design expert on Oprah, with a high-end following that allows him to selectively choose two

dozen or so clients each year.

He also made the news when he survived the 2004 Tsunami in Thailand, and the loss of his partner, Fernando Bengoechea. After a period of public grief, Nate moved forward, throwing himself into his work to launch a home line at Linens 'N Things in the fall of 2005 and to write his first book, *Home Rules: Transform the Place You Live into a Place You'll Love*. In an interview with TCW, Nate, 36, talks about his prized possessions, his new love and being a fan of Mariah Carey.

**The biggest mistake people make when it comes to decorating** is they try to impress other people. They skip the step of asking themselves what they really want and how do I want to feel in my own home. When people start decorating, they need to think about how the interior is going to reflect themselves. The most successful people are the ones who sit with me for hours and know who they are.

**The biggest mistake people make when it comes to love...**I can only talk from my personal experience. People try to overlook who people really are. They want them to be who they want them to be. Love is about understanding who someone really is and loving them for those reasons, even if they're characteristics you wouldn't choose. It's about celebrating who somebody really is.

**My most prized possessions** are two woven photographs created by late boyfriend Fernando and my (Border Collie mix) dogs (Henry and Emma), even though they kept me up all night last night.

**Since the Tsunami...**It was very difficult at the beginning, but it's much easier now. In many ways it's been an incredible blessing. I've learned things about myself I would have never learned. I've learned a different kind of tolerance; an inner honesty, an inner strength.

**I like the dining rooms and bar at RL.** On a rare occasion, I go to The Underground. I workout with my trainer, Drew Bales, who I think is the best trainer. I'm also a gourmet shopper and a huge reader. I panic if I'm not reading a book.

**The thing that makes me laugh the most** is my boyfriend, Brian Atwood. We met years ago in Chicago. He's a shoe designer. You've probably seen his shoes in Nordstrom.



**The person I'd pay to see in concert...**I'm a huge Mariah Carey fan. I spent New Year's Eve with her last year in South Africa for the opening of Oprah's school.

**I'm very child-like.** I'm constantly doing things like playing practical jokes on my friends and doing things to embarrass everybody. I have the keys to a friend's apartment in New York. Once, I didn't tell him I was coming in for a weekend. I hid under his bed and called and pretended I was in Chicago. I was under his bed for five hours. When he walked in, I reached out and grabbed his ankle from under the bed and he freaked out.

**I like the soul Chicago has.** I like that people are sophisticated and really friendly. This city really gave me a great opportunity; for that, I'm always really proud and respectful of Chicago. ■

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