

INSIDE STORY | MARNI JAMESON

Jameson: Odeur du jour pushes writer into pantry panic

By The Denver Post

The text message read: "I was just in the Rockfords' pantry. It was so fresh and nice smelling. Then I realized — they don't keep their trash in there!! Fix that!"

My teenage daughter knows few things motivate me quite like unfavorable domestic comparisons. I can accept not being as up on politics as the next person, or not being as fast in a footrace. But I take a domestic shortcoming personally.

True, the pantry had begun to smell like old fish tails and onion skins. Taking the trash out more often didn't help. However, I really didn't want to get to the bottom of that smell, for fear I'd find something living — or dying — behind the pancake syrup.

But now the Rockfords were besting me! I hauled out the trash can — a stainless-steel bin with a foot-pedal lid designed to "contain odors." Right. I sanitized and deodorized every surface. Next, everything came out of the pantry, which was like clowns exiting a clown car. How did all that stuff fit?

I scrubbed the walls, shelves and floor until the pantry was cleaner than a nun on Sunday. As I started to put things back, I experienced what could only be described as an awakening: What is life if not making the same mistakes over and over? I asked myself, channeling Carl Jung. Perched on the verge of putting everything back like before only neater, I heard Jung whisper, "Pssst. Maybe there's a better way?"

I called my friend Mary Collette Rogers, a professional kitchen coach and the force behind everydaygoodeating.com.

"I'm having a pantry attack," I said.

"Want me to come over?"

"Do you know CPR?"

"One question," she said. "May I videotape?" She'd been wanting to make a video on pantry organizing and was just waiting for the right subject.

Though, at the moment, my kitchen looked as if it were decorated with explosives, I said, "Sure." Wouldn't be the first time I traded pride for free help.

Next day, Rogers, her camera person and two planet-sized lights on poles arrived. As we got going, my two daughters tumbled in and squinted. "What's going on?" one asked.

"A pantry makeover," I said.

"You need lights and cameras to clean the pantry?" the other asked.

"It's Mom, remember? We can't do any home improvement like normal people."

Seeing that no food was coming, they high-tailed it out of there. Meanwhile, Rogers and I sorted, space-planned and labeled with camera rolling. (Look out, YouTube!) That evening, the girls checked back in on my pantry progress.

"Hmmm," one said, which was high praise.



Emptying the pantry created chaos in the kitchen. But it's the best way to impose a new order. (Marni Jameson)

"Actually smells mediocre in here," said the other, offering more high praise.

"And see those?" I pointed to labels that read "cereal," "pastas and grains," "chips and crackers," etc. "You'd better put things where they belong, or you'll be canned goods."

"You got into this," said the daughter who tripped the whole project with her insinuating text.

I folded my arms smugly. "I bet the Rockfords' pantry doesn't have labels," I said.

Syndicated columnist Marni Jameson is the author of the just released "House of Havoc," and of "The House Always Wins" (Da Capo Press). Contact her through marnijameson.com.

Tips: 6 Steps to Pantry Sanity

A well-organized pantry saves steps, time and money. You'll never again buy a jar of mustard because you didn't see the one buried behind the shredded wheat. To get there, kitchen coach Mary Collette Rogers offers these steps.

Step 1: Think function. Pantries are for backup storage and infrequently used cooking appliances, like the s'mores maker. It's not so much for everyday ingredients you need while cooking. Oils and common spices belong in your cooking triangle, close to your stove and food preparation surfaces.

Step 2: Pull everything out. Then wipe shelves so you move back in on a clean surface. If the space is dark, add better lighting and paint it a light color.

Step 3: Create categories. Group like items on your counter. We had about 20 groups, labeled with sticky notes: paper goods, soups and sauces, tomato products, bread, etc. (I know this sounds sick.) Bulky and rarely used items (like my bread machine) went to remote storage, like the garage or basement.

Step 4: Consolidate. Corral the unwieldy. We put our water bottles, which we knock over daily like bowling pins, into a 4-inch deep plastic bin. Snack bars, which tend to sprawl, went vertically into a basket. Use containers you have before running to The Container Store. After editing your contents, consider whether wall-mounted wire racks, stackable shelves, Lazy Susans, clear square bins (round take up more room) or wall hooks would make the space more efficient.

Step 5: Post-it plan. Before shoving contents back willy-nilly, apply these rules: Put like with like; light stuff high, heavy stuff low, and stuff you use most in the middle; tall in back, short in front; related categories beside each other: bread next to cereal, pasta beside tomato products, dried spices next to condiments. Use Post-its from Step 3 to label shelves. It's easier to move sticky notes around than stuff. Play with the layout until it makes sense. Allow for growth. (Think Costco run.)

Step 6: Restock, then label. Move contents in and rearrange until you're satisfied. Though I thought labeling pantry shelves was a compulsion on the nuttier side of crazy, Rogers insisted it would help prevent "product migration" (when pickles want to hang with soda). Plus she'd brought her label gun. Soon, I was hooked.



Above, my pantry after its makeover — a well-organized space that makes for a more efficient kitchen, saving time, energy and money, because you stop buying stuff you already have. (Marni Jameson)