



# <sup>A</sup> Keen Insight to Outdoor Living

By Mike Dahl, LC/DBM

In striving to design and build the ideal outdoor living area for each individual customer, Michael Gotowala searches for a greater comprehension beyond their wants and needs. When speaking of his guiding tenets, he often refers to lifestyle.

“The secret that I have found is to understand the indoors lifestyle and comfort level of every family member and portray that familiarity outdoors,” he reveals.

Gotowala is the president and founder of the Outdoor Kitchen Design Store by Preferred Properties, an interesting hybrid of a landscape design firm, a landscape installation company and a concept and product provider that specializes in luxury outdoor living.

An accredited landscape designer with a background in the nursery business, and licensed for outdoor lighting, Gotowala started in the green industry while in college in 1984 with a push mower.

Today his company located in Cheshire, Conn., employs 11 to 15 people including masons and horticulturists, and offers complete design, build and

management of outdoor kitchens and outdoor living structures.

The Outdoor Kitchen Design Store is an indoor showroom offering outdoor kitchen ideas as well as outdoor appliances and other proven outdoor products for retail.

“It is geared to help owners understand the mechanics of how to build an outdoor kitchen lifestyle beyond just placement of the grill,” Gotowala says.

His company also includes a 5-acre nursery that brings in featured plant material from across the country to sell at retail or to acclimate for use on upcoming projects.

But their renown arises from creating high-end outdoor living areas.

“The secret to Preferred Properties’ success,” says Gotowala, “is our ability to design and build tremendous outdoor projects in-house with an outstanding work force of diversified talents all blended together.”

The company’s slogan, “living fabulously beyond

**Above:** The underdeveloped backyard at this residence in Avon, Conn., was given vitality by the Outdoor Kitchen Design Store by Preferred Properties, which is a landscape design/build firm, and an outdoor living product provider. Blue marble pavers from Marmiro Stone were sandblasted and banded with an antique finish. The spa is a Sundance® Marin, 315-gallon model with 33 jets powered by two TheraMax™ 2.5-horsepower pumps. The Leisure fiberglass pool was enhanced with blue marble bullnose coping and a raised sundeck.





**Top, Right:** Twin whale-tale falls spill into the pool. Beneath the weatherproofed deck that includes a Romeo and Juliette bacony – the diagonal portion, which allows fuller views of the vista - is the great room that is open to the elements and features a pass-through window to the spa. To the right of the window is a stainless steel outdoor shower.

**Middle, Right:** The marble floor in the great room was also sandblasted and given an antique finish. It is heated by Orbit radiant floor heaters. The kitchen has a Woodstone pizza oven, Alfresco warming drawer, True dual wine coolers on each end of the counter, Brown Jordan cabinets, Haiku overhead fans by Big Ass Fans, Bromic overhead tungsten electric heaters, Juno overhead lights, and a custom TV wall stand and wine racks built by Michael John Litefoot of Bald Eagle Construction.

**Bottom, Right:** Solid bronze ABR illuminators, bullets, downlights, uplights, and wall lights were retrofitted with LED fixtures and installed throughout the backyard.



the walls of your home outdoors,” sums up what they want to deliver to every customer that entrusts their aspirations for their home’s outdoors to Preferred Properties.

### Case in Point

For a family of four that just settled in Avon, Conn., enhancing their underdeveloped ½-acre backyard with an entirely new outdoor living space was a priority. Their reasons were many and included adding appeal to their collective activities and keeping the kids anchored at home.

After spending time with the residents, finding out more about them, hearing their ideas, and considering the available space, Gotowala expressed that his team could build the type of outdoor area that they deserved and that would suit them all. He was put under retainer to conceptual-

ize the project. Ultimately the process was a very fluid one. It “started with a fireplace that had a sitting wall 22 feet off the chimney” and evolved from there with lots of input and enthusiasm from the customers.

“On the weekends when the family was home, they had a chance to reflect on and impact the project and there were many changes throughout it,” remembers Gotowala. “On a project like this, it’s all about change.”

### The Starting Point

The existing yard had a traditional builders deck with four-by-four posts, arborvitae masking the posts and a knoll of lawn.

The build started August 2013. Grading the property was performed with the company-owned Bobcat 335 compact excava-





**Left:** Around the deck are railings made of black aluminum. The L-shaped kitchen island can accommodate five barstools and has a double-thick laminate, Azul granite countertop and a Turkish blue marble backsplash.

**Below, Left:** Two HBC remote-controlled burners were installed on either side of a granite bench that the fire pits warm up. All the stone for the counters and wall faces came snapped and cut, but Preferred Properties' masons trimmed the pieces with an Imer saw to create very tight joints.

tor. Larger John Deere loaders were rented to also perform ground preparation duties.

The fireplace is a custom-built stone unit with dual woodbins and remote control. It is large enough to be seen just about anywhere in the backyard. After the fireplace was done, the patio was created around it. The pavers are blue marble that were sandblasted and banded with an antique finish.

The patio's cooking station has a circular Evo flattop grill, a True beverage cooler and Brown Jordan cabinets. The grill is a direct contact cooker that provides the ability to cook nearly everything. This station doubles as a breakfast nook.

The retaining walls and seatwalls were reinforced with concrete and CMU block before being decked out with thin-cut stone from Vermont. One wall was turned into a fire feature by the installation of two HBC remote-controlled burners. All the stone for the counters and wall faces came snapped and cut but Preferred Properties' masons trimmed the pieces with an Imer saw to make the joints exceptionally close.

For the granite countertops, the hearth and ledges of the fireplace, and a bench between the fire pits, the masons fabricated templates to be cut offsite. All of them are twice as thick as typical outdoor or indoor kitchen counters to mirror the scale of the project. The bench actually gets heated by the fire features.

### **The Vista Point**

The upper level consists of a stone grill island and outdoor kitchen counter set on a mahogany, waterproofed deck with a Romeo and Juliet balcony, which is a diagonal overlap that allows for fuller views of the backyard. Black aluminum railings were installed for the same reason.

The homeowners originally wanted the spa on the deck. Gotowala suggested that they instead put it on the lower level and install stone 15 feet high to the second floor to create an adult setting on the balcony. The L-shaped kitchen island with an Azul granite countertop and Turkish blue marble backsplash contains a DCS grill, Alfresco power burner, True refrigerator, True wine chiller, and Brown Jordan cabinets.

### **Back at Ground Level**

Once the balcony was finished, Gotowala and the homeowners settled on a completely weatherized, all-season, great room beneath it. To build it, he had to first level the ground and then find the footing foundations of the home and reinforce them with rebar; put in some drainage off the house; and cut into the house to create a walkout basement into the room.

The kitchen there has a Woodstone pizza oven, an Alfresco warming drawer, an Alfresco bartending center, True dual wine coolers on each end of the counter, Brown Jordan cabinets in java, Haiku overhead fans by Big Ass Fans, Bromic overhead tungsten electric heaters, Orbit radiant floor heaters, and Juno overhead lights.

A mahogany TV wall stand and wine racks were built by Michael John Litefoot of Bald Eagle Construction. The TV can be set in eight different positions. Installing the pizza oven was very involved, needing a chimney, ducts, gas piping, and electricity.





**Right:** The fireplace is a custom-built stone unit that can be controlled remotely. The accompanying seatwall extends almost 20 feet to the right. They are veneered with square- and rectangle-cut thin stone and capped with double-thick granite. All of the furniture is from Gloster.

**Middle, Right:** On the upper deck made of mahogany is a kitchen that contains a DCS grill, an Alfresco power burner, a True refrigerator and wine chiller, java-colored Brown Jordan outdoor cabinetry with custom pulls and an Elkay stainless steel sink and faucet.

**Bottom, Right:** A circular Evo grill, a direct contact cooker, anchors the patio's cooking station, which also has a True beverage cooler and Brown Jordan cabinets. The station doubles as a breakfast nook.



Gotowala convinced the homeowners to leave the room open to the elements so that they can hear the sounds of the waterfall spilling into the pool, the crackling fire, and the laughter of the kids. There is a pass-through to the Sundance Mariner spa with an Azul granite and blue marble surround.

The Leisure fiberglass pool was then added. It has blue marble bullnose coping and a sundeck with waterfalls. Before installing it, Gotowala had to do some engineering to make sure the grading and run-off were handled properly and the setbacks were not disturbed.

The landscape was designed to be powerful enough to soften all the stone and marble. The plants came into Gotowala's nursery and then were dry-set around the yard for the homeowners' benefit. Blue Atlas cedar, coral bark maple and paper bark maple were three of the specimens that were planted.

For lighting, Gotowala used ABR illuminators, bullets, downlights, uplights, and wall lights. They are solid bronze units that were retrofitted with LED fixtures.

As a finishing touch, an outside contractor was brought in to install surround sound and automation equipment throughout.

The entire project took one year and involved 20 to 25 workers. Gotowala reports, "As each phase was in process, the homeowners added energy and ideas but they let me become the editor for their lifestyle outdoors."



### A Hitch Here and There

The house is situated down slope from other houses so there was much concern about run-off. Gotowala installed three 32-inch, cast-iron grates with 10-inch NDS pipe for drainage; what he refers to as "dollars well-spent underneath the ground."

Getting some of the larger items put in place proved to be somewhat demanding as the spa, fiberglass pool and pizza oven had to be craned in and the full slabs of granite were difficult to lift up to the deck. Scheduling was tricky according to Gotowala because on projects that take on many adjustments, expected timelines are ambiguous.

A shift in the tone of the overall design had to be accounted for. At first, the owners asked for a Tuscan stone and stucco feel, but they returned from a vacation in Miami wanting a more contemporary look, which Gotowala readily embraced for various reasons including that it would have more appeal to younger buyers when the time came for the owners to sell.

But with all the challenges and changes taken care of, the final results reflect the "fabulous design and meticulous workmanship," that Gotowala and his company takes satisfaction in providing to customers.

Gotowala states that outdoor living areas are one of the hottest trends, and advises that the best choice for building them is a company that knows concrete, masonry, drainage, runoff, proper plumbing, electrical requirements, air drafts, and additionally, how people interact with their surroundings. By understanding everyone's lifestyle and comfort level indoors and portraying it outdoors, he knows they'll spend endless hours there. 

