



# Taniya Nayak

Get to Know Celebrity Designer  
and UMass Lowell Alumna

by **Beth Daigle**

main photo by **Jeffrey Santos**

Last December, UMass Lowell alumna Taniya Nayak returned to the campus she once called home. Nayak is an interior designer, television host and, most recently, brand ambassador for Ellen DeGeneres. You might recognize Nayak from her appearances on Food Network's "Restaurant: Impossible" and HGTV's "House Hunters on Vacation" and "Designed to Sell."

In an engaging onstage discussion last spring with then-UMass Lowell Executive Vice Chancellor Jacqueline Moloney (now the school's chancellor), Nayak, 42, lit up the room with her energy and charm. She shared personal stories as well as design ideas for the holidays and every day. The audience learned that Nayak is a fan of artificial Christmas trees, her go-to paint color is Sherwin-Williams' urbane bronze, and that the use of an old business tie can be a fun and personal way to create a wreath ribbon.

Nayak was born in India and raised in Weymouth. Her father is an architect, and while her dream was to follow in his footsteps, she opted to pursue an undergraduate degree in marketing.

"I don't regret it," she says of her choice. "I'm happy I got that degree — it has helped tremendously with my design and television careers. Across the board, you need to know how to market yourself."

Following her time at UMass Lowell and a series of unfulfilling jobs, Nayak decided to work on a master's degree in interior design at Boston Architectural College.

"I had one of those moments when I thought, I am just too young to be doing a job that I don't love," she says. "The moment I did that, the gates opened. Everything in my life, that is me, fell into place."

In addition to her television gigs, Nayak established Taniya Nayak Design LLC in 2005. Her Boston-based firm has designed the interiors of residential properties for such notables as Joe Perry of Aerosmith and Patrice Bergeron of the Boston Bruins. Hospitality/restaurant design, however, is the company's main focus. Nayak and her team have created the chic and comfortable vibes at popular Boston restaurants including Julep Bar and Abby Lane, and soon will be overhauling several Ruth's Chris Steak House locations.

"To have my own business, see it be successful, and keep the integrity of a great





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job is very important to us," she says. "It has been one of the most challenging things I have ever done."

Beyond her booming business, Nayak continues to take on more in the Hollywood realm. In October 2014, she received a call to audition for the role of brand ambassador for DeGeneres, an interior design enthusiast whose homes have been featured in Architectural Digest, Elle Decor and Vogue. With her own line of home products for QVC called ED On Air, DeGeneres needed an expert who could represent the brand when she was unavailable. Competing against about 4,000 candidates, Nayak got the job.

She is a powerhouse of personality and approachable style who appreciates

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individual taste. "Trend" is a bad word in her book.

"I don't think that anyone should ever follow a trend because it's a trend," she says. "I think that whatever you love, whatever makes you happy, is what the trend should be."

Right now, Nayak loves basic elements such as wood and concrete. White walls are another of her favorites. These choices can seem stark if unadorned, so Nayak always offsets any severity with soft, comfortable and textured accents. Warm lighting also contributes to the balance she creates between cool and cozy.

Whether she's designing the interior of a restaurant or a home, Nayak wants the results to have meaning for her clients. She



Above: At Abby Lane Food & Spirits in Boston, Nayak's affinity for color pops with notes of orange. Her use of wooden elements, modern lighting and a neutral backdrop creates an interesting yet comfortable atmosphere. Below: A great example of Nayak's minimalist style in a kitchen view of her own home in Milton, Mass. Crisp white Caesarstone countertops contrast the contemporary black cabinetry. The vertical green tile backsplash adds interest and earthy color.







Nayak poses with Ellen Degeneres as brand ambassador to Degeneres' line of home products available on QVC.

wants them to feel the pride and joy that can only come from creating a space that is truly theirs. If a client isn't comfortable with color, Nayak helps them ease into bolder choices by keeping the big things, such as sofas or walls, more neutral. She suggests starting with grays, taupes or whites and then layering pops of color and pattern with smaller, less permanent things, such as throw pillows, window treatments or artwork.

She draws inspiration from the personalities of her clients and the intended function of the space. For restaurants, she allows the menu and the surrounding environment to be her muse. But before anything else, she likes to first ask: "What is the problem?"

"For anyone starting a renovation, they are doing it because there is something they don't like," Nayak says. "They may not like the wall colors or the flow of the house. I find out the problem and try to solve it through the design."

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## Nayak's Holiday Tips

**Create different themes.** For example, a nautical theme could include blues, brass- or chrome-toned ornaments, and rope for garland. Nayak created an Indian-themed Christmas tree using jewel-toned ornaments and her mother's sari as the tree skirt.

## Common Mistakes

**Furniture pushed up against the walls, no matter the size of the room.** "You should create intimate areas by pulling furniture in a little closer," Nayak says. "This gives you space that is conducive to chatting."

**Decorate even if you don't plan to be in your home forever.** Small touches can make it feel more personal and comfortable, and you will feel happier — if only for just one year. "Every single day is a new day. Every morning you wake up, you should feel good about where you are," Nayak says.

**Design to enjoy — not to sell.** "My rule of thumb is to allocate a certain amount of money every year," Nayak says. "If it's a few hundred dollars, then let that be painting an accent wall. If it's a few thousand dollars, let that be upgrades in the kitchen. This way, you'll be able to enjoy the changes you've made, rather than someone else."

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