



Scandi Style Designer Aly Velji sets the table for a holiday feast in his dining room (opposite), with a vibrant Zoë Pawlak painting behind him.

EASY DOES IT

Calgary designer Aly Velji brings a Palm Springs Christmas vibe to his mid-century home.

by JACQUIE MOORE // photographs by PHIL CROZIER



T

here's been a lot to celebrate this year in a circa-1959 southwest Calgary home. For starters, an engagement. In the spring, designer Aly Velji said yes to a marriage proposal over a Santorini sunset from his long-time partner, Jason Krell. Second, there was the completion of an inevitably tedious, but ultimately stunning, piecemeal renovation of the couple's four-level split, purchased nearly a decade ago in tiny Chinook Park. Lastly, there are the usual holidays, which are, not surprisingly, anything but usual in Velji's hands.

A well-known designer and media personality in Calgary and beyond, Velji runs his namesake firm out of the top floor of an old building on the less than trendy (for now) side of Bridgeland. It's an eccentric, fairly gritty contrast to his pretty, leafy residence on a quiet suburban street—a juxtaposition that fits the designer's fervent belief that character and beauty are born out of a pastiche of eras, textures, meanings and price points. The beguiling eclectic Christmas decor at the Velji-Krell home is seasonal proof that he's right.

An Ismaili Muslim born in Tanzania, Velji says Christmas was never “a big deal” in his house. He learned to love it anyway. “I made my parents buy me my own little tree, and I made my own decorations.” He was, he says with a grin, “a DIY-er from the beginning.” These days, a white feathered tree anchors Velji's holiday decor year after year, and homemade decorations still rule. “We do something completely different every year, but that tree stays.”

This year, the loose theme is “Christmas in Palm Springs.” Boughs of faux evergreen are given a desert twist via Velji's incorporation of real palm and eucalyptus. A vase of twisted manzanita branches is festively dressed up with hot-pink and peacock-blue glass balls made by Velji and his design team. (“I bought clear balls at Michaels and we filled them with iridescent paint and rolled them around until they dried.”) Homemade paper lanterns in lemon yellow and avocado green hang in all the main-floor windows. “I make sure there's a little DIY action

Sparkle and Shine “I make sure there's a little DIY action every year,” says Velji (standing with his partner, Jason Krell, top left). Velji eschews traditional Christmas colours. “I lean toward deep pinks, peaches and metallics to add *tjuz*.” Personal touches like a handmade Advent calendar (opposite, bottom left) and hand-painted Christmas balls (opposite, top left) keep the space warm—along with golden accents, like the “cheers” sign on the fireplace and the Crate and Barrel flatware on the table (opposite, centre).





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Despite Velji’s energetic approach to seasonal decorating, he works from the philosophy that adding Christmas to your home needn’t be an arduous task with entirely transformative results. “Sometimes Christmas can be overwhelming,” he says. “We tend to keep our house as it is and just add in a few details.” Rather than change out his sofa cushions, for instance, Velji just adds a sparkly one in the mix. The bar cart (a yard-sale score) offerings are simply extended to a nearby credenza, where neatly labelled glass bottles of fizzy cranberry juice are decoration enough. “Your house doesn’t have to scream ‘Christmas,’” he says. “Just look through boxes and see what you have—you can really add something to a room by putting out a couple of gold elements, travel souvenirs or meaningful gifts from friends.”

Indeed, the only truly seasonal touch to the couple’s dining room is a little row of burlap sacks strung across the window—an Advent calendar made by a friend. Otherwise, the table is made festive in ways that speak to the couple’s mid-century modern style (admittedly, Palm Springs lives large here year-round). Simple white dishes are amped up with sparkly clip-on swans and colourful side plates; bits of eucalyptus add greenery to a non-traditional floral arrangement; and brass cutlery—used year-round—lends an air of formality that could work for any special occasion. Add Champagne, matching suits from Palm Springs’ Mr. Turk Menswear, a *de rigueur* kitchen-dance party and—voilà!—it’s a classic Velji Christmas. **///**

Hot Holiday Velji’s colourful design aesthetic was the perfect base for his “Christmas in Palm Springs” theme. The master bedroom is decked out with vibrant Cole and Son wallpaper (left, centre and bottom); in the living room, tropical fabric on a side chair fits right in with palm leaves and eucalyptus in the decorative boughs (above, centre); and colourful throw cushions bring a hothouse vibe to the whole space.

