

Designing a Kitchen That Cooks

by Lynn Comeskey

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Whenever I see a “decorator” kitchen in a magazine, I get the feeling that kitchens are becoming works of art rather than practical workplaces for preparing food. We don’t have mere kitchens anymore; we have gourmet kitchens. Some of the lighting and detailing in these “cutting-edge” creations instills the feeling that one should be speaking in hushed tones.

But as a builder who also loves to cook, I think it’s time we get back to basics and build kitchens that work well for cooking as well as being a pleasure to the eye.

In a working kitchen, no amount of glossy finishes and fancy gadgets can substitute for good design.

Features I Like

I recently had a commercial gas cooktop installed in our kitchen, and it’s wonderful. Precise burner controls which allow for a good simmer, enough Btu to boil water for pasta quickly, and an open, observable, adjustable flame are features I really like. Many of the more popularly priced gas cooktops I have seen don’t seem to have good controls or enough heat-producing capacity.

Drawer dividers are simple and obvious, yet many people don’t have them. A set of built-in dividers for utensils will make it possible to separate the spatulas,

the cooking spoons, and the salad utensils, so that it is always easy to find what you want. The same applies to knife racks; knives are easier to find and won’t get dulled by unnecessary contact with each other.

Vertical dividers for trays and shallow baking dishes keep everything within easy reach.

Pantry cabinets, with row upon row of swing-up, pivot-up, and hinge-out shelves to store foodstuffs in an organized and easily accessible manner are great. Admittedly they’re costly, but they make it easy to find cans and containers.

Tilt-out trays located behind blank drawer fronts under cooktops and sinks are useful for storing small utensils and cleaning supplies close to where they’re needed.

Undercabinet lighting. After remodeling my own kitchen (and continuing to cook in it), I really appreciate the difference between working with and without lighting installed under the wall cabinets and over the counters. It’s the difference between just getting by and being able to actually see.

Impractical Features

The bulge of a self-rimming sink edge makes it virtually impossible to clean the counter easily. You have to wipe refuse off the counter and into your hand or some other receptacle and then

place it in the sink. With an under-mount or flush-mount sink, you can clean a counter with one easy swipe.

Wood counters look great, but I have yet to see a cook keep one dry on a routine basis. They don’t look so good after they start supporting mildew growth. Nonetheless, wood remains a very popular choice, so I recommend routine maintenance of the surface with a food-grade mineral-oil, sold for this purpose. There is a similar problem with wood counter edges attached to a tile, Formica or Corian top. Near the sink, water gets into the joint between the wood and the surface material, the wood expands, and the two eventually separate.

Tile counters can be very attractive, but they are much more difficult to keep clean than smooth solid-surface products. Plus, some activities, like rolling dough, are not practical on an uneven tile surface. Here, it may be helpful to specify large tiles, reducing the number of dirt-grabbing grout lines.

Rollout trays located behind a pair of doors are a pet peeve of mine. Yes, they provide accessibility, but to avoid scratching the backs of the doors with the tray’s side-mount hardware, it’s necessary to open both doors fully each time a tray is rolled out. I find this to be a nuisance — good old-fashioned draw-

ers seem more practical.

Wine and spice racks mounted over cooktops and refrigerators seem to make clever use of space, but exhaust heat from the appliance may cause the early demise of spices, herbs, or wine stored there.


Those rustic heavy racks for hanging pots and pans over cooktops look good too, but unless the pots and pans are all used and washed frequently, they will soon accumulate a layer of grease and dust.

Hulking refrigerators are an abomination to the eye. One hard-to-swallow

solution is to buy a costly 24-inch-deep refrigerator. As an alternative, I try to find an accessible location for the refrigerator, where it can either be recessed into a wall, or the surrounding cabinets can be built out to minimize its visual effect on the kitchen.

Appliance garages can be nice, but they can also interrupt the visual flow of the counter. The intended purpose is generally for the storage of small appliances, and if a person is good about putting things away, then they're useful. But if a client doesn't put things away, my guess is that the appliance

garage will go unused and just take up more counter space.

Of course, none of the above applies if (as is sometimes the case) the homeowner doesn't care about cooking. If the desired effect is merely a room decorated with whatever is "hot" in the cooking world, then perhaps it is our duty to pair these clients with a kitchen designer who also does not care about cooking. 

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