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'Tis the Season



Top Drawer Cabinetry

The holidays are a perfect representation of when function meets style in kitchen design

Story by Emily Ballard

*H*oliday traditions vary, and their significance is obviously different for every family. Yet a constant theme that is celebrated universally is the idea of togetherness. Our homes are our refuge and a place of serenity, but they can also be a spot for gathering and entertaining, especially this time of year. For those who enjoy cooking and hosting family and friends, it is very important to have the appropriate space and layout to maximize comfort and functionality.



Nu Kitchens

This can be achieved in a number of different ways, but it begins with design. Top industry experts employ innovative concepts to capture the look and feel their clients dream of—and to build spaces that can accommodate holiday festivities with sparkle, finesse, comfort and function.

Lifestyle and Expectations

The most important questions that designers, builders and architects must ask their clients are about their needs and lifestyle. This is especially important when tackling a kitchen design. Tyra Dellacroce, vice president of interior sales and marketing for Connecticut Stone in Milford, CT, recognizes the importance of getting to know the client's lifestyle and expectations. Connecticut Stone specializes in luxury kitchen design and products, and its design team realizes that the best way to produce happy clients is to get to know them first. "For me,

it is all focused on the way people are using their kitchen and entertaining," Tyra explains. Traditionally, there was a trend toward people and guests sitting in the living or dining room while food was brought and presented to them. "Today," says Tyra, "the way we see folks using their luxury kitchen is that guests and family are very much participating in preparation of the meal."

This has led to the growing popularity of open concept designs, where the kitchen flows into the dining and living room spaces. Homeowners are more drawn to features such as kitchen islands, which allow for seating that fosters interactive socialization. Tyra has also seen a shift in the concept of wine cellars, which are being replaced by wine towers, wine refrigerators and wine rooms—right in the kitchen space. With hands-on cooking and entertaining, people want to have everything they need at their fingertips.

Tyra equates the design process to matchmaking. "You can have something that is absolutely fantastic, but you want to make sure it has specific attributes that are appealing to you," she says. "It is a question of balancing the aesthetic of the product with functionality and durability." With the evolution of appliances and advancements in technology, it is now easier than ever to accommodate specific requests of homeowners. The latest equipment is smarter, more efficient and



more aesthetically pleasing—and it is not uncommon to find multiple dishwashers and multiple sinks to facilitate cleanup. “It’s important to ask people how they live, and it is really important for people to be honest about that,” says Tyra. “You can help them get a product that meets design aesthetic, but also serves them functionally for the lifetime of the kitchen.”

Connecticut Stone is a stone supplier, and its materials dress kitchens with luxurious and sophisticated elements, such as countertops and back splashes. When designers choose a material, it is critical to assess the customer’s characteristics to ensure that the most durable product is delivered. For instance, if the homeowners entertain often, they may not want to choose a countertop that will become etched from the wine glasses. “We are looking to match people with products to fit their design aesthetic and the functionality they require for their household,” Tyra says. “For us, it is not about selling a countertop, it is about selecting something they will be happy with for decades. To do that, you have to really understand the family and where they are coming from.”

No matter what the requirements of the kitchen are for entertaining, family life is the backbone of kitchen design. As a father of six with more than 30 years of experience in the industry, Jerry Tomic with Top Drawer Custom Cabinetry in New Rochelle, NY, has firsthand knowledge of what works in the kitchen. “I like to see how big a family it is, and the age of the kids,” he says. “If they have young kids, or kids in college, it makes a difference in what I suggest in terms of materials.” Hardwood floors can be problematic with wear and tear in some cases. Jerry is a proponent of radiant heat flooring for comfort, and embraces open concept for style and flow. He believes the key to a successful design is thorough planning—from the blueprint, to the final design, to the selection of the materials.

Blending Function and Style

Sarah Blank of Sarah Blank Design Studio in Greenwich, CT, also values the importance of designing to match the client’s lifestyle. “When someone likes to entertain, you have to start at the beginning with your storage needs,” she says. From there, the designer must evaluate the size of the ovens and the number of burners necessary to fit the owner’s culinary needs. And especially for entertaining purposes, it is vital to consider if guests will be in the kitchen. “You want to think about the easy flow, about entertaining and spending time with your guests, but making sure the kitchen is going to accommodate all this,” she says.

Sarah often finds that the younger generation has a much greater demand for open spaces, to enable the homeowner to cook in the kitchen while watching the children in the living room or playroom. When she started designing in the 1980s, there was a trend toward open concept, and decades later, people started closing up the kitchen space. Now there is a definitive shift back towards open spaces, a full circle in the design world.

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Another generational difference that Sarah has encountered is the collection of formal dinnerware or fine china, which goes back to the storage needs of the client. Designing a space that has a practical organizational and functional flow is key. "I spend a great deal of time with my clients, making sure that things can be put away and there are ample outlets to plug things into. You want to make sure it's as easy as possible," she says. "I've done it for so many years, it becomes second nature to know what needs to be in a kitchen."

One solution that can address these challenges is the creation and use of a butler's pantry. This area is typically adjacent to the kitchen area and can be used to store china, linens and wine glasses; it may even have a small refrigerator or sink of its own. This can also be a perfect place to stage meals for dinner parties and events. With ample space, a buffet can be set up in this area for guests to serve themselves and continue with a more modern and open experience.

A kitchen design should also provide ample counter space for preparation. "If you are a cook, then one sink isn't going to do it," says Sarah. "You are going to want a prep area and a cleanup area." Having studied classical architecture and spending much time playing with proportions, Sarah has an exceptional talent for analyzing size and style, and integrating them into a kitchen so it is functional and forward-thinking and has a distinct design aesthetic. Function and style have a long history of fighting each other when it comes to design, but there is a plane on which they coexist.

In the end, it all comes back to the client. How much use will the kitchen get? Will the family gather there each night for dinner? Will there need to be a place to put the baby down as dinner is being prepared? Will it be a space for entertaining friends and extended family, where the homeowners will enjoy the holidays

with big meals and wine toasts?

Designers must consider these questions when it comes to kitchen design. And, in addition to meeting client needs, the design must match the technical requirements of the appliances. Whether the homeowners are advanced home chefs or barely know how to open a can, they must have all the necessities they will ever need. "We can have clients who never cook, but the one day they do cook is when they put the turkey in the oven," Sarah jokes. "You've got very sophisticated cooking equipment that is wonderful to use, but they all have very specific requirements, and you have to make sure one of them is going to fit a turkey."

Joseph Najmy, with Nu Kitchens in South Norwalk, CT, urges his clients to think about their daily living routine and how the right kitchen design can improve the way they live in their home. "The goal is to think beyond the ordinary and creatively plan a more organized kitchen life that friends and family can share in," he says. "I grew up in a family with 16 uncles and aunts and 36 cousins living on the same block in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Cooking, eating and cleanup were always a family affair full of great memories, especially Thanksgiving."

Creating style and character is the ultimate goal for Joseph, who does this by incorporating pure elements such as stone, porcelain, warm wood tone and richly colored paints. He also adds texture with materials such as copper, brass, soapstone and walnut. All of this comes together for modern comfort and organization.

It's All in the Layout

The layout of a home can be the defining factor when it comes to comfort and functionality, and this aspect is critical when considering a kitchen build.



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If the homeowner has a large family and frequent guests, there must be sufficient space for walkways so the cook or multiple cooks have room to walk around. “We consider the flow of the space and where guests will naturally land when entering the space. If the first few steps direct guests between the range and the sink, the chef will be dancing around them during meal prep,” says Jennifer Howard of JWH Design and Cabinetry in Rye, NY.

The daily use of the kitchen area must be taken into consideration. For that reason, designers such as Jennifer must evaluate the needs of the client with questions such as whether they like to cook and how often they host gatherings. Establishing how large the events might be and the details of such events leads to decisions about which appliances will best suit the cooking needs. For instance, would an extra refrigerator, double ovens or a warming drawer facilitate efficient planning and execution? “It makes sense to right-size the appliances,” says Jennifer. “We don’t want to overwhelm a space with huge appliances, but the largest units that fit proportionately will provide the best function and overall value.”

This concept is quite familiar to Peter Deane with Deane Rooms Everlasting in New Canaan, CT. A recent kitchen design for a family with five children brought some specific design requests and challenges. The family loved to cook, so it was important to have places for the children to sit in the kitchen, and that the appliances accommodate their needs. This was achieved with an elegant and functional



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kitchen island with seating for five, so the mother could converse with the kids while cooking. Because of the family's size, timing for meal preparation was also imperative. A warming drawer is one feature that Peter and his clients knew was a must-have. A butler's pantry with extra sink, refrigerator, storage and counter space enhanced the space with increased organization and efficiency. Great attention was given to materials that could withstand an active family of this size. Inch-and-a-half perimeter stainless-steel countertops, storage for dry goods, and increased refrigerator and freezer space were installed, along with a 48-inch range with custom hood and a concrete island with a waterfall edge.

When speaking about functionality versus style, Peter says, "I think they are complementary to each other. Aesthetic and style are very important to designers because that is the value we bring to creating this image, but just as important is the functionality."

When it comes to a kitchen build, the options for design, features and appliances are endless. There is an ebb and flow to trends and styles, but certain aspects of this space are timeless. A special feel emerges around the holiday season that brings people together, and so often this congregation happens in the kitchen. With the proper design, this space can be a beautiful, comfortable and functional area for entertaining friends and in-laws—or just staying home for an intimate dinner with loved ones.

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