



9 Kitchen Island

Ideas

**Common-sense strategies
for creating kitchen islands
that function well and look
great** BY SCOTT W. SMITH



When homeowners contemplate remodeling a kitchen, they often think of commercial stoves and built-in refrigerators. My company specializes in kitchen design and installation, so I think of the efficiency of the work triangle, which is formed by connecting the three main areas used in cooking: sink, refrigerator, and stovetop. More important, I think of the kitchen island, which I consider to be an essential element of an efficient kitchen.

The kitchen island revolutionized the residential kitchen industry when it was introduced in the 1970s. It was carried over from commercial kitchen design and was thought of primarily as a prep station. Then creative designers started customizing islands to suit their residential clients. They topped islands with smooth marble and granite. They added smart storage features, sinks, undercounter refrigerators, and seating. European cabinetry companies began creating islands that looked more like fine furniture than practical surfaces for slicing and dicing. The island evolution continues at a staggering pace.

In commercial kitchens, the island is a critical way station for the flow of food from prep to patron. At home, it's an integral part of overall kitchen design. Today, the island is as much a place to eat, gather, and define a room as it is a place to mix and chop.

What makes a kitchen island work well? From surface and size to shape and storage, there are a number of things to consider if you want your island to be a practical and attractive part of your kitchen. Here are the ones I think are most important.

1

Look high and low

THE STANDARD HEIGHT for kitchen countertops is 36 inches, but that doesn't necessarily apply to kitchen islands. To increase your comfort level, you can customize an island to your height or to its uses. In fact, it's not uncommon to design a two- or three-tiered island to allow for a bar area, a prep area, and a baking area.

Another advantage to mixing counter heights is the ability to hide cooking messes behind a bar counter. The split-level island at left gives kids and company a place to perch while the cook is afforded more room for prep and cleanup. When friends and family sit down to eat at the table beyond, the dirty dishes disappear from view.



2

Find the right location

AN ISLAND CAN BE MUCH MORE than a

workspace. It can physically or visually separate a kitchen from an adjoining space—a family room or dining room, for example—while allowing the cook to be part of the conversation. It can be situated anywhere from 3 to 6 feet away from running counters, depending on the size of the kitchen, and can be centered or not, depending on traffic patterns.

An island can separate cooking from socializing while simultaneously allowing for controlled circulation. A strategically placed island with a wide circulation path around it lets traffic pass by without interfering with the cook. A narrower path can allow for efficient cooking while limiting the number of visitors in the way.

This island seamlessly eases the transition between activities—cooking and dining—while visually blending the two sides of the room.



Mix and match materials

3

AN ISLAND CAN CONTRIBUTE to an interesting palette of materials in a kitchen. By matching it to the perimeter cabinetry and keeping the surfaces the same, it can feel very much a part of the room. On the other hand, an island can afford you another canvas if you want to create a more complex and visually interesting design. Painted perimeter cabinetry, for example, can look great in combination with a distinctive stained-wood island.

You can mix materials on the island itself, depending on how you plan to use it. For instance, if you like to make pastry, you can insert a marble slab into another surface, such as butcher block.

A bleached maple base blends in with the sleek cabinetry in this kitchen, but the stainless-steel-topped counter with removable wood cutting board provides a visual contrast.



Left photo: Ken Gutmaker



A BEAUTIFUL ISLAND can look like a custom piece of furniture. You can match it to your overall cabinet design or let it stand on its own.

If you keep your perimeter cabinetry simple and straightforward, you have the option of spending more on the island and adding design details that really make a difference.

This island looks decidedly different from the painted cabinetry in the rest of the kitchen. The stained cherry cabinet and heavy butcher block top give it a strong presence, identifying it as a place for working more than socializing. Because the kitchen is open to both the living room and dining room, and there is ample seating available, this island doesn't have to do double duty.

5

Stand out in the crowd



Pull up a chair

4

A GENEROUS OVERHANG can provide adequate

seating without taking up too much room in a crowded kitchen. This is great for families with children who do homework while moms

or dads are fixing dinner, or for couples who enjoy cooking in the company of friends.

Eating was no afterthought in this island's design. The granite counter is easy to clean, the island is deep enough for sitting comfortably, and it looks like it belongs.

IF YOUR KITCHEN ISLAND doesn't dramatically increase the amount of storage in your kitchen, you're missing an opportunity. Thoughtful design can make room for everything from pots and pans to spices, books, and wine. An island can have a multitude of uses if you build a bookcase into a corner, fit a wine rack into the side, or add shelves for baskets to hold produce.

Hidden storage is a given, and pretty shelves are a plus. This island provides both. Cabinet doors line one side (above), while here, open shelves hold decorative baskets and serving pieces in full view.



Put everything away

6



7

Plug in for more uses

IT MAY SEEM LIKE A LUXURY, but a second dishwasher can be a huge help if you have a large family or entertain a lot. Another appliance that fits easily into most islands is an undercounter beverage refrigerator. If you install it on the outside corner of the island, it can provide easy access without disturbing the cook. A prep sink can be useful for washing salads, fruits, and vegetables or rinsing glasses.

In this wide island, a sink and handy drink refrigerator take up almost no room, but they are strategically placed for lots of daily use.



GOOD LIGHTING IS ESSENTIAL to a functional kitchen island. Dimmers can allow you to create a mood over an island that ranges from romantic candlelight to operating-room brightness. Here, a pair of dropped pendants carefully placed over the island illuminates the entire work surface and lends visual interest.

8

Take lighting to task



HOW TO IMPROVE THE ISLAND YOU ALREADY HAVE

NOT READY TO REPLACE THE WHOLE THING? Here are some ways to improve functionality and looks without buying a new kitchen island or building one from scratch.

UPGRADE LIGHTING This can be as simple as switching to brighter bulbs or as involved as wiring to add a fixture (or increase the number of fixtures) overhead. You can also replace existing fixtures or shades.

INCREASE WORK SPACE You can substitute a larger countertop easily, as long as it's not much heavier than the one you have. If it is, you may need to add support brackets. It's always a good idea to consult

a kitchen expert before making any changes that could compromise the structure of the island.

GIVE CABINETS A FACE-LIFT You can change the look of your island by simply replacing hardware. You can paint the cabinetry or have it refaced as you would regular kitchen cabinets (see IH#5, July/August 2004, "Getting It Done").

ADD A SINK OR DISHWASHER A kitchen island is the perfect spot for a prep sink or dishwasher. But remember, you'll have to bring a water line to the island if it isn't already plumbed.



9 Get a good fit

THE SIZE OF YOUR ISLAND should be directly related to the size of your kitchen. An oversize island can make you feel claustrophobic and take away from the rest of the detailed cabinetry. If the island is too small, you may wonder why you bothered having one at all.

To decide the best size for your island, ask yourself what its functions will be. If you plan to put appliances in the island or use it as a cooking surface, then it needs to be large enough to accommodate them—and then some. If it will be used primarily for making sandwiches or serving appetizers at a party, you can make do with a smaller surface.

In this kitchen, a relatively compact island does it all, providing seating, storage, a prep sink, and open shelving. Although a deeper, wider island would have fit, this one doesn't sacrifice the smooth traffic pattern or overpower the room. **h**

Scott W. Smith owns Smith River Kitchens in East Hampton, N.Y. He believes the kitchen island is the true center of home life and wonders if we really need living rooms anymore.

For more information, see Resources, page 84.