

I've been designing kitchens for more than 30 years now, and I've made a career-long study of the reasons why some kitchens are so much better than others. I have seen kitchens with nearly identical budgets and the same amount of floor space, yet one perfectly suits its owners while the other one doesn't even come close. Here's what I've learned about where things go right.

Great kitchens have a lot of things in common that don't necessarily jump out at you. It's not one detail that separates a great kitchen from a not-so-great one; it's getting all the details right and making sure they work together. The relationships between various functions in the kitchen, and how the space is connected to the house and its surroundings, emerge as most important.

I offer these ten elements as points to consider when creating your own kitchen. As you study the accompanying photographs, you'll note that these elements don't exist in a vacuum. They all fit together, and you'll see many of them at work, side by side.

10 Ingredients of a Great Kitchen

From the perfect location to long-lasting materials, the best kitchens get every detail right

BY DAVID EDRINGTON





1 Natural light

Sunlight wakes us up in the morning and makes us feel good all day long. A great kitchen has generous windows on at least two and preferably three walls. Ideally, some of them face east or southeast to catch morning sun. The windowsills should be 4 in. to 6 in. above the countertops (lower where there are no counters). If the ceiling is at least 9 ft. high, the windows should include transoms above. A shelf between the transoms and the windows is a wonderful place to display treasured objects.



2 Central location



A great kitchen is at the heart of family activity, so it should be at the crossroads of circulation through the house—but it shouldn't have one of those roads going through it. Rather, the kitchen should be tangent to where the main circulation paths intersect. Ideally, the kitchen's location has a view of the main entrance and a view of the main garden or outdoor room.

3 Zones for cleanup, food prep & storage

Kitchens are only as good as they are functional. The best kitchens are subtly divided into three zones for different types of work, each with its own counters, cabinets, and equipment for a specific function. Arranging these zones incorrectly is probably the most critical mistake in kitchen design.

The cleanup zone has a counter or a pass-through for staging dirty dishes that have come back from the dinner table, and a big sink for scraping and rinsing pots, pans, and plates before they go in the dishwasher. This area is also the place to store dishes, glasses, cups, and flatware, particularly if they can be stored between the dishwasher and the table. This zone contains recycling bins and a compost bucket, too.

The food-preparation zone should have a large cutting surface, a prep sink, and a stove. When designing kitchens for new homes, I typically locate this zone in a space that includes an island and a portion of the adjacent counter. This zone also includes storage space for all cutting, mixing, and cooking tools, along with counter space for arranging food on plates before bringing them to the table.

The food-storage zone houses a pantry for dry storage and a refrigerator for cold storage. To be most efficient, the pantry and the refrigerator should be 6 ft. to 7 ft. tall. Group them together so that you can gather ingredients without affecting any of the other zones.





Design: John Hurst

4 High-quality equipment and finishes

In creating a great kitchen, the most fundamental economy is to buy equipment and finishes that endure. They should last 20 years minimum, longer if possible. For this reason, I prefer commercial or commercial-style equipment for sinks, faucets, refrigeration, dishwashers, fans, and ranges. I like solid wood for cabinets; oil-based enamel for painted surfaces; and the patina of a clear, oil-based polyurethane varnish on woodwork when a clear finish is called for. I recommend faucets that are guaranteed for the life of the house, simple cabinet-door hinges that look good whether the door is open or closed, and doorknobs and drawer pulls that grow more beautiful with the patina of age.

5 The farmhouse-kitchen table and the modern island

No great kitchen is complete without a place for visiting. For centuries, the kitchen table was where you could sit down for a conversation over a cup of coffee or just to rest a moment. Children could do their homework there, too. At seasonal benchmarks such as harvest time, the table became an extended workplace for canning, baking, or putting up preserves. Modern kitchens, for the most part, have lost that table; it has been replaced by the kitchen island. If designed properly, however, an island can serve many of the same functions. Johnny Grey is probably the best authority on how an island should work (see "Getting the Most From a Kitchen Island," p. 90).



Design: John Hurst

6 A mix of countertops

A great kitchen has counters made of different materials, at a variety of heights and depths. For any counter to be considered an effective work area, it should be at least 48 in. long.

A 33-in.-tall counter is useful for kneading dough. This countertop should be a cold stone such as granite, soapstone, or a quartz composite. Another counter is for cutting and chopping at a comfortable height, usually 36 in. This countertop is typically maple block treated with food-grade oil or wax. The counter near the stove should be a heat-resistant surface such as stone or stainless steel. If you can spare the space, make this counter a little deeper than usual, say 30 in., to fit bottles of olive oil, vinegar, and spices. The countertop near the cleanup sink can be a softer dish-friendly surface such as linoleum, plastic laminate, or even maple.



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7 The garden connection



A view of the garden is so important that if you don't have one, I urge you to plant a garden next to the kitchen; even a window box or a few potted plants are better than nothing. This outdoor connection expands the kitchen visually. French doors opening onto a sunny, wind-protected garden complete with table and chairs can extend kitchen function outdoors. The yard even can include another place to cook.

The door to the garden should be placed along the edge of the room, or between the kitchen and its adjacent eating space, not in the middle of the kitchen.

8 Glass doors and lots of drawers

More and more, the kitchens I design don't have upper cabinets. The storage load that they typically handle is taken up by drawers instead. Drawers are far more convenient than cabinets with doors anyway, as long as the drawers, which should be on full-extension slides, are a variety of widths and depths to store different items: dishes, pots, pans, and silverware; recycling bins; table linens; mixers, blenders, and toasters; and condiments and spices. Narrow drawers can be side-loaded rather than top-loaded (photo right).

A great kitchen does have at least one upper cabinet for glasses, teacups, and coffee mugs. It should feature glass doors; if the cabinet is on an outside corner, it also should have glass sides (photo right). Glass doors not only show off attractive glasses and mugs, but they also are a lighter alternative to solid upper cabinets, which can bring in the walls of a kitchen, making it feel smaller and more cramped.



Design: John Hurst





9 Seating areas

A kitchen table or a bar at the island is one kind of sit-down spot that every kitchen needs. The other kind is the soft, sit-way-back places that can be provided only by an easy chair, a sofa, or a window seat. I'm especially fond of the latter, which should be placed next to big windows with low sills overlooking the garden. The key is to place the window seat between work zones, not in the middle of one of them.

A breakfast nook that is almost in the kitchen is also beneficial. Visually and acoustically entwined with the kitchen, the nook is nevertheless off to the side with built-in benches that take up a minimum of space.

10 Lighting and personality

A great kitchen fits the character of the house. It has some regional characteristics in its detailing and use of materials, and it does not look like it is from a foreign country or another galaxy. The colors and the lighting should be on the warm side. Uniform lighting isn't necessary, however; some areas of a kitchen are clearly meant to be brighter than others. I use incandescent lighting, xenon undercabinet lighting, and occasionally halogen accent lighting. When I use compact fluorescent bulbs, I make sure they are inside a warm-glass globe or shade. The light fixtures that are visible are a joy to see.

Finally, a great kitchen contains keepsakes: platters from a favorite potter, framed menus from special dinners, or labels from long-gone vintage wines. Put them on display, where they will infuse the space with your life.

David Edrington is an architect in Eugene, Ore. Thanks to architect John Hurst of Portland, Ore., for his first-rate kitchen-design insights. Photos by Charles Miller. Kitchens designed by the author, except where noted.