

The Fun's Where the Food Is: Today's Kitchen is Yesterday's Living Room

Charlene Arsenault

Food's a strong magnet. The smell of bread baking. A crock-pot of chili. Kabobs grilling on an open flame. Try as you might to keep guests out, the kitchen's the hopping room of any party. Likewise, the kitchen is where family connects. So these days, people are devoting more money and attention to this room. With eat-at counters, oversized islands, wine refrigerators, warming trays, inside grills and extra-large cabinets, the kitchen is becoming bigger, warmer, and more equipped to be the centerpiece of the house.

Today's designers, contractors, and appliance manufacturers are responding to this desire to make the kitchen friendly. Here, we talk to some area experts about the kitchen's growing popularity, as well as new trends and products to make your kitchen the talk of the house.

"People are investing more and more into their kitchens," says Paul Shaffer, regional marketing manager for **BSH Home Appliances**, 780 Dedham St., Canton (781.774.6100), "especially in the New England market. They're either knocking down old homes and building new homes on that



Aga stove courtesy of Domain Home Fashions

land or remodeling. I would say more homeowners are remodeling because of the lack of land in the northeast. People are becoming more domesticated, especially since 9-11. People stopped traveling and the sense of home and family has taken on even more of an effect."

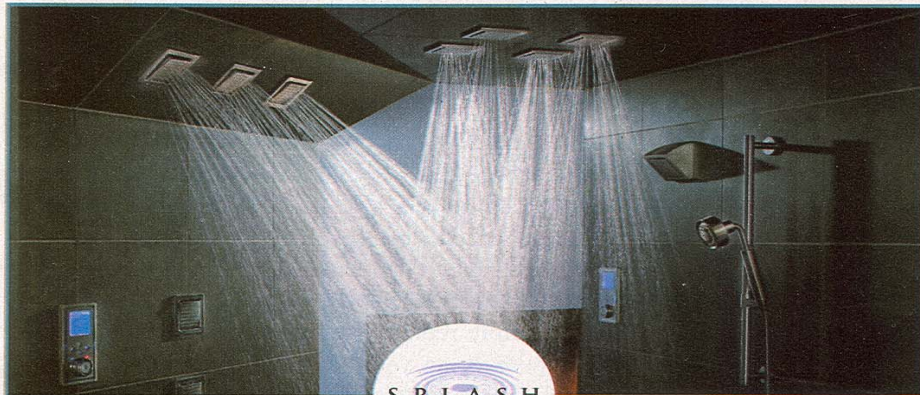
The kitchen, he says, has doubled in size in the past 20 years, and is more equipped to entertain and at the same time furnish larger, state-of-art appliances. BSH owns and manufactures Bosch (www.boschappliances.com), Thermador (www.thermador.com) and Gaggenau (www.gaggenau-usa.com) brands, all targeting the residential market, and each with its own niche.

Fans of the Food Network will appreciate some of the more recent innovations in kitchen appliances. Thermador, renowned for its invention of the wall oven over 50 years ago, is still going strong, burning out its competitors the last three times Consumer Reports covered wall ovens. Thermador has attractive, top of the line cooktops (electric and gas), refrigerators, ranges, dishwashers and more. "It is one of the premier lines on the market today," says Shaffer. "Thermador makes an induction cooktop right now that's really hot in the industry." This cooktop is safer, particularly where there are children in the home, because the surface stays cooler.

An exclusive product line, Bosch is famous for its dishwashers and recently added cooking products, such as ranges, cooktops, and wall ovens. Bosch's dishwasher line was ranked highest in its category by Consumer Reports for seven years. Finally, Gaggenau is the quintessential line for home chefs, producing unique styles that rival restaurant-quality models. "They make the only oven," says Shaffer, "that can be a combination oven and steamer in one. It's unbelievable. With their line, you have the capability of customizing your own cooktop."

Kam Appliances and Home Electronics (www.kamonline.com), with locations in Hyannis (508.771.2221) and Hanover (781.829.0810), carries just about every line of kitchen appliances. After 18 years as a Kam salesperson, Steve Kalweit has observed a noticeable increase in the money people are spending on kitchens. "It's simply amazing," he explains, "what you can do today."

Though people are purchasing lots of basics at Kam such as dishwashers, stoves, microwaves and ventilation units, they're also eyeing snazzy specialties such as warming drawers, under-counter refrigerators, built-in icemakers, and beverage centers. "You can



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even do a complete outside kitchen," says Kalweit, "including grills, grills with ovens in them, icemakers, and wok burners." He adds that home design has become more open: the home is a fun place, not just a functioning shelter. "The design flows," he says. "They are not separate rooms anymore. And when people entertain, they know everyone will be in the kitchens. Islands with the seating around it are very popular."

Islands, and a Lot More.

While appliances provide the functionality for a kitchen, the design—including the cabinets and countertops—defines a

kitchen's style. With showrooms in Wilmington, Middleton, Wakefield, Needham, and Kingston, **Boston Kitchen Distributors** (978.657.8720, www.bostonkitchen.com) has some of the area's top designers on staff, and specializes in dealing custom and semi-custom cabinetry and countertops from leading vendors. The company carries products from seven manufacturers, offering varying lines and price ranges.

George Menihtas, president of Boston Kitchen, says he sees a shift in people's attitude about the kitchen. "They are more conscious about the placement of appliances and cabinets," he says, "which leads to utility of use. Islands continue to be popular. People are including room for other things in the kitchen such as TVs. Computers and desks seem to be moving back out of the kitchen area after a few years of being hot."

The use of large islands, or peninsulas, is indeed a major trend in kitchen design, echoes Carlotta Cubi, project manager for **Cumar Marble and Granite** (800.774.7818, www.cumar.com), who says social changes have affected the use of the kitchen and its design. She adds that kitchens today are based on esthetics just as much as convenience, and tend to have less wall space and more floor space to allow traffic. This is a big reason granite has become so popular.

With warehouses and a showroom in Everett, Cumar keeps a wide variety of marble and granite slabs and tiles in stock. The company imports directly from Italy, and sometimes from Brazil, and all of their residential products are custom-made. Cumar specialists assist you in selecting the right countertop for any style kitchen. Take care to choose the stone that best complements the décor, and learn about granite and how it can be easily incorporated into your kitchen.

"Honed granite has become a popular choice, especially in black," says Cubi. "It's very popular since it's easy to coordinate with other decors, and when honed rather than polished, it not only gives a softer warmer look to the kitchen, but it's also easier to keep clean."

Domain Home Fashions (877.4.DOMAIN, www.domain-home.com) is an upscale retailer of unique and exclusive home furnishings and Aga kitchen

products, founded in 1986 by Judy George. With 30 retail stores from Boston to Washington D.C., Domain has locations on Newbury Street, at the Burlington and Chestnut Hill Malls, a Norwood warehouse and its flagship store in Natick. The Natick store boasts an Aga Shop with live cooking demonstrations and a comprehensive display of Aga stoves and cookware.

PR manager Sue Beddia says Domain's customers are very savvy, and appreciate that the show floors change seasonally. "Our collections are displayed in room settings and completely put together," says Beddia, "so you can really picture what it will look like in your home." Families want multi-functioning kitchens, where they can eat together, allow kids to work on their homework or entertain gracefully. "The room," she adds, "has gained a certain status. For instance, fabulous stoves have become a status symbol."

"We've conducted focus groups," she says, "and discovered that most people couldn't identify the brands of top stoves, only that they were stainless. The Aga is incomparable in style and actually comes in 15 designer colors. And now we have under-counter refrigeration and wine cellars to match. Dual-fuel ovens are particularly popular for the cook who loves to



Photograph courtesy of Fager

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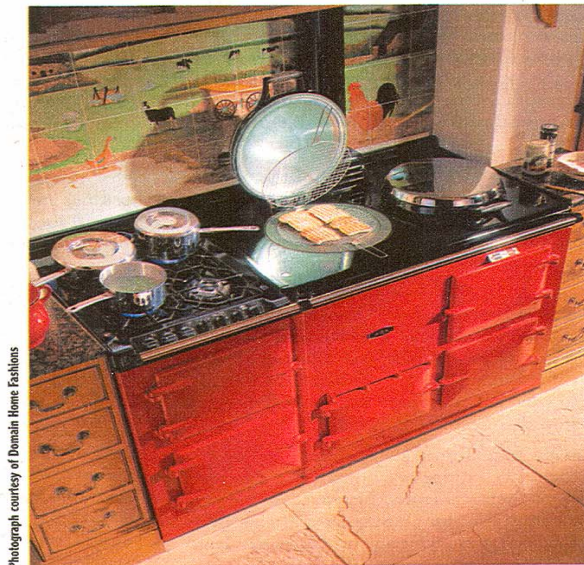
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Photograph courtesy of Domain Home Fashions

cook with gas and electric. We offer three dual-fuel models." "Aga," she adds, "is particularly family-friendly. With multiple ovens that are always on, it's ready to cook when you are."

Nancy Stracka Interiors (617.273.8438, www.strackainteriors.com) has been working with clients throughout metropolitan Boston since 1989. Members of the Designer-on-Call program at the **Boston Design Center** (www.bostondesign.com), Stracka is based in Marblehead and has an office at Independence Wharf in Boston.

As designers at Nancy Stracka Interiors, Stracka, Jennifer Brown, and Brielle Majeau agree that people are looking for a kitchen that will simplify their lives. "The kitchen is where the family lives," says Stracka, CEO and principal interior designer, "and with both parents working, children in school, sports events, and school plays, time together is extremely valuable."

And it takes more than muffins to warm up the kitchen. As with many rooms, lighting is important. Natural materials such as wood flooring and wood countertops or stone backsplashes are other effective ways of warming up a kitchen. "Wooden appliance panels are still a popular way of warming an otherwise stark appliance," adds Brown, vice president of kitchens and baths and senior interior designer, "if it is finished in stainless steel or white."

Like the garage and bathroom, the kitchen is one of the most dangerous rooms in the house, especially for kids. Though there is no better solution than rules and supervision, kitchens can be made somewhat safer for the children. According to Stracka, parents tend to stay away from ranges or range tops with front knobs when there are younger children in the house.

"Appliances such as the Wolf Electric cooktop have a light that will remain on," says

Stracka, "until the surface lowers to a certain temperature, telling you that it is now safe to touch. There have been instances where I have placed separate refrigerator or freezer drawers in an area designated specifically for children to help them know what they are allowed to eat during the day. Also, items such as the microwave can be placed below the counter so that when children are old enough they are able to use it and don't feel tempted to use the stove or oven."

Stephanie Moore, president of **Lasting Impressions Custom Design and Build, Inc.** (978.470.0492,

www.lasting4u.com), is involved with her clients from the conception stage through to the final paint touch-up. Many of the homes she works in are a minimum of 20 years old, designed at a time when moms were in the kitchen and kids stayed in the yard. "The kitchen is now a hub of activity," says Moore, "and to the extent that it seems cramped, dark, and unfriendly, it becomes a source of dissatisfaction in daily life. That's when my phone rings."

Moore agrees that parents will occasionally install an induction cooktop that is cool to the touch out of concern for children's safety. In fact, some safety measures have yet to catch on in the world of kitchens. "I've introduced the concept of a step-out stool area in the cabinetry for the children," says Moore, "but have yet to have any takers. Parents are definitely thinking about the accessibility, practicality, and safety of the kitchen for adolescents and teenagers."

"Eat-at counters," she adds, "make lots of sense for kids on the go, as they can grab a quick snack or meal between their many organized activities." Microwaves are essential. Sometimes an extra refrigerator is even considered for that stash of cheese sticks and energy drinks.

And a change in the kitchen doesn't always mean pumping thousands of dollars into a project. As with any room, a change of paint can do wonders. "A kitchen can seem brand new with just a switch of countertops and appliances," says Brown.

So, gather around the table. Dinner's on, and with a new kitchen, families might even sit longer. Not only will a new kitchen enhance your lifestyle, it will provide a handsome return on investment and increase your home's overall value. With progressive products and styles on the market, and a plethora of companies vying for your attention, your options are endless.

The only problem may be getting your guests into the game room you just built. ■