

Cooking Up the Perfect Kitchen

For practically guaranteed remodeling success, consider including the 10 features homeowners and homebuyers love most.

White Cabinets

Keep this classic element looking current by choosing a simple door and drawer style.



Still Stainless

Despite new options, stainless steel remains the most loved appliance finish option.

Quartz Countertops

They might love the look of white marble, but most remodelers today opt for quartz.

Wood Floors

Wider planks in a medium brown, gray, or distressed finish are hot right now.

Perfect Kitchen



WOULDN'T IT BE GREAT if there were a recipe you could follow to design your dream kitchen? Actually, according to recent research from the National Kitchen & Bath Association (NKBA) and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), there is—and it's surprisingly easy to follow. These professional organizations (and the top kitchen pros we polled) point to 10 most wanted kitchen features: the common must-haves of homeowners across the country. Mix these essential ingredients into your new space and you'll create a kitchen that's easy to work in, comfortable to live in, simple to keep clean, and attractive to future buyers when you decide to sell. Here's how to put these ideas to work for a perfectly custom combination:

Open Layout

More homeowners are undertaking major kitchen renovations, according to housing economist Brad Hunter of HomeAdvisor, a service that matches homeowners with remodeling professionals. If you're one of them, your best remodeling decision could be opening the kitchen area to adjacent living spaces. "Nine out of 10 clients want an open floor plan," says remodeler Josh Downing of Direct Movement Group in Jacksonville, Fla.

Removing walls to reconfigure the layout can create better flow—as well as a storage dilemma. "Fewer dividing walls also means fewer places to put cabinets," says John Yun, a certified master kitchen and bath designer at Mr. Floor in Skokie, Ill. "You have to be creative, allocating storage wherever else you can fit it."

Of course, for budgetary or structural reasons, it might not be feasible to create an open layout. In that case, move on to the next most-wanted feature, which can help any kitchen multitask.

Center Island

"It's probably our single most-requested feature," Downing says. "Everyone wants a big, inviting island with four or five seats." Patricia Davis Brown, a certified kitchen designer based in Vero Beach, Fla., is even incorporating two islands into some larger kitchens. "The second island might be a beverage bar, while the center island is for prep and cleanup," she says.

But not all kitchens have room for even one island. Tom Freudenthal, an

associate kitchen and bath designer in New Haven, Conn., says that although a center island is at the top of his clients' wish lists, many of the older New England homes they live in just can't accommodate one. "We'll often include a rolling island when there isn't really the space for a full-size island," he says. "You satisfy the need but can push it out of the way when you need to."

White Cabinets

White is the most widely used cabinet finish option, with gray a close second, according to the NKBA's 2017 Trend Report, which is based on a survey of its members. The designers we polled agree. Freudenthal says 90 to 95 percent of the cabinets in his projects have a painted finish in white, off-white, or gray. "Neutral cabinets are the most versatile because you can add color through tile or accents, and you don't risk getting tired of something you've invested a lot of your budget in."

Stainless Steel Appliances

Newer finish options, such as black stainless steel and glossy white, have been popping up lately, but "traditional stainless is still the front-runner," Freudenthal says. According to the NAHB's 2016 Builder Practices Report, 79 percent of new homes have stainless steel appliances, with the remainder falling into black, white, or "other." "Fitting appliances with cabinet panels for a seamless look is the 'other' option people go for, but it's expensive," Brown says.

Their favorite appliance finish may not have changed, but homeowners



Open Layout

Details like pocket doors add versatility to the much-desired "open concept" plan.

Built-In Bar

It's not a must-have for most homeowners, but if there's room, they'd love a wet or dry bar.

Dining Area

Seating at the island is essential, and a connected dining space is a plus.

Perfect Kitchen

are picking sleeker styles and showing interest in new technologies, such as induction cooking and steam ovens.

Energy efficiency isn't necessarily driving appliance choices, but "it's a nice selling point for most people," Freudenthal says. Downing takes the decision out of the clients' hands: "We won't install an appliance without the Energy Star label," he says.

Quartz Countertops

The top-rated countertop material in CR's tests (see page 56) is also tops with consumers, according to the NKBA and John Yun, who estimates that 75 percent of his clients choose quartz. "There's a lot of interest in the designs that look like marble, because they offer that clean, classic look without the maintenance issues of the real thing." All the other designers we spoke with agree that quartz has overtaken all other stone countertop materials and that granite has fallen out of favor.

Wood Floors

"The open kitchen created a need for consistency of the flooring material from room to room, which made wood floors very popular," Yun says. He and Tom Freudenthal point to wide-plank designs with rustic character and medium-tone or gray finishes as among the most current looks. "Most people don't want a glossy, perfect floor," Freudenthal says. "They want character-grade wood and a reclaimed look."

When real wood isn't the pick, faux wood often is: Wood-look porcelain tile is a widely used and extremely durable alternative. But don't assume it costs less. "In some cases, tile ends up costing more than wood because there's more labor involved," Downing says.

Single-Bowl Sink

Double-bowl sinks are out; single-bowl are in, the pros say. "I think people just got tired of not being able to fit a cookie sheet in the sink," Freudenthal says. Stainless steel is the material of choice, and apron-front styles are losing their

appeal. "We saw more of those a few years ago," Downing says. "Now it's just the big stainless sink, with a tall faucet that you can fit a stockpot under."

Dining Area

When there's room in the floor plan, a separate dining or breakfast table—most often set in front of a window—is a desirable feature. But most of the time, according to the designers, the island does double duty as casual dining center. "Sometimes we'll extend the island, so there's a raised area for prep work and a large, lower dining table," Freudenthal says.

Slide-Out Shelves

Ample storage is important in any kitchen update, but one cabinet feature wins out over the rest. "Pullout shelves are by far the biggest thing people ask for," Freudenthal says. "They make base cabinets much more accessible." Floor-to-ceiling pantry cabinets are another storage favorite. "They don't have to be deep, and you can still fit a tremendous amount of storage into just 36 inches of wall space," Brown says.

Tech-Readiness

Homebuyers are becoming more interested in smart-home features such as WiFi-connected lighting, security systems, and even appliances, according to online real estate broker Redfin. But what about remodelers? "My clients definitely want new technology built into their kitchens, but it has to be easy to use," Brown says. The other pros we spoke with agreed, noting that incorporating elements like USB ports, charging stations, and extra outlets has become standard but that some clients are more comfortable with WiFi-connected systems than others. Josh Downing expects this category to grow. "With the entrance of Alexa and other control systems, smart technology has become a very affordable feature to include—you don't have to factor in expensive technology anymore because everything's wireless."

Nice-to-Have Features

Adapting these four bonus details to your kitchen can make it more efficient and look more expansive.

1. LED Lighting

Include layers of light (recessed fixtures for overall illumination, pendants and undercabinet lighting to brighten task areas) using energy-efficient, long-lasting LED bulbs.

2. Windows

"Enlarging existing windows or adding new ones can make a space look much bigger, even if you can't add on," says designer Patricia Davis Brown. To ensure the comfort and energy efficiency of your new space, pick windows with an Energy Star rating.

3. Built-In Bar

Homebuyers love a built-in wet or dry bar, according to online real estate service Redfin. But any counter can serve as an impromptu bar: Just gather bottles and supplies on a tray to make them easy to move to an accessible serving space.

4. Walk-In Pantry

If you're lucky enough to have a separate pantry (or are planning to add one), take the time to organize it carefully so that you'll be able to find and grab your most often used items quickly and easily. Baskets, bins, trays, and labels are indispensable organizing tools. Transferring dry goods to matching airtight containers will create a pleasingly uniform look.

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PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ALEX HAYDEN; BARRY CALHOUN; ANDREA RUGG; CASEY DUNN