



DESIGN

ISLAND, UNSINKABLE

Kitchen trends come and go, but the ever-adaptable center island proves it has staying power. BY DALE KOPPEL

Cambridge architect Marcus Gleysteen likes to design houses around the kitchen. And he likes to design kitchens around an island. “The island,” he says, “is critical. It’s the focus; it’s the command bridge.”

He traces the kitchen island to the loft studios that struggling New York City artists – he among them – lived in during the 1970s. The kitchen was typically at the end of the studio. The island was typically an electric cooktop set in a sheet of plywood on sawhorses.



Richard Mandelkorn

The raised walnut eating bar gives the island that architect Marcus Gleysteen designed for Ed Heller a sculptural quality. The island base is cherry wood; the countertop is granite.

Gleysteen, who almost became a professional chef, recalls cooking at one end of the island while his guests sat at the other end sipping wine. "That's when cooking started to become a social experience," he says. "It still is."

If you run plumbing and electrical wiring under a kitchen island, it can be outfitted with cooktops, sinks, ovens, dishwashers, and trash compactors.

Jennifer and Jonathan Paul of Weston wanted their kitchen island to serve as the family epicenter. So Gleysteen designed it with maximum counter surface. At about 4 feet by 9 feet, the island has enough space for the Pauls' four children, who range in age from 2 to 9, to "sit and eat breakfast, do their homework, or perhaps just color," Jennifer Paul says. "We use it all the time."

A microwave oven and a standard oven sit under the counter, along with a cabinet for added storage and a shelf for books.

Rather than match the off-white cottage-style cabinets and soapstone countertops in the Paul kitchen, Gleysteen wanted the island to contrast with the space. So he painted the base pale green and installed a granite countertop. "It's as beautiful as it is functional," says Jennifer Paul.



Retro-style bar stools suit this informal kitchen with an island designed by Gleysteen.

For Ed Heller of Weston, Gleysteen designed a 6-by-3½-foot island with a sink, dishwasher, and secondary oven. Gleysteen raised the countertop on one side by 6 inches, to create an eating bar and add visual interest. "It's utterly functional from the kitchen side," says Gleysteen, "but you don't have to see any mess from the other side." The raised bar is a favorite place for guests to sit and chat with Heller while he cooks. And when he's home alone, it's where he eats.

The rich materials – a combination of walnut and cherry wood finished with granite countertops – and the contemporary design make the island seem "almost a piece of sculpture," says Heller.

When a couple in Beverly wanted to expand their kitchen to accommodate an island, they combined the room with an adjacent breezeway. Their first thought was to put the cooktop on the island, but they changed their minds when they considered that the island was also going to be a place to eat. A messy stove might not be something they would want to see while sharing a meal. Instead, they installed a prep sink – with a faucet that they went over budget for. "Given where it was, we wanted something that really looked good," the wife says. They saved money by choosing a laminate for the island counter instead of granite.

Says Bob Kelley, owner of Caseworks Inc. in Middleton, who installed the couple's counters, "The installation may cost the same, but a plastic laminate is one-fifth the price of granite" – even with the cherry wood trim the couple used to dress up the counter's edge. The trim also matches the desktop in the office nook that occupies a corner of the kitchen.

Ray Badman, owner of Designing Kitchens in North Reading, says that when planning a kitchen island, you should have at least 42 inches between it and any other counters in the room. If you plan on eating at the island, allow at least 2 feet in width by 1 foot in depth per person in countertop space. Says Gleysteen, "You need enough space for a place mat" and some elbow room.

Even people who are strapped with small kitchens and small budgets can have their islands. The Home Depot has introduced three freestanding Pro Chef islands. A 24-by-18-inch model on wooden legs is \$399; another, 30 inches by 24 inches, with locking casters, is \$599.

The IKEA catalog has a 19-by-23-inch Bekvam kitchen trolley for \$50 and a



Marcus Gleysteen

Gleysteen designed this work island with open shelving, a handy place for cookbooks.



Marcus Gleystein

A Weston couple's island has a large surface area to accommodate their young children.

39-by-17-inch Forhoja, with two drawers, for \$100. IKEA also sells freestanding kitchen units that can be used to create an island. Two Talbo base cabinets, \$225 each, put back to back become a 49-by-49-inch island that can be fitted with a cooktop or sink. Steel Udden components are even more economical. Combine a console unit with a sink unit and a couple of cabinets, and, for less than \$400, you have a 49-by-50-inch island with seating for two.

For do-it-yourselfers, Sandra Fairbank of Fairbank Design in Cambridge recommends stainless-steel open shelving from Metro, available at hardware stores. It is typically used in restaurant kitchens, but add a butcher-block top, and any homeowner can be island-bound. □

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