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## COVER STORY



MERCHANDISE MART PHOTOS

Transitional kitchens include elements of traditional and contemporary design, with a touch of creativity. Eclectic in nature, they mix natural and man-made materials and finishes.

# WHAT'S YOUR KITCHEN STYLE?

## Ideas and tips for creating your dream cooking area

By Leslie Mann  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Cool or casual? Sleek or sedate? Your kitchen style not only says a lot about you, but sets the tone as family and friends gather around the hub of the home.

A great way to determine your kitchen style is to head to Luxe-Home at the Merchandise Mart, said Katherine Flaherty, the Mart's vice president.

"We have 100 kitchen displays that are open to the public," she said. "The designers are ready to talk to you to help you determine which style is you."

Designing your own kitchen, said Flaherty, is like giving yourself a haircut.

"You can do it, but there are pros out there to help you. So take advantage of them," she said.

In addition to visiting builders' models and kitchen showrooms, Flaherty recommends combing

magazines and websites. The National Kitchen and Bath Association's site, [nkba.org](http://nkba.org), offers a virtual gallery of kitchens.

Here's a look at three popular kitchen styles:

### Contemporary

The contemporary kitchen is uncluttered and unadorned. It appeals to people who like "clean and sleek," said Flaherty.

Appliances are disguised as cabinets so the kitchen does not look "kitchen-y." Cabinets are flat-front wooden, steel or lacquered. Countertops are square-edged, often metal or underlighted glass. Light fixtures are works of art. Accessories are minimal.

### Traditional

If you tell a designer you want a traditional kitchen, she will steer you toward cabinetry reminis-

cent of 18th- and 19th-century furniture.

Lighting is more functional than artsy, and accessories are decidedly not funky. Countertops are neutral, while backsplashes may be tumbled stone. Flooring is made of tried-and-true woods and patterns. Trimwork features flutes, columns, beadboard or, at the high end, a coffered ceiling. Blue Danube china feels right at home.

Traditional can be Old World formal with cherry cabinetry or farmhouse informal with painted-white cabinets and rustic additions such as wooden countertops, scraped wooden flooring and farm sinks.

"It is more sophisticated than what we used to call country," said Alan Zielinski, NKBA president-elect and president of Better Kitchens Inc. in Niles. "It's rustic but fresh."

## Transitional

"Pretty but simple" was Renee Bryant's dictate for her kitchen when she and her husband, Christopher, built a house in Hinsdale in 2010.

The Bryants checked out kitchens in houses constructed by their builder, Oakley Home Builders of Downers Grove. "We said, 'We like that.' 'We don't like that,'" said Bryant. The result: a kitchen that designers call transitional, meaning it falls somewhere between traditional and contemporary.

The Bryants' cabinetry is white and raised-panel, with a cherry-stained island. Some upper cabinets have glass fronts to show off collectibles and add a splash of color to the otherwise neutral room. The backsplash has matte, white subway tiles. Contrasting the white cabinetry are black granite countertops and Brazilian cherry floors. The island has a Carrera marble top for the family's frequent baking.

The transitional kitchen suits you if you like Arts and Crafts-style cabinetry with little ornamentation. Woods are painted or in natural tones. Think traditional with spice, such as a backsplash with funky tiles, an island with colorful cabinetry or a light fixture with humor.

The backdrop is conservative enough to carry it into the next decade, but the kitchen has enough pluck to qualify it for a magazine spread. For the remodeler, this kitchen is updated but doesn't scream "new addition."

## Crossovers

Some materials cross style lines, depending on their applications. The concrete countertop with an ogee edge fits a traditional kitchen, while square-edged concrete suits a contemporary one. Aqua subway tiles in a classic running-bond pattern help turn a traditional kitchen into a transitional one, while the same tiles in the stacked-bond pattern say contemporary.

Design trends also cross style definitions, said the designers. More homeowners are eliminating upper cabinets in favor of windows, shelves or artwork. More are "foodies," who require features such as built-in spice cabinets or televisions to watch cooking shows.

Islands have replaced peninsulas and are more often bar height. Their stools welcome visitors as though they are part of the neighborhood pub or martini bar, depending on their style.

## Demographics matter

Buyers' demographics affect kitchen designs, said Zielinski.

Busy families want their kitchens to be command centers, regardless of the style.

"Mom and dad are paying the bills and Skypping their kid in college while cooking," he said. "The kids are doing their homework."

Single women want simple kitchens where they can have quick meals and check their iPads, said Zielinski. Most single men have other priorities, according to a recent study by Rent.com. Only 4 percent surveyed require spacious kitchens, compared with 45 percent who want single women as neighbors.

The empty nesters who are buying condos at the Ritz-Carlton Residences-Chicago want contemporary kitchens, even though many of them have traditional kitchens in their family homes in the suburbs, said Margo Dahmani, vice president at Prism Development.

"Whether they cook or have caterers, they want sophisticated, modern luxury where they can set the stage for entertaining," said Dahmani. "Cabinetry is simple, in natural colors or white. Glass doors display collections. Counters are limestone, marble or quartz."

Production and semi-custom homebuilders tend to offer more choices now, though most of their suburban kitchens fall into the transitional and traditional ranges.

At Wheaton-based J. Lawrence Homes, for example, buyers of homes at its four developments prefer raised-panel cherry or oak cabinets, granite countertops and black or stainless steel appliances. The result, said president John Wozniak, is a traditional look that they accessorize to personalize it. "Eclectic is OK now," he said. "In fact, your own accessories are your conversation pieces when you have guests, who always wind up in the kitchen."

## It's your kitchen

Regardless of the style, homeowners want kitchens tailor-made for their families.

Zielinski starts with a lengthy questionnaire that asks: "Do you follow recipes on cooking shows?" "How often do you entertain?" and "Are you left-handed or right-handed?" Every answer, he said, helps him pinpoint amenities that will make the homeowner's life easier.

Today's HGTV-watching, Internet-cruising buyer is educated and not brand loyal, said the designers.

"She wants the kitchen to work for her instead of being a status symbol, even at the high end," said Zielinski. "If it's a remodel,



Contemporary kitchens are described as modern, minimalist and geometric. Less is more, such as fewer accessories, hidden appliances and minimal details.



The traditional kitchen is a blend of English and American designs from 18th- and 19th-century designs.

she says, "This house may be from my mother's era, but I don't want my mother's kitchen."

"Contemporary, transitional or traditional, the kitchen will not go out of style quickly if it is done right," said Flaherty. "Look at the

1950s 'modern' kitchens. They're still stylish."

Gone are the days of closing the kitchen door while shoeing the guests into the living room. Like its occupants, the kitchen is multitasking, inviting family and

friends to eat, work and relax. Its style just sets the tone.

"It's the most important room," said Bryant as she recently cooked for a family graduation party. "This is where we spend our time."