

The High-End Kitchen Remodel

by Paul Turpin



Everyone dreams of the customer who comes to you and says: "We want you to remodel our kitchen, and we want it to be grand and wonderful!" What do you do with people like that? For people like this, the key element is service, and in the design phase, the most important way to serve these customers is to ask the right questions and then listen.

How many people will the kitchen need to be able to accommodate? How many cooks and/or helpers need space to work in? Will different people be using the kitchen at different times, like spouses making dinners and children making themselves breakfasts? Do you want guests separated from or included in the preparation areas of the kitchen? Do you want the dining area completely separate from the kitchen?

The answers to all these questions go into the mix of how much floor space will be needed, what a cabinet layout/traffic pattern might look like, and what other areas (like an adjacent family room) might contribute to the workability of the new kitchen. If you want to have good traffic circulation for large parties, then the work area should be isolated from the main traffic area by an island or peninsula cabinet to keep guests out from underfoot.

Since we're talking about grand kitchens here, a normal requirement is some kind of public area, even if it's just a breakfast nook; that almost always means a larger-than-normal room. If the original kitchen is small (100 square feet or less), then clearly it must open to an adjacent room (like a family room), or floor space must be added on to expand the kitchen. If the kitchen is already a large room (150 to 200 square feet), then a re-arrangement of existing space might do the trick.

Middle-sized rooms can be tougher propositions: They may be wide enough to make for an awkwardly large work-triangle, but not quite wide enough to subdivide with an island or peninsula cabinet. In older homes (pre-1950 in my area), there are often small adjacent rooms like pantries and laundry rooms that can be incorporated into a single larger area.

When you have a workable floor plan, it is time to start fleshing it out with details. This is where learning your customers' tastes is

vitaly important. Every surface finish is especially important: counters, cabinets, floor, walls, fixtures, and appliances. Every effort should be made to keep everything in the room in the same "family" of style, whether traditional, modern, or some special style like French Provincial.

There are too many possible combinations of choices to be able to just write a simple menu of choices, but we can look at comparative scales for the major elements.

Countertops

I put counters first on the list because I think they are the most dramatic element in the kitchen. Here are the choices, in roughly ascending order, starting with the minimum counter I would consider for a high-end kitchen:

- High-pressure plastic laminate with a decorative edge such as wood or solid-surfacing (starts at \$50 per linear foot)
- Standard ceramic tile with an interesting pattern or border design (starts at \$75 per linear foot, plus linear foot costs of the pattern; a moderately complex pattern might cost \$20 or more per foot)
- Manufactured wood counters, such as maple and oak (\$60 to \$90 per linear foot)
- Solid-surfacing (starts at \$120 per linear foot; edge and splash details might raise it to \$140 to \$150 or more)
- Exotic ceramic tile (\$120 to \$200 per linear foot, depending on the tile and how much cutting has to be done)
- Stainless steel (\$150 to \$200 per linear foot)
- Granite (the current popular choice; starts at \$200 per linear foot)

Never consider post-formed counters or fake wood-grain stock counters for a high-end kitchen.

Cabinets

Cabinet faces are the next most striking part of a kitchen. The main elements are (1) style, represented by the difference between traditional wood raised-panel doors and contemporary flat laminate doors and (2) color, either laminate color or stain color for wood doors. As far as colors go, kitchens have been getting lighter recently. In my work, the most popular finishes these days are natural wood and whitewashed

finishes. Here are some of the options, roughly arranged in order of less to more expensive:

- Painted wood cabinets (common paint-grade woods are alder, birch, and poplar; paint is acceptable only for rustic or "provincial" kitchens)
- Pigmented lacquer finish over paint-grade woods
- Stained-and-lacquered hardwoods, such as red oak, birch, maple
- Stain-and-lacquer over exotic or premium hardwoods, such as white oak, cherry, walnut, koa
- Plastic laminates (use color-core or exotic laminates only)

Using good-grade stock cabinets as a base line, high-quality custom cabinets might be twice as expensive, and furniture-grade cabinets with exotic woods might be as much as three times as expensive.

Never consider low-grade cabinets, hollow-core wood doors, standard laminates, cheap hinges, or cheap drawer hardware.

Appliances

Use only the best, and in some cases more than one. Two dishwashers can make sense for customers who do a lot of entertaining, as can two refrigerators. Even more common is two or more cooking locations. If your customers are cooking enthusiasts, find out what kind of cooking they particularly enjoy. Chinese-style stir-fry cooking requires extremely high wok temperatures; restaurant-style pots and saucepans need extra elbow room on the cooktop. Here are some options you might consider:

- Any appliance that can have a custom face-panel should have panels that match the cabinetry
- Modular cooktop elements make for the greatest flexibility; Gaggenau and Jenn-Aire offer this option
- Restaurant-style ranges approved for residential use include Admiral, Wolf, and Russell Range
- Refrigerators come in either cabinet-conforming models like Sub-Zero (Amana also has one available now), or commercial-grade stainless-steel/glass-door models (the latter have the advantage of remote-mountable compressors for especially noise-sensitive customers)
- Remote-mount exhaust fan motors outside the kitchen

Never consider free-standing or drop-in ranges (unless antique or otherwise unique), standard refrigerators, or standard stove-hoods. ■

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