

# Kitchen Questions

Seven things to consider  
when designing a kitchen's  
function and flow

BY PAUL DeGROOT



## MORE DETAILS

Counters: White Macaubas quartzite

Backsplash: Floor & Decor ceramic tile

Cabinets: Primo Woodworks

Island counter: Primo Woodworks Texas black walnut

Pendant lighting: West Elm

**D**esigning any part of a home requires a multitude of decisions made by the designer and the homeowners. When it comes to the kitchen, arguably the most important and challenging room to get right, the number of options for everything from flooring to faucets can make the design process feel overwhelming. While every fixture and material is important and must be chosen in time, one way to ease the burden and to stay focused is to spend some time answering a few questions that will drive the layout.

These questions are equally helpful for new homes and remodels and are based on how homeowners live or plan to live in their house, how they use their kitchen, and the style they want to achieve. Keep in mind that the order of decisions isn't necessarily linear. Where one kitchen germinates from a desire to have great views, another may center on efficient flow for a busy family. So even when all the questions are answered, there may be some prioritizing and compromising to do.

I use these seven questions to get started on a kitchen design with new clients. Some

of them require a lot of input from the homeowners, while others fall more on my shoulders as the designer. Whether you're working with a client or designing your own kitchen, this process will help you begin drawing and refining an informed floor plan. And once you have that dialed in, you can get to the fun work of choosing colors and finishes that bring the layout to life. □

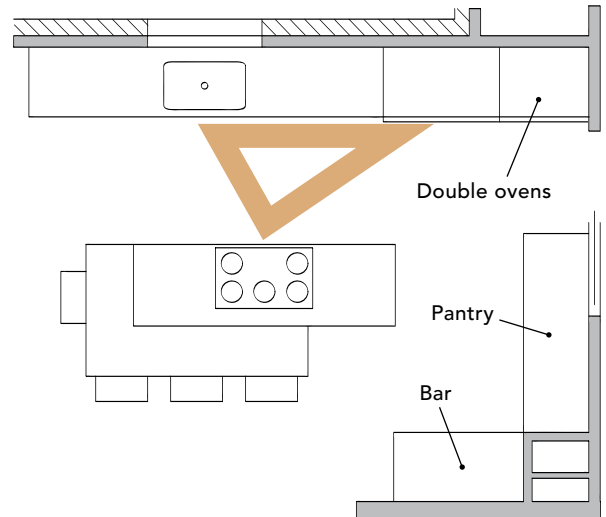
Paul DeGroot is an architect in Austin, Texas, and a frequent *Fine Homebuilding* contributor. Photos by Brian Pontolilo.

## 1 HOW OPEN IS OPEN ENOUGH?

Nearly all of my clients want to maximize the open connections to adjacent spaces. They want to be able to see into the family and dining rooms, and they want friends and family to be able to visit while they are busy with meal prep. While open plans are great for these purposes, walls are still handy for mounting cabinets and mundane little things like light switches and outlets. Walls are wonderful places to hide the backs of refrigerators and ranges, and they give privacy to hallways that might lead to a bedroom wing, for example. The trick is in finding the right balance of openness and walls.

A dependable open-kitchen plan has two walls forming an L, with one wall longer than the other. The long wall might have both the sink and the range, for example, and the short wall might have the fridge or a pantry cabinet. Such a two-wall layout needs a rectangular floor area that's long and skinny. When the space available for a kitchen is more of a square than a rectangle, try a three-wall arrangement. Two walls will likely be the hard workers, loaded with cabinets, fixtures, and appliances. The third wall might be partial, with a peninsula counter extending from it, possibly with bar stools on the outside.

When remodeling, opening up space usually involves removing a section of wall between the kitchen and dining or living room. It's remarkable how much visual impact this fairly easy move makes. Even with load-bearing walls, there is almost always a fairly straightforward way to get the job done.



### THREEFOLD FORM

This kitchen has a three-wall layout with the sink, fridge, and double ovens on the back wall and the cooktop on the island, creating a convenient work triangle on the business side of the island. The second wall has full-height pantry cabinets, and the third, shorter wall has a bar.

## 2 HOW ARE THE VIEWS?

There's no doubt that views and daylight make a kitchen more delightful, especially if it's a small room. So site your kitchen to take advantage of a good view, if possible. Make the windows as big as you can without sacrificing too much cabinet storage, and try to arrange the kitchen around the view, so everyone—cooks and guests included—can enjoy it.

Not every kitchen has an exterior wall or a great view. Another option is to position the kitchen next to a room that does. Abundant glass in other rooms will bring outside views and daylight into the kitchen. In a recent remodel, I was able to give a landlocked kitchen three different views: one through the breakfast nook out to the back deck, another into the family room, and a third to the front courtyard through the formal dining room. Other views to consider are TVs and fireplaces. Some clients place priority on seeing the fireplace, while others want to watch a cooking show or ball game while puttering in the kitchen.

Lastly, remember the kitchen itself will be the view from adjacent rooms. It's common to put the sink on the back wall of the kitchen in front of windows. If there's no view there, consider using some appliance details for visual interest, such as a cooking alcove with a stylish range and vent hood framed by upper cabinets on each side.



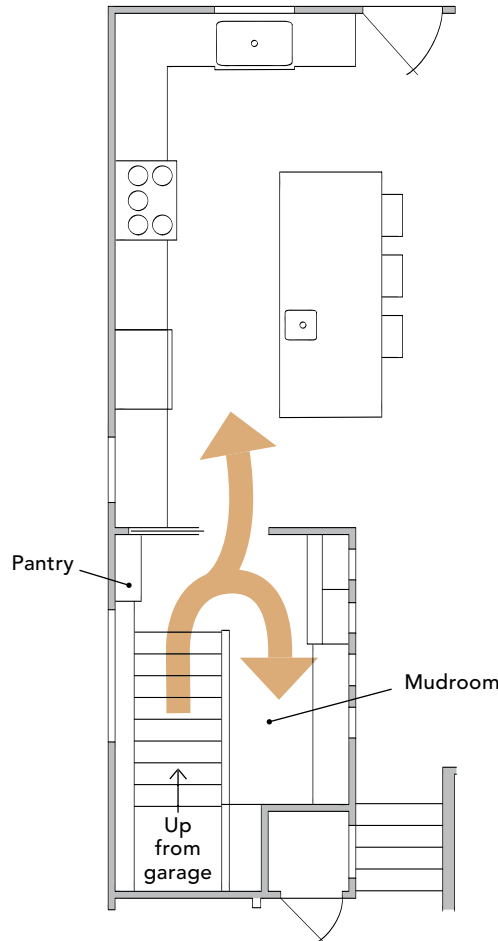
**Open to the view.** The remodeled kitchen is completely opened up to the family room. The view from the kitchen is aimed at a feature wall in the family room and extends to the back deck through a large glass sliding door.

# 3 HOW WILL YOU GET INTO, AROUND, AND OUT OF THE KITCHEN?

In all but the smallest kitchens, avoid a layout where there's only one way in and out. I advocate for circular flow. With two or more entry/exit points, nobody gets stuck waiting for an oven door to close. During a party, guests can come and go around one end of the island while the host is busy at the other. By locating the fridge near one of the openings, people can make quick grabs without having to cross the entire kitchen.

A smart work triangle means that you won't have to wear yourself out moving between the sink, the refrigerator, and the stovetop. There should be plenty of counter space between and beside these task areas. Drawing the triangle with straight lines, the sum of the three sides should measure between 13 ft. and 26 ft., with no leg less than 4 ft. or greater than 9 ft. Use this information for guidance, but also consider your own circumstances when determining how these rules may be tweaked.

Routes to and from the kitchen are just as important. An early design determination is the primary path to the kitchen when you have an armful of groceries. This path usually leads from the garage or carport and might require an entry door other than the front door. Plan on a mudroom between the entry and the kitchen, if possible, and build in a dedicated "drop zone," preferably hidden from view.



## ENTRY PIT STOP

In this house, the route from the garage to the kitchen is mediated by a combined pantry and mudroom with plenty of hidden storage, benches, and cubbies. The kitchen has a circular flow around the island, with the fridge and beverage cooler easily accessible from the family room.



Counters: Honed absolute black granite  
Backsplash: Ceramic subway tile  
Cabinets: Precision Woodcrafting



**Just right.** Designing an island is a balancing act between cooking spaces, storage, and seating. Here there was room for a hardworking island with a prep sink, full-depth base cabinets, a bookshelf, and seating for four.

## 4 DOES AN ISLAND MAKE SENSE?

Islands fit well in an open plan. They're prized for extra workspace and storage, and they often serve double duty as casual dining areas. But some kitchens are just too narrow for an island.

Even a 12-ft.-wide three-sided kitchen doesn't have quite enough room for an island situated between opposing runs of standard base cabinets. Assuming 36-in.-wide aisles and 24-in. cabinets, the island will be a slim 24 in. I suggest foregoing the island in this situation. The aisles will be tight and the island skinny, and it's likely that the work triangle will be disrupted. I prefer an aisle of 48 in. or more on the working side of an island, where cabinet doors, oven doors, dishwasher doors, and people all have room to move. I also recommend at least 36-in.-wide islands with full-depth cabinets on one side and 12-in.-deep storage on the other. Using these figures, a three-wall kitchen needs to be at least 15 ft. wide.

The right island length depends on the kitchen length and the tasks to be performed. With no cooktop or sink, a 48-in.-long island can be handy as prep or serving space. Much more length is needed to center an island cooktop. Ideally, you'll want to allow 18 in. to 24 in. of countertop on each side of a 30-in. cooktop, which would require an island between 66 in. and 72 in. long. Allow 96 in. or more for the common island arrangement of main sink, dishwasher, pullout trash, and storage drawers.

Island seating is popular, too. The standard 24-in. allotment per stool is a bit tight for adults; 30-in. spacing is more comfortable. When length is limited, move one stool to an end. If there's less than 6 ft. of length, consider a square-shaped island with stools on two or three sides.

## 5 WHERE DOES THE PANTRY GO?

I don't believe that you can design a truly great kitchen without including a functional, convenient pantry. It plays a vital supporting role for the rest of the kitchen.

Most clients want a pantry as big as I can make it, but with floor space so valuable, finding the right size for a pantry is key. Sometimes a small pantry in a strategic spot is perfect. It might be a compact walk-in design—perhaps 20 sq. ft. or less—with shelves lining two or three walls. Or it might be a reach-in design, with shelves 12 in. to 18 in. deep and double doors giving a full view inside. A pantry like this can occupy a mere 6 sq. ft. Either way, the location is critical. Put the pantry close to where groceries are brought in from the car. Put it near counter space. And remember that a couple of deep and tall shelves down low are great for large items. But shelves above 48 in. from the floor shouldn't be deep—it's too hard to see what's at the back of them.

Nobody wants to go down the hall for breakfast cereal, so when the main pantry will not be close to the kitchen, I like to add a pantry cabinet to the kitchen for daily needs. This tall cabinet is usually 24 in. deep to match the rest of the kitchen cabinets, and 24 in. to 36 in. wide with drawers and slide-out shelves for easy access to items in the back.



**Pantry in place.** When there's no space outside of the kitchen for a pantry, put it in the kitchen. This pantry cabinet has storage behind the doors, on lower pullout shelves, and on shelving on the back side of the doors.

**Arched with intention.** When this kitchen was opened up to the dining room during a recent remodel, the architect mimicked the existing arch between the dining room and living room, keeping consistent style throughout the house.



## 6 WHAT STYLE ARE YOU AFTER?

Most clients know what style they're looking for long before I get involved. They want a kitchen that has a particular look. Sometimes it's the home's own style. Sometimes they want to make a departure and they see the kitchen as a chance to be creative. Like most designers, I tend to believe that a home's interior should be somewhat consistent with the overall architectural design. But I also believe that rules aren't hard and fast and that deviations are fair game, particularly when a home's exterior is dated and tired. For many people, the kitchen is the first thing they remodel, and inserting a bright, open kitchen into an otherwise tired home not only gives it life, but can be a stepping stone toward more and more updates.



**Classic cabinets.** It's often the cabinets that set the style of a kitchen. Details like these island-top brackets and the furniture-style cabinet legs strike a classic look.

Cabinets are typically the biggest style cue in a kitchen. Traditional cabinets have decorative moldings and raised panels. Contemporary doors and drawer fronts are plain and sleek, emphasizing their planar quality. The simple detailing and ordered lines of Shaker-style cabinets seem to fit well into most aesthetics that fall between traditional and contemporary. Opting for painted cabinets or natural wood is another choice that contributes to how a kitchen looks and feels. Plumbing fixtures, lighting, and appliances play key roles as well. While you don't have to break the bank reworking your '30s Tudor kitchen with a vintage Aga cast-iron stove, you should pick a sink, faucet, and lights that appear consistent to the period.

So while the aesthetic style of a kitchen may not have a great influence over initial schematic planning, it is important to pin it down as early as possible because it will influence the multitude of decisions to come.



**A modern niche.** The glass tile and floating shelves above this kitchen's bar support its modern style and offer a contained focal point within the otherwise open kitchen.



Counters: Soapstone, honed Calcutta marble  
 Backsplash: white Carrara marble tile  
 Cabinets: Elmwood Kitchens  
 Lighting: Restoration Hardware

## 7 WHAT APPLIANCES DO YOU NEED?

Though it's not uncommon for appliances to be used to create a look, choosing appliances should first be about how you like to cook. Appliances are expensive and can quickly eat up your budget. So if you don't do a lot of cooking, don't buy a professional-grade range. If you don't bake much, you probably don't need double-wall ovens. It's important for me to have an idea of what clients are leaning toward as early in the design process as possible, as appliances are so variable that they have a significant impact on the available space and layout of a kitchen.

Though I have had clients request two dishwashers and there are now some

convenient alternatives like dishwasher drawers, I advise my clients to keep it simple; place a good-quality dishwasher to one side of the main kitchen sink.

A range has an oven below and burners on top. This all-in-one cooking appliance is a mainstay, especially for smaller kitchens. Yet there are valid reasons to separate the cooktop from the oven. Some folks want the cooktop in the island so they can cook while facing guests. People who do a lot of baking or who hold big holiday gatherings may want double ovens. Then again, sometimes built-in ovens are better than a superwide range. In any case, separating the cooktop and ovens generally requires a larger kitchen. I like to place double wall

ovens at the end of a run of base cabinets. This acts as a visual bookend and puts handy counter space next to the ovens.

Refrigerators are basically divided into two types: slide-ins and built-ins. Both styles have similar widths, 36 in. being the most common—but built-in models are taller by a foot or more (and they are much more expensive). Since they are only 24 in. deep, aligning perfectly with 24-in.-deep cabinets, they need extra height to bring their storage capacity up to par with that of the shorter, deeper slide-in models. Even if I already know where the fridge is going to be located, I need to know which type my clients prefer before I can get to designing cabinetry.