

# Rethinking the Contemporary Kitchen

(ARA) - When you think of a "contemporary" kitchen, what enters your mind? A sleek and contrasty Euro-style loft kitchen? A soothingly balanced Asian-inspired kitchen? What about a '50s throwback kitchen with colorful appliances, pastel walls and a starburst clock?

According to kitchen industry experts, all these kitchens could be called "contemporary" because of a 21st century desire to blend clean modern lines with a whole new world of influences.

"We've shrunk the oceans," says Andy Wells, head of product design for Decora Cabinets, an Indiana-based manufacturer of semi-custom cabinets sold through 1,000 kitchen dealerships nationwide. "Contemporary used to be about achieving a particular fashionable look. Now, since people are exposed to more international culture, we've lost our inhibitions about mixing different styles together. Even America is developing its own different subcategories of modern looks."

## Asian Contemporary: It's a Zen Thing

While America's Asian population is increasing, you don't have to be of Asian descent to appreciate the clean, serene lines and fine-tuned proportions of an Asian contemporary kitchen. Designers describe this burgeoning kitchen style as emphasizing low, strong horizontal lines in the cabinetry. Cabinets are usually flat front, and often in dark woods with very dark finishes.

When designing kitchens, some people will even consult the ancient Chinese art of Feng Shui, a process of placing furniture and accessories to be in harmony with the environment.

What makes a space truly Asian contemporary, however, are the details. "We're seeing more kitchens with Japanese Tonsu-like storage systems, sliding doors, watercolor drawings, natural surfaces like bamboo flooring, or river stone backsplashes," says Mary Jo Peterson, kitchen designer, educator and writer for "Kitchen and Bath Design News."

## American Versus European Contemporary

While contemporary kitchens share many of the same design principles, American and European styles are often worlds apart. European kitchens tend to be focused more on exceptional product design, smart storage and bright colors, like bold reds and deep cobalt blues. European kitchens tend to be more futuristic, and smaller, too, so no space can be left underutilized.

American contemporary kitchens, however, have less metals and glass. "American contemporary is warmer, with lots of rich woods, stone flooring and even the occasional antique shaker table," says Ellen Cheever, columnist for "Kitchen & Bath Design News," and kitchen designer at her own dealership in Wilmington, Del.

"There may be hints of some traditional elements, like a raised panel door for the cabinets, but they are far more sleek and understated," she says. "And some kitchens feature a very carefully edited collection of modern plates or family photos too. It all works, because the design is still based on very simple, clean lines."

## Cottage Contemporary: Life's a Beach

With so much of the Northeast surrounded by rivers, bays and lakes, it no mystery why Connecticut developed its own contemporary style. But you don't have to live by a lighthouse to enjoy the casual, pared-down 1930s inspired look these kitchens bring.

"Once you've lived in an ornate, traditional room, you know how much upkeep it is," Cheever says. "The cottage contemporary look is one way to simplify while still straddling the line between contemporary and traditional."

She notes that cabinets in this kind of room tend to be a very, very tailored recessed panel white or a very dark cabinet, with very few embellishments like corbels or columns. But what makes this kitchen different is its sense of line. Lines in this kind of space can be very vertical, with extra tall upper cabinets, or very low and horizontal. Fabrics tend to be muted, using soothing earth tones and natural textures for a pattern-on-pattern look. Floors tend to be natural surfaces, like cork or hardwood. And lighting is often a very playful, sculptural looking mid-century modern chandelier.

## Retro: A Blast from the Past

Whether you're looking for a taste of '70s mod, '50s atomic age design, or '80s industrial, there's a little bit of something for everyone in today's retro kitchen designs. Unlike many other contemporary styles, cabinets play a secondary role to the details in the room. Pair any contemporary looking cabinet with lighting fixtures, accessories or color palates from

another era and you have a fresh twist on kitchen design history.

Peterson is quick to advise, however, that the retro look is not about pure imitation. "We've taken these historic looks and updated them for the 21st century," she says. "For instance, that famous avocado green from the 1970s is now a grassier, more natural shade. Robin's egg blue is similar, but more silvery and sophisticated. And we're pairing them differently. In the 1950s, you might have had an entirely pastel room of blue, pink and mint green. Today, that blue is paired with deep browns and grays."

So, with the right classic contemporary cabinetry, grandma's starburst clock, blond wood dinette or chrome chairs might look right at home. "Don't be afraid to mix and match," Peterson says. "It's all part of making your home your own."

For more information about what's going on in today's kitchens, visit [www.decoracabinets.com](http://www.decoracabinets.com).

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