Counter-space design ingredients that are making a stir

When interior designer Alison Martin set foot in a cramped townhouse kitchen in McLean, she had her work cut out for her. What she didn’t know was, upon completion, she would have an award-winning space to add to her resume.

The McLean client, who enjoys entertaining, told Martin, a designer for NVS Kitchen and Bath in Manassas, that her chief concern was

Everything but the Kitchen Sink
By Jennifer Shapira
The eat-in kitchen was replaced by a granite-topped buffet that allows guests to chat while the homeowner finishes meal preparations, and the dining room became the space for presentation. A tall, slim book nook now housing a cookbook collection was built-in beside the refrigerator. The ceramic tile floor, placed on the diagonal, now creates the illusion of a larger space. Recessed lighting illuminates task areas. A green slate backsplash gives a nod to nature with surrounding sleek, Shaker-style maple cabinetry, providing an updated look while multiplying storage.

Winner of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry’s 2008 Contractor of the Year Award—NVS Kitchen and Bath, incorporates maple cabinetry with diagonal ceramic floor tiles.

Designer June Shea designed one Old Town condo to be as inviting as it is organized, with stainless steel appliances, brown tones and pendant task lighting.

Ultra-Modern
Kitchens today are all about embracing a shared living space, says Amir Farazad, Mid-Atlantic director for Poggenpohl in Georgetown. The German company’s hardware-free, lacquered wood cabinetry is decidedly unfussy. “The kitchen is not a space where you cook and bring out the food. You share it with others—friends, family. It’s part of the whole process,” he says.

And since the kitchen has become part of the living space, Farazad says, “it’s far more visible. The tendency is give it more value visually. All sectors of the industry—appliances, flooring, countertops, lighting—all complement each other.”

Kitchens have been trending more stylish and less complicated. Over the past 10 years, he says, the U.S. market has become more streamlined in keeping with the European kitchen concept, which is “more contemporary and clean” in terms of form and function.

Streamlined Simplicity
For a couple in Rockville, Md., Maryland
based interior designer Sandra Meyers took inspiration from their ideas for a streamlined kitchen. And while the homeowners had very specific ideas of what they wanted, they insisted on using all manmade materials.

Using wood veneer cabinetry with a medium finish, the light-colored Caesar-Stone countertops and creamy tiled floor suggest a warm place to gather. Stainless steel toe kicks create interest around the cabinet base. Open shelving provides a spot to exhibit favorite works of art. A stainless steel farm sink is as eye-catching as a wall painting. A starburst-patterned banquette is nestled in a corner for flexible seating.

The showstopper is a wall of windows that looks out onto the woodsy views and bathes the space in natural light. In the evening, window coverings drop, individually powered by handheld remote. When down, the shades are textured like the kitchen’s wallpaper—like light scribbles to the touch.

This is one kitchen that brings the outdoors in—in high-style. “It’s a very linear space,” Meyers says of this light-filled beauty. “I wanted it to feel natural without feeling forced.”

Backsplash ‘jewelry’
Backsplashes have been de rigueur for the past five years, Shea says. But if they’ve been around, there’s certainly no shortage to their developments.

The backsplash is a common element to bring everything together, Poggenpohl’s Farazad says. “It could even be a simple, clean paint. There’s such diversity as far as backsplashes are concerned. You can be very creative.”

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What are homeowners looking for in today’s kitchens?
Really large ceramic tiles, textured porcelain, with a lot of movement in the tile. Everyone wants to get away from the plain Jane whites and beiges.

Are people more open to new textures and colors?
People are so used to seeing white and beige floors. When they come through here and they see the travertines and the marbles and the slates, they think, “Wow! My house would look really great like that.” I think people want to be a bit more custom, but stay more neutral as well, in a sense.

What are the sizes of tiles you’re putting in?
Generally we’re doing 12-by-12-inch. A lot of people are going to larger sizes, 16-inch and 18-inch size—even as big as 2-foot tiles. Part of it is design standpoint—it makes the rooms and areas look larger, means fewer grout lines.

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What advances have there been in today’s wood floors?
I think one of the best things about hardwood flooring today, and it doesn’t matter if it’s in kitchens or not, is the fact that they have a factory finish. You don’t necessarily have to have site-finished floors anymore.

What are the benefits to the factory finish?
You can get it installed in one day. You know what the color is going to be. You know what the finish is going to be, as well as the look of the wood itself.

What are the more popular colors and styles?
We just did a lot of customer research around the country and the chocolate browns, the blacks, just really seem to be coming on strong—as well as gray colors. It used to be that 3 1/2-inch was considered a traditional plank width. Now it’s gotten to the point where 5 inches has almost become the new width. Why? People want something different. Oak still makes up two-thirds of our business. It’s a very conservative look. It’s a very traditional look. But if you want to move away from that a little bit, you can move to a wider plank. It’s quicker to install and it can make a room look a little bit bigger.

What else do people need to know about wood floors?
Wood is a natural product, and you know over time it can scratch and indent, especially if it’s a softer species such as cherry. But that goes with the territory. That’s part of the beauty of wood.
From ceramic to stone to glass, every material and color combination imagine-able can take its place above the countertop and below the cabinetry. If people are making an improvement in their kitchen, Shea says, they’re adding a backsplash. “They make tiles now that are abalone shell, so it’s like jewelry for your walls,” Shea says of the iridescent properties. Dress up a lower-priced tile and embellish with mother-of-pearl, amethyst or tiger eye. “You can just drop these little 1-by-1-inch or 2-by-2-inch tiles in the center of the space and create a really dramatic look that’s special,” she says.

Also popular: glass mosaics, according to Brad Wintermute, owner of Granite Transformations in Dulles. Tiny individual tiles are available in a myriad of translucent colors, from muted mosses to bold blues. And they can be mixed so you can create your own color palette, he says. “You can do a backsplash that may be the only one in the world. We’ve installed some in the D.C. market [where] that’s the only iteration in the whole world.”

Light the Way
To add even more punch to the glass pieces, experts suggest playing color up or down by featuring light fixtures. Whether it’s a ceramic or glass tile backsplash, draw attention to it with under-cabinet lighting, Wintermute says. The days of overhead fluorescent lighting are long gone, he says, now replaced by infinitely more graceful and artistic bursts of light.

Task lighting gives you a nice focus when you’re performing kitchen tasks, he says, from washing dishes to slicing up vegetables. Proper lighting is more than useful; it can showcase the backsplash and provide ambiance.

Wintermute offers this example: If you’re watching TV and you go into the kitchen for something, leave the under-cabinet light on for convenience. “We’re doing a lot more of those types of installs. That’s practical and aesthetic. It’s a simple thing, but it really makes a difference.”

To kicks are another area that’s getting more attention. People are putting them along the floor, “so that there’s a soft glow around the room, on their feet when they walk in,” says Erin Schwartz, showroom buyer at Dominion Electric Supply Co. in Chantilly. They don’t emit heat, and are low on electricity so people don’t mind leaving them on.

Pendants and track lighting are also trendy options. Incorporating a high level of design, often at a minimal cost, they highlight islands or task areas. Typically grouped in multiples, the orbs exist in all shapes, sizes and styles.

Whether you’re a conscientious cook or microwave maven, pendants can cast just the right light to make you look like you know what you’re doing. And they’re forgiving enough if you don’t.

Another hot topic in lighting right now, Schwartz says, is the use of LED (light-emitting diodes). “One of the reasons that they’re so sought after is they’re tiny, there are no bulbs to change, and [they] have life of about 50,000 hours—that’s 10 to 15 years, or more.”