

A Cook's Kitchen in La Mesa

This article is excerpted from *Designing the Cook's Kitchen* By Moorea Hoffman Copyright 2010

Leslie and Grant Yellen are a charming couple with two college-age children. In Spring of 2009 they purchased their dream house in San Diego with the goal of finishing a full house remodel by the end of the summer. They had a budget which was realistic while still constrained by the long list of “to-do's” it included. The time crunch put pressure on them to move quickly, sometimes forcing them to make the expedient choice rather than the best one. When they hired me the project was further along in the process than is usual when you begin working with a designer.

- Original Kitchen -



Definitely a fixer-upper when they purchased it, the whole house had been gutted. Drywall was down, new windows had been installed and they were in the process of removing the wall separating the kitchen and dining room. When I came to the jobsite for the first time, I was shown the contractor's design for the kitchen. It was a simple, U-shaped kitchen—the kind you would find in the average three-bedroom suburban house. The problem was, the Yellen's home was to be much more than average. Though modest in size (around 1200 square feet), their home is on a San Diego hillside with an exquisite view of the downtown skyline and the Pacific Ocean beyond. In designer parlance, this type of project where size is restrained in favor of location and superior quality of materials is often called a “jewel box.” Small but precious.



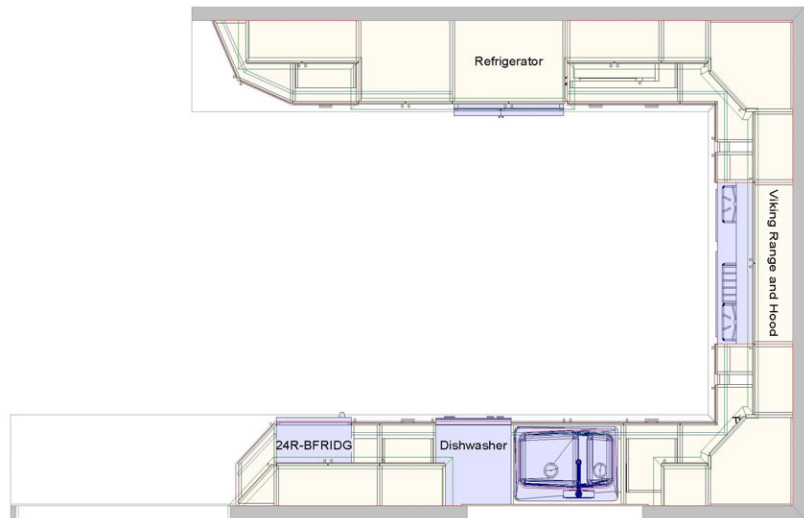
- My First Look at the Kitchen -

As we talked, I quickly realized that the average kitchen layout would not work for Leslie, who is anything but an average cook. Leslie loves to cook and entertain; she frequently hosts gathering for upwards of twelve guests. As a former caterer, she has extensive collections of equipment, glassware and serving pieces. As we talked she shared with me her goals for the space: a convenient, comfortable kitchen that would be open to her dining area and the living room beyond with a four foot professional-style range.

While the contractor's plan did include her 48-inch range, that was about the only good thing to be said about it:

- Contractor's Plan -

- Problem One: Connection to other spaces—while the wall between the kitchen and the rest of the house had been removed, the U-shaped kitchen design didn't foster the kind of open, connected feeling that the Yellen's wanted. With all the cabinetry wrapping the walls, no matter where the cook stood her back would be to her family and guests.



- Problem Two: One Sink.
You've already heard my views about the benefits of the two-sink kitchen but it bears repeating. *Adding a prep sink is the single most critical way to improve the functionality of any kitchen!!* In Leslie's case, the kind of entertaining that she does demands a separation of food prep and food clean-up. Also, Leslie's mother is part of the household. Barbara loves to be of help in the kitchen and considers clean-up her job; with two sinks mother and daughter can comfortably



work in the kitchen together without conflict over space or tasks.

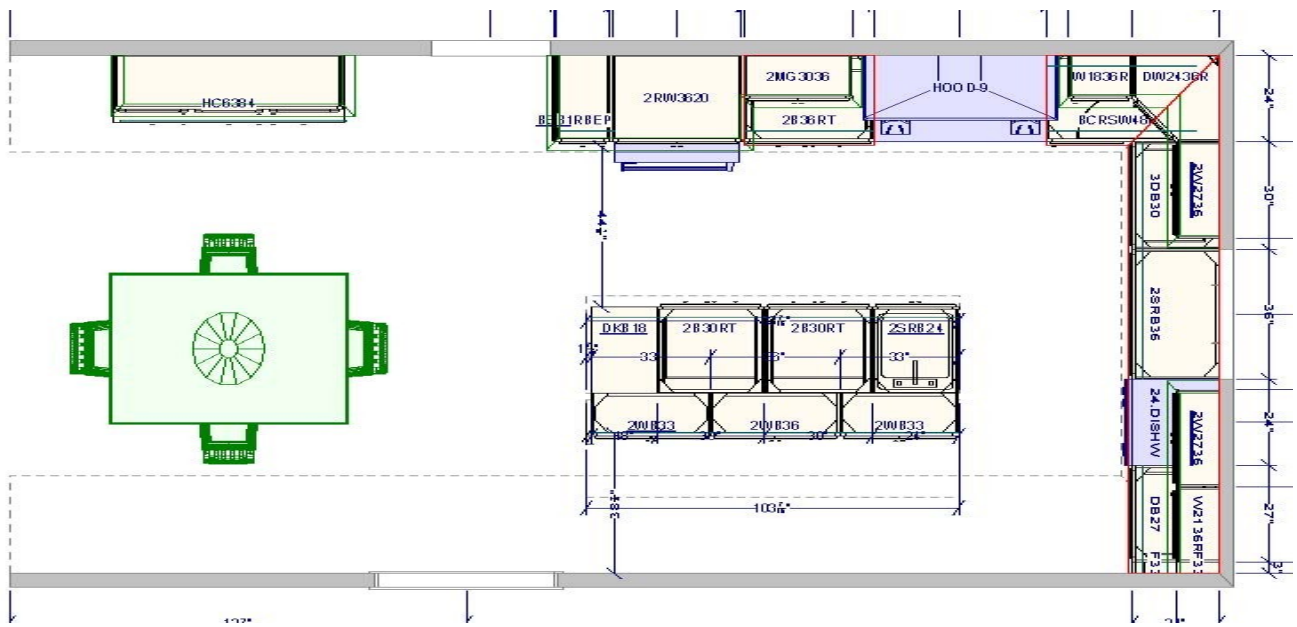
- Problem Three: No continuous counterspace. The counter in this kitchen—because of the placement of sink, range and refrigerator in a perfect triangle—is chopped up into small pieces. I know, I know, you've heard the “Kitchen Triangle” is the best way to organize your kitchen. It's not, but it is the most well known (see introduction for more details on the kitchen triangle). The problem with the counters in this kitchen is there is nowhere for a cook to really spread out with all the tools, containers, cutting boards and small appliances around her. She would have to shuffle from one inadequate space to another.
- Problem Four: Corners!! The relationship of the sink (where you prep) and the range (where you cook) is one of the most important in a kitchen. Here, the space between these two critical appliances in a corner—therefore, the cook is stuck in that corner!
- Problem Five: Narrow width. Leslie really wanted to have an island or a peninsula but the kitchen was just too narrow. A peninsula coming off the end of the cabinets on the sink side would have cramped the space around the sliding glass door (the only access to the house's deck) and would have made the kitchen feel even smaller, not to mention creating traffic problems when someone wanted to open the refrigerator or pantry while someone else wanted to walk in or out of the kitchen. There was just no room for an island (or so it seemed . . .)

I was, quite literally, horrified at the thought of this incredible lady being forced to live in her dream house for the next twenty or more years with such a ho-hum kitchen. While many contractors and even most kitchen designers justify planning a space with conventional solutions as economical or efficient, I knew that my client deserved better. Not just because of her cooking skills but also because this is the house she and her husband have been working and saving to build. In all likelihood, this will be the last kitchen they ever have and with what I knew of their lifestyle, it seemed a crime to let them build a dream home with an ordinary kitchen. It may be a cliché that the kitchen is the heart of a home but for a lot of us that's true. What kind of dream home would it be without a dream kitchen at it's heart?

The solution for this kitchen was surprisingly simple, once I stepped back from all the assumptions about the “right” way to lay-out a kitchen in this shape of room. Ignore the Obvious. In other words, to ignore the “U.” Instead of following convention, I thought about what kind of layout would work best for Leslie, her family, and her guests.

As soon as I set myself free to imagine the space best suited to the kind of cook Leslie is, I realized that she needed a large island with a prep sink so she would have lots of counterspace and room for her family and friends to help her or just sit and talk. It was critically important to give her two sinks: first to allow her family to help in the kitchen without being underfoot and secondly, to give her the ability to wash and prep on plenty of counter without taking a single step, or being forced to face away from the rest of the house. But where to fit an island in this small space, let alone one big enough for a prep sink and a couple of stools?

- My Design Layout -



To make room for an island I eliminated the cabinets against the wall with the window. In a sense, I was just shifting those cabinets over: the base cabinets became the “front” of the island and the 12” deep wall cabinets became shallow base cabinets that made up the “back” of the island. In this way, we lost no storage and even eliminated a corner cabinet (which is inconvenient to use and expensive because of the cost of revolving lazy-susan hardware). Now she had an island three feet deep and eight feet long—more than enough room for a prep sink and plenty of counterspace. We even had room to add an overhang with two stools on the end of the island: the perfect space for Leslie's teenage son and daughter to hang out while their mom cooks.

I still needed to make room for the clean up sink. I chose to move the refrigerator and pantry to the end of the wall. This left room for the range to move onto the same wall so the range could work in perfect tandem with the prep sink—no steps, just an easy pivot to get from generous prep counter to the eight burner range and double ovens. With the range moved, I was able to put the clean-up sink and window along the shorter wall. We were even able to add a small window above the new sink location—I'm always a fan of getting more light.

- The Finished Kitchen -



The only significant compromise that this kitchen layout required was the pantry. The contractor's plan had a 30" wide pantry cabinet where the new layout only had room for a 15" pantry, in order to make room for moving the range to the same wall. However, Leslie reports that the 15" pantry has more than enough room for all the things she uses frequently and the less-frequently used items she is able to store in a cabinet we added to the laundry room for this purpose. In all, the list of things we gained makes the loss of 15-inches of pantry storage worth it. You can see how the refrigerator, prep-sink and range operate as a zone—for cooking—while the clean-up sink (under the new window) has it's own counter

and storage. The head cook stands at the counter on the right of the prep sink and her guests can lounge at the barstools on the end, help at the second sink, or chop and prep while standing on the far side of the island, facing their hostess.

-Here is the view from the cook's perspective -



A broad, sweeping expanse of counter— more than enough room for multiple large-size cutting boards, small appliances (like the food processor stored conveniently in the middle drawer) prep bowls and other receptacles. And that's just on this side of the island. With three feet of depth, there is plenty of room to work on the island from both sides. You can see how connected it feels to the dining and the living room beyond. Although this space is less contiguous than the “great room” as we have come to understand it, the feeling is the same. Fabulous food, wine, conversation and no stepped-on toes or traffic jams to ruin the convivial feeling.



Some of you might have been concerned that the wall on the right side of the kitchen would feel empty and awkward without cabinetry there. Instead it has become the location for one of the owner's favorite paintings. A gorgeous working kitchen with gallery space? It doesn't get any better than this.



Counterspace?

Yes, Indeed!

Cooking with Friends and Family

