



New Ideas for an Old Kitchen

by John Leeke

One of the main tenets of historic preservation philosophy is to "minimize intervention." This means do as little as possible to the building and preserve as much of the historic fabric as possible. This philosophy is most difficult to adhere to when fitting a modern kitchen into an old house, since ways of life and standards for hygiene and convenience have changed dramatically in the past 50 to 100 years.

When fitting a modern kitchen into an old house, try to choose a space that doesn't have a lot of features that contribute to the historic character of the building. For instance, window placement on the house's exterior is often critical to the historic style. If you move windows to suit sink location, you might spoil the style from the exterior. But if you use space effectively, you can provide convenience and adequate storage space, and still preserve the character of the house. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, I designed and built many kitchens into a variety of historic and just plain "old" houses. For most of these projects

I developed at least one special feature in response to specific design problems. Here are a few of the solutions I've used that have proven successful.

Corner storage. A common problem in kitchen design is how to make convenient use of the storage space in inside corner base cabinets. A typical solution is a "lazy susan" with an opening at the face of the cabinet that goes both ways from the corner.

On one kitchen that was particularly cramped for space, there was room for a door along only one side of the corner. To take advantage of the corner storage space, I made two sets of "quadrant" shelves (see Figure 1). One was screwed onto the back of the door, and another hung from the opposite edge of the door opening. I used four hinges to hang the cabinet door; the hinges had to carry the extra weight of the shelves and their load. I hung the second quadrant from a piano hinge that ran down the inner edge of the stile on the cabinet's face frame. The second quadrant swings easily in and out of the corner space, making good use of an otherwise "blind" corner.

Special function drawers. Customized drawers are another way to add special food storage when there is no room for a pantry. Drawers that extend the full 24-inch depth of the

base cabinets can be designed for special food-storage needs. When designing drawers to carry bulky or heavy food items (grains, flour, sugar), you'll need the extra length to counterbalance the added weight when the drawer is open. The extra inches provide more storage space as well.

To create a flour bin, use dividers to make compartments for different types of flour (see Figure 2). These dividers should be removable for easy cleaning. A sheet of copper, screwed to the back of the face-frame rail above the drawer, acts as a lid. When the drawer is closed, the copper settled across the top of the drawer to keep out insets and dust from above.

You can create a vegetable drawer the same way, but you need to provide ventilation. The dividers and bottom of this vegetable drawer are made of 1/4x3/4-inch maple slats (see Figure 3). A debris pan below catches potato dirt and onion skins. It slides out at floor level for easy cleaning. Ductwork through the back of the cabinet and the wall ventilates the drawer with cool air from the room beyond.

Kneading counter. One client's special interest was baking bread. She baked almost every day and complained about low back pain from kneading on standard 36-inch-high countertops. I dropped a section of maple countertop down to 31 inches (see Figure 4). A drawer at the back holds rolling pins and dough knives.

These solutions were the result of careful space planning and of attentive listening. By devising solutions that met my clients' needs, I was able to blend new kitchens into old houses without changing major architectural features. ■

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Figure 1. Two swinging "quadrant" shelves make use of the space in a corner base cabinet. One shelf is screwed onto the back of the door (note the four hinges at left, in top photo, needed to support it). The other is attached with a piano hinge to the inner edge of the cabinet's face frame.



Figure 2. Drawers designed for heavy food items should extend the full length of the cabinet; the extra length is needed to counterbalance the added weight when the drawer is open. A sheet of copper, screwed to the back of the face-frame rail above the drawer, acts as a protective lid.



Figure 3. Maple slats between bins and on the drawer bottom allow air circulation around vegetables.



Figure 4. For the serious bread maker, this kneading shelf is lowered to 31 inches high, to reduce back pain.

Author's note: In my July column on historic house plans, there was an error in one of the addresses. The correct address for Historical Replications, Inc., is P.O. Box 13529, Jackson, MS 39236 (not P.O. Box 12529).

Also, in the June column on vertical-grain wood, the photo of a warped clapboard in Figure 4 was inaccurately credited to Forest Products Laboratory. It's the photo in Figure 3 of weathered paint on flat-sawn wood that's from FLP. Actually, the warped clapboard depicted is on my own workshop. I'd replace it except that it's such a good example of the benefits of vertical-grain wood. (That's my excuse anyway.)