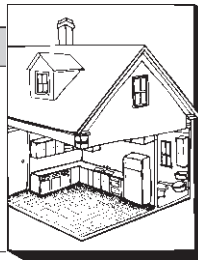


Island Living

by Lynn Comeskey



With all the attention—and space—kitchens have been getting in the last few years, islands have become almost a standard feature. Personally, I think they're great, but they have to fit—both in their size and placement within the kitchen, and in the way they're used.

My Way

I enjoy cooking—either alone or with my wife—and the island in our kitchen is something I couldn't do without. We have a little larger than average U-shaped kitchen (see illustration) with a 3x4-foot island. It's used primarily for food preparation, chopping, slicing, and the like.

Since the kitchen isn't a major thoroughfare in the layout of our house, we can get by with 33 inches between the island and adjacent base cabinets. This cuts down, by a step or two, the distance between the perimeter counter and island, which helps if you're one of the cooks. Yet its placement divides the kitchen so that two and even three can cook together without being in each other's way. More space between the base cabinets and the island is needed if you have to accommodate traffic through the kitchen as well as cook.

Our island is covered with a 2-inch-thick maple butcher block top. A 1 1/2-inch top is standard but the extra

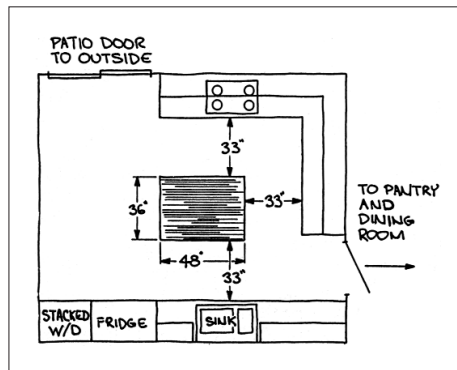
to define an area visually or divert traffic outside the core kitchen area.

A "complete" food preparation island has a small second sink and disposal unit so produce can be washed and parings ground up right there at the island. But this takes a lot of room. More than half the islands we do are just work surfaces—no sinks or cooktops. For this purpose, you can get by with an island that's 30 inches wide and 24 inches deep. Proximity to refrigerator, storage, and the cooktop is essential. The 30-inch width is somewhat subjective, but I'm convinced that anything smaller looks out of place and isn't worth the bother.

There really isn't much difference between food preparation and baking except that the latter is more specialized and requires a proper working surface—marble. For kneading, most bakers also prefer a slightly lower surface.

If the island is going to be used for dishwashing and clean-up, you'll need to incorporate a sink, a dishwasher, possibly a trash compactor, and open counter on both ends of the sink.

All this requires a lot of space—more than you're likely to have. This is not to mention the problem of venting the waste line from the sink, and the fact that your clients are likely to end up with a lot of water on the floor. As you maybe can tell, a



The author's own kitchen has a butcher-block covered island used for food preparation.

Although 36 inches is the recommended minimum, the 33-inch corridor between island and base cabinets is sufficient in this case, since there is little through-traffic and appliances with doors are well away from this lane.

1/2 inch gives it a more substantial look. If you are a stickler for neatness, know that a maple block top requires more maintenance than other surfaces, because it stains and cuts easily. A number of clients have also complained to me that they can't put hot or wet things on a maple top without it staining.

What's the Use?

Islands are a hot item in kitchen designs, and clients often ask for them. But including one because it's chic is not a good enough reason. They must have a purpose and be an integral part of how the kitchen works.

Islands can do many things. They can be used for food preparation, baking, washing and clean-up, cooking, eating, or as a staging area for the dining room. An island also can be used

sink isn't one of my favorite uses for an island.

Setting a cooktop in an island is common. For this you need a minimum of 10 to 12 inches of counter-space at one (preferably both) ends of the cooktop. The bigger problem with an island cooktop is venting. Placing a bulky hood over it takes away a lot of the freedom and openness associated with an island.

The logical solution is to use a downdraft cooktop, but I'm not all that fond of them (see JLC Kitchen & Bath, 9/89). I recently ran into a new problem with installing a downdraft cooktop in an island. If the duct is designed to run down the back of a 24-inch-deep base cabinet, this precludes including a toe kick on that side.

Size and Placement

An island is more than just another cabinet or an auxiliary work surface. Because it's out in the middle of everything, it's a major factor in determining where people walk in the kitchen, where they congregate, and how they cook.

First you need to figure out if there is room in the kitchen for an island, and if so, how big. Think this one out carefully, for a Yogi Berra might have said, "Once it's in place, it's there."

As I mentioned earlier, I'm quite happy with the 33-inch space between my island and the adjacent cabinets. Most designers I have talked to thing 36 inches is minimum, and that 42 inches is better. It's a matter of personal choice, and I often lay out the island on the floor so the homeowners can decide for themselves. Regarding island size, I subscribe to "the bigger, the better" theory. A single-use island 48 to 60 inches long and 30 to 36 inches deep is perfect if you have the room. (And then there's the kitchen I saw recently with a ten-foot island. In fact, it was actually two islands with a section of hinged counter in between to save all the steps of getting from one side of it to the other.)

Often there is only one logical place to put the island, my kitchen being an example. But where there is some latitude, remember to consider both how it will look and how it will work. Sometimes, islands can be used to define the end of the kitchen space. In other situations they can be used to reroute foot traffic that's on its way to another room or outside.

It's also important to consider appliance locations in tandem with the placement of the island. Two high-use items like the primary sink and an island cooktop shouldn't sit across from each other, and it's easy (but disastrous) to forget where dishwasher, oven, and refrigerator doors open. You also need to account for what a friend of mine calls "back up" room—the space needed to pull a hot or heavy item out of an oven or refrigerator.

More Design Fun

Islands offer a good opportunity to get inventive. You can incorporate a breakfast counter on one side of the island at a 42-inch height, and then hide utensils or spices on the work side of this short wall. You can also give a particularly tall or short client a break by raising or lowering the height of the island from the standard 36 inches without affecting the entire kitchen.

If you are lucky enough to have three or more feet of depth available for an island, you can use standard depth base cabinets on the principal side and modified wall cabinets on the other side for books or other shallow storage. Or, if you are designing a kitchen where two people will be cooking, you can use 18-inch-deep base cabinets back-to-back.

Last, islands can be design elements. You can use angles to add interest, or to separate functional areas of an island. One designer I work with likes to reflect the island shape at the ceiling either with a hood or a lighted soffit. Another possibility is to change the counter material on the island to provide variety and to draw more attention to it. ■

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