

# A few of my favourite things



It's quite a shopping list. But what would a talented amateur cook want in a new kitchen? **JAMIE GIBSON** waves his magic whisk

Reginox



It's 1920 and the gong goes. Servants plate up the dishes downstairs and the family make for the dining room. The family never sees the kitchen and barely knows how to boil a kettle let alone an egg. It was an elegant era to be sure; everyone dressed to the nines for every sitting.

How times have changed. These days it's safe to say most of us can cook at least a tiny bit. Some even enjoy it. And then there are ones, like my wife Lizzie and me, who just can't get enough of cooking.

No surprises then that, when it comes to househunting second-hand homes, our post-viewing conversation tends to follow a common theme: there's the poky kitchen, peeling paint and ropy cupboards. There's the ornate red dining room and the formal library to adjourn to for brandy. Who adjourns these days?

Back home and we're pulling out the blueprints: dreaming of knocking down the walls and doors, installing steel RSJs, opening up the space for modern open-plan living, and scribbling in an orangery like there's no tomorrow. Perhaps we should simply buy brand new, off-plan, and hope to specify and personalise down to the last bespoke coffee bean.

Nostalgia is all well and good, but, bar a few earls in ancestral piles, we



**RIGHT** Stolz  
**BELOW** Jim Lawrence lighting  
**BOTTOM** KitchenAid Iconic fridge  
**BOTTOM RIGHT** Nolte Küchen



don't live like that anymore. Dishes cooked in the shabby servants' kitchen and served in the resplendent dining room are conceits left in the file marked 'period drama scripts'.

The modern family lives in the kitchen. We socialise in it. We play with the children in it. We work in it. We eat in it. On a personal level, we use the poor thing to death – we paint, draw, sketch, sculpt and even have been known to candle make in it, so it takes some real punishment.

And yet being well and truly the beating heart and hub of the family home and the place to entertain, we want it to look effortlessly beautiful every day. So how do you make a room do all of that and more?

As a family of four, with two toddlers, we're in the midst of family-home hunting, and alongside a wild and whimsical lawn with organic vegetable gardens, the kitchen comes in joint first place for priority. Between my food blog, Butter Wouldn't Melt, and Lizzie's baking and crafting blog, Cocoa + Cotton, which runs alongside our luxury children's nursery design business, Pannacotta, our kitchen is tested to the limit every day.

Our aesthetics are fairly solidified at this point: uplifting, spacious, light and timeless, white walls to brighten the room, shaker cupboards, Silestone work surfaces and a neutral scheme to stand the test of time.

This provides a blank canvas for embellishing with furnishings, and leaves the basic shell not only tranquil and calming, but attractive to any future buyers. That's the easy bit. The harder part is choosing products, layouts and materials wisely.

In the esteemed opinion of Michel Roux Jr, his kitchen priorities are "great lighting, clever storage and a sensible layout". I'm on the same page. When it comes to natural light and window style, we favour the Georgian look, arguably the finest period in history for an understanding of how to bring swathes of light into a room while creating beautiful architectural exterior proportions. It rarely disappoints a buyer and Jim Lawrence is generally our favoured go-to for contemporary-classic electrics.

For storage and layout, they'll need to be clever and sensible to accommodate the numerous 'must-have' and 'most-wanted' appliances.

A large central island with slider induction hob and plenty of workspace is a necessity. Overhead ventilation is all well and good but downdraft is neater. Ovens at waist height or higher – nothing lower down that demands bending or, critically, runs the risk of small children burning themselves. Similarly, no low-level fridges. Aside from the bending, from personal experience, small, hungry toddlers love





LEFT Silestone by Cosentino  
LEFT BELOW Sub-Zero & Wolf  
THIS PIC McCarron & Company

to visit on a quest for self-foraged snacks, leaving the door wide open and your expensive meat cuts looking worse for wear. The solution is invariably a large American fridge freezer – nowadays not only the favoured choice but virtually expected in many homes.

There are also smaller worktop appliances to consider. Sounds like a dream to build everything in, but what about the nightmare when the newest technology arrives and you have to rip things out? We all love a gadget, but the kitchen needs to last, and appliances are updating at a rate faster than we can keep pace.

We won't be shelling out a small fortune on the latest gimmick promised to be a magic bullet for some kitchen chore. Instead, we'll be sticking with the tried and tested ones – favourites being Thermomix and KitchenAid – as well as a water bath hidden in the counter top, a bean-to-cup coffee machine and an ice-cream maker. Each gadget would be at worktop height in a cupboard with its own electrical point – easy access, and once you're finished, just close the door on the clutter. Except the ice cream maker – a noisy little devil that needs tucking behind a proper wall or two in a utility room. The raucous chamber vacuum packer – good for storage, marinating and the water bath – can keep it company there too.

Let's not forget the other favourite on our list: the boiling water tap, a brilliant bit of inspiration. A warming oven is also a nice touch and doubles as a proofing oven for bread making. And a magnetic knife rack to display my I.O. Shen knives is both smart and efficient, as well as safer in practice than hidden in a drawer. Lastly, a floor-to-ceiling wine fridge built into a wall is a luxury few would snub.

Corner cupboards should be cleverly thought out to avoid irritations of use. Tall cupboards must extend fully to the ceiling – redundant space above is just space you otherwise need to clean and you never know what you might want to hide out of reach.

A walk-in larder is on our essentials list, with utility room round the corner. Being the enthusiastic cook, I'd be also hunting out a room for a butcher's block and full-size dry-ageing fridge for start to finish meat prep, but I accept this probably sets me slightly apart from your average home cook.

Over the island, a laundry maid is a great feature, but also supremely practical for displaying and storing all your copperware, pots and pans. Two dishwashers may seem extravagant but proves inspired if you're keen on hosting. And, for ease of unloading, there's much to be said for the benefits of dishwasher proximity to where your crockery and cutlery is stored.

It's the small luxuries that make the difference. A snug area with a TV is

also a must – the perfect spot for playtime while we're cooking. And finally shelving space for all your cookbooks, whether tucked into the island unit or using up forsaken wall space.

It is also important to consider the cook and entertaining. As cook, you want to be engaging with your guests, but you can't abandon your hob too long or the results may put them off returning. That means the luxury of being able to stay by the hob while also facing the whole room. We'll be solving it with a hob in the island. Guests can be sat nibbling nuts and enjoying a glass of wine on stools and we can still be fully integrated in the conversation while we cook. Likewise, a good view of the TV snug area from the island means you can keep an eye on the latest scores.

We'll probably avoid the temptation of a built-in sound system unless it can be future-proofed and a set of Wi-Fi speakers can do the job just fine. Needless to say, superfast broadband is a must and lots of electrical points on the island. USB ports equally make for easy use of a laptop or phone.

Finally, cooking to me does not just mean an oven and hob in the kitchen. I've grown to love the incredible smoky flavours that outdoor cooking brings. It's no longer just a summer pastime for many Britons – we're catching up with our sun-drenched Australian and American counterparts and lighting

up our barbecue grills come summer sunshine or snow.

This ideally means stepping straight out of the orangery into your outdoor kitchen, replete with full barbecue works and your herb garden at hand. For us this looks something like stone paved floor, a covered area, bulkhead lighting, built-in cupboards, a Sub-Zero & Wolf fridge, running water and electrical points. Sub-Zero & Wolf for gas, Kamado Joe for charcoal, Traeger for wood pellet smoker, Uuni for great pizzas and a fire bowl for evening garden heat and toasting marshmallows come pudding time. Personally, I've also got my eye on a small brick smokehouse for cold smoking.

Ultimately, whatever a homeowner's personal feelings are towards cooking, keen chefs or not, nobody can deny the kitchen is the most valuable and lived-in room in the house and, at any financial level, the main factor in a buyer's house purchase is almost always kitchen potential.

So personal approaches aside, it's worth getting the kitchen right. My dream kitchen might attract a heavy price tag, but over to you housebuilders. [SN](#)

*When not cooking or blogging, Jamie Gibson is a Premiership rugby player for Northampton Saints.*

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