

Cook Up a Kitchen

6 basic ingredients blended in different proportions yield a variety of sweet solutions

BY DANIEL S. MORRISON

Compared to other rooms in the house, the kitchen is a classic overachiever. Beyond meal planning and preparation, it's a communication hub for busy families, so we keep a phone, a notepad, and a bulletin board there. Also, it's often our landing and launching pad, so we keep our keys, charge our cell phones, and drop the mail there. More and more, we surf the Internet there. Sometimes we even eat there. Because all of that overachieving can get in the way of a good sauté, many people now are asking for a dedicated office space to be included in their kitchen design. But if you're going to steal space from the hardest-working room in the house for an office, you need to allocate that space thoughtfully. It often needs to multi- or mini-task; it needs to share or specialize within its footprint.

Placement is the critical ingredient

To be successful, a kitchen office needs some basic ingredients (sidebar right), but most important is placement. The best placement of an office zone is directly on a travel route but outside the kitchen triangle. "Different, yet part of the space they're tucked into—that's the whole key to these designs," says Stuart Davis, an architect in Austin, Texas.

Next, fill the space to fit your needs: Because unsuccessful designs produce clutter, clutter is a good starting point for design. Look at what you do that creates clutter and account for it in your design. Do catalogs and phone books constantly cover the kitchen table? Give them a cubby or desk drawer in your design.

Think about your Internet, lighting, and electrical needs: Will wireless Internet access work, or do you need to snake CAT-5 or cable wire to your desk? Within your work zone, you'll want to have light fixtures, electrical outlets, and a phone jack, but don't tangle the desktop with cords. One outlet at desk height may come in handy, but keep most of the outlets below the desk if you can and use a desktop grommet to tidy the cords.

Seating is often optional in a kitchen office. "I haven't found a lot of people who actually like to sit down in their kitchen in a true workstation format. It's usually less formal than that," says Davis. Less formal, yes, but also less solitary. Architect Stephen Selin tries to get the seating wide enough to accommodate two people looking at the computer screen. And if the chairs can do double duty, even better: "If the desk is near an island with stools, sometimes we raise the desk up to counter height. That way, you can pull a stool over from the island rather than have a kitchen full of furniture." The examples that follow all incorporate fundamental ingredients into their recipes; the difference is in the proportions and how the ingredients blend together.

1. Functional placement

Keep the office out of the kitchen triangle. Put it close by, though, or it won't be used.

2. Personalized desk

Space needs range from narrow bill-paying stations to double-wide desks for homework-help sessions.

3. Open display and hidden storage

Cookbooks, pictures, and knickknacks need shelves; cubbies can be family mailboxes; and drawers can be sized for phone books, office supplies, and hanging files.

4. Desktop lighting

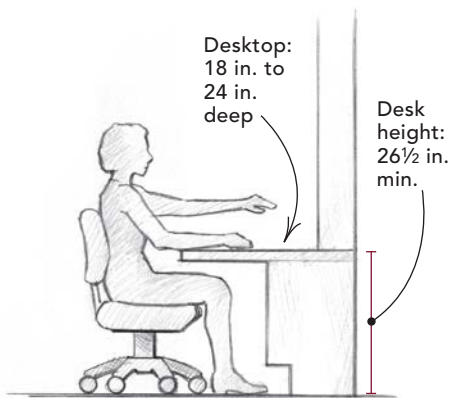
A window or a skylight is a real plus, but incandescent, low-voltage, or fluorescent lighting can work if properly arranged. Light should wash the desk surface without shadows. Placing fixtures a few feet above the desk behind a valance is a good solution.

5. Message hub

Hang a bulletin board to hold fliers, photos, and field-trip permission slips; a dry-erase board or chalkboard is useful for reminder notes and grocery lists. In its simplest form, the message hub can be a notepad and pencil.

6. Wires and outlets

You'll likely need a lot of places to plug in cell phones, PDAs, iPods, telephones, and computer equipment. Dedicated space behind doors is an option that cuts cord clutter, but when you hide your phone, you often forget your phone. One compromise is to put outlets below the desk and feed cords through with a desk grommet.



Daniel S. Morrison is an associate editor at *Fine Homebuilding*.

Office

FOLD A DESK INTO AN ISLAND

ISLAND DESK

Key ingredient

Sharing an island puts the office in the center of the kitchen, yet this desk won't impede kitchen workflow.

Wet areas, such as kitchen islands, usually don't make great places for desks, but because this island is used by a single cook, there are never any vulnerable items (such as a laptop computer) in the desk area during cooking. "The placement of this office space allows visual access to everything in the kitchen while keeping outside of the cooking realm," says architect Jim Bischoff of Tiburon, Calif. "Because of the openness of the floor plan, this spot felt like a natural place for a bill-paying center." When stealing space from a primary work zone (the island), as in this case, the office must work extra hard. Created by carving into the island in a gentle curve, this desk is 18 in. at its deepest point.



SUBSTITUTE A DESK FOR CABINETS



OFFICE NICHE

Key ingredient

Placing this desk on the refrigerator's hinge side keeps it close to the action but out of the way.

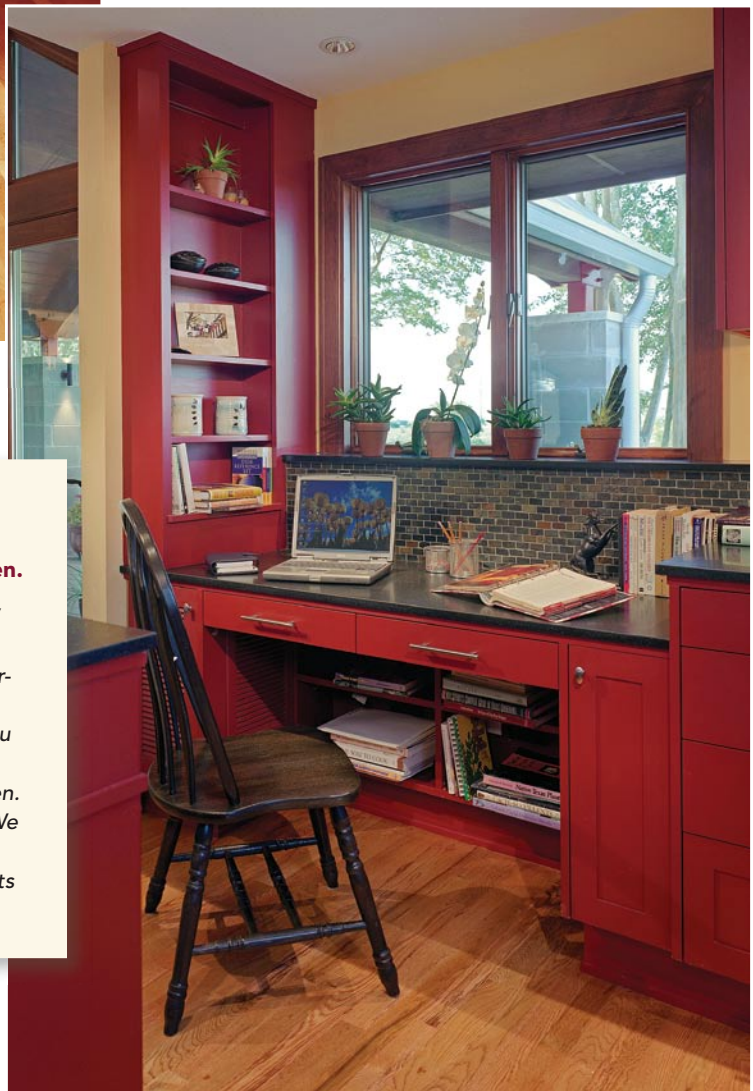
"We try to get the desk area away from the main circulation of traffic, but if you're going to use it, then you want it to be accessible when you come in," says architect Stephen Selin of Shelburne, Vt. The desk is incorporated into a display niche and storage hutch featuring glass-front doors, file drawers, and open cubbies. Low-voltage light fixtures tucked behind a valance and inside the display cabinets place light where it's needed. Outlets and switches are above the desk with a data-port below for Internet access and networking needs.

DOUBLE-WIDE DESK

Key ingredient

The wide seating area can fit two people, which is great for homework-help sessions or double viewing of the computer screen.

"A lot of times, as in this case, the office area is primarily for the kids," says Stuart Davis of CG&S Design/Build in Austin, Texas, "so that they can be doing homework or working on the computer in view of the parents." Open shelves above the desk provide display space, and doors, drawers, and a shallow-depth shelf hide work items below. Because you don't need the full 24 in. to fit your knees under a desk, adding open shelves is a great way to keep schoolbooks handy yet somewhat hidden. Also below the desk is a ventilated cabinet for the computer tower. "We sort of learned that lesson the hard way," Davis says. "When we built underventilated cabinets in the past, what we found was that the clients took the door off or left it open all the time."



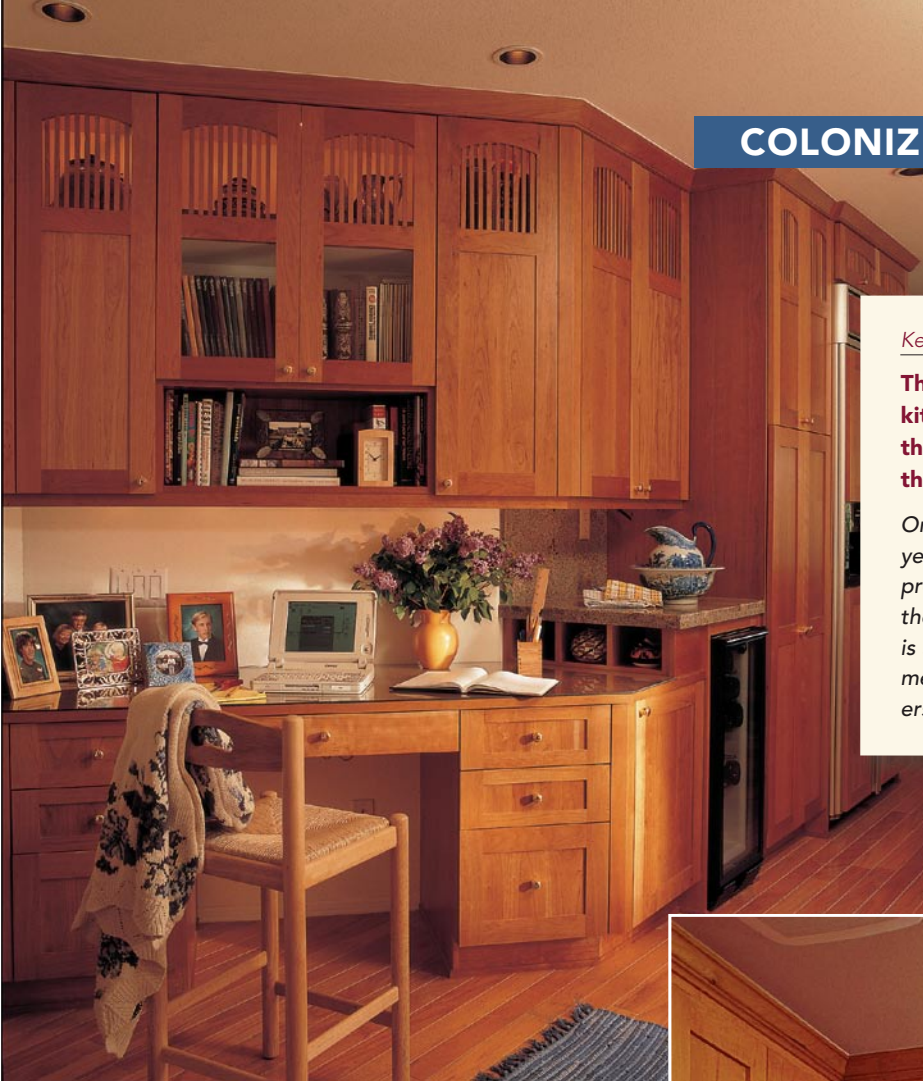
COLONIZE THE CORNERS

OUTSIDE CORNER OFFICE

Key ingredient

The angled desk placement affords a clear view of the kitchen work area. Also, when the homeowners get in, they can drop car keys and cell phones here, making them hard to forget when they're heading out the door.

On the edge of the work triangle, the office space is separate yet accessible. Open shelves, cubbies, and glass-front doors provide ample room for display items and cookbooks, while the traditional seven-drawer desk (including two file drawers) is a place for nondisplay office items. The angled desk placement allows users to work without turning their back to others in the kitchen.



INSIDE CORNER OFFICE

Key ingredient

At the entrance to the pantry, this inside-corner desk provides tons of desktop space, especially for a bulky computer monitor.

With almost 5 ft. from desk front to back corner, there's plenty of room in front of the monitor for a keyboard and papers. Additional legroom is afforded by using shallow drawers but no corresponding base cabinets in the space immediately flanking the angled desk. Architect Tim McIntyre of Austin, Texas, says that what makes this home economist's office successful is that it's out of the wet stream, away from the primary work triangle, but firmly rooted in the kitchen's support zone: the pantry, the laundry area, and the recycling center. Meal planning and grocery-list making are efficiently done in the pantry.





ROOM WITHIN A ROOM

CRAFTSMAN CUBICLE

Key ingredient

A three-sided office on the edge of the kitchen has room for cubbies and drawers.

The compact footprint (2 ft. by 3½ ft.) at the base of a staircase near the entry to the kitchen seemed like an ideal place to put a desk for a little home office, says architect Bryon Anderson of Minneapolis. "It reminds me of the writer's desk that my parents had, with plenty of cubbies, mail slots, and drawers, all in quartersawn oak." Low-voltage lighting provides punches of task light.

OFFICE WITH A VIEW

GLASS-TOP DESK

Key ingredient

Clever design exploits an otherwise wasted space and floods the office with natural light. Low-voltage fixtures illuminate the display cabinet and provide task lighting at night.

Bisected by a tall window, this narrow space beside the kitchen door seemed an unlikely spot for a kitchen office. But designer Susan Tamsky of La Jolla, Calif., hit on the idea of the glass desktop, which puts the desk right in front of the window without blocking light or views. Pieces of stainless-steel tubing elevate the curved glass slightly above the base cabinets, placing the desk at the right height for standing or for use with a stool borrowed from the nearby island. Cookbooks, phone books, and a recipe collection fill one base cabinet. The other side is for bill-paying and postal supplies.



A STAND-UP WORKSTATION

COMMAND CENTER

Key ingredient

At the edge of the kitchen, this tall desk is handy for scheduling and large enough for a desk calendar.

This command center, designed by architect David Edrington of Eugene, Ore., features an angled desktop that holds a large calendar while simultaneously discouraging clutter accumulation. The height is perfect for quick looks at the calendar without bending or stooping, but a stool from the island can be borrowed for list making or extended scheduling sessions. Sitting at the periphery of the kitchen action, this command center provides a view of the kitchen to let the cook make sure the sauce doesn't burn while he's fielding a phone call. There also are display and storage areas. Open and closed storage above the desk houses cookbooks, phone books, and office supplies. Below the desk is a spot for the kids' schoolbooks and supplies. For more on this kitchen, see pp. 50-53.

Desktop:
13° slope

