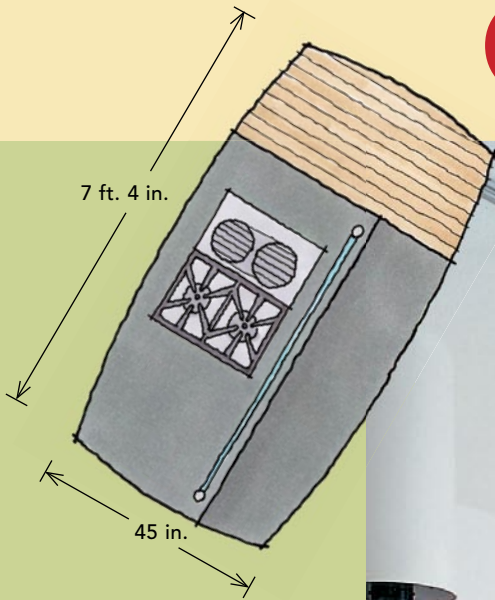


Getting the Most



MAXIMUM UTILITY, MODEST SIZE

Roughly 4 ft. wide by 7 ft. long, this island has been condensed to fit into a limited rectangular space. Because it is close to both the sink and a freestanding range, located on adjacent walls at right angles to each other, the island helps to make work flow easily. Its rounded ends ease circulation into the work zone and reduce the problem of bulkiness that can result from large pieces of furniture placed in small areas.

Splitting the island into sections allows each segment to be like an independent piece of furniture. The island includes separate counters for chopping and cooking. The lower counter also can be used for eating; a glass partition protects anyone seated there from stove splatters. An overhead gantry reflects the shape of the island, houses lights, and provides convenient storage for pots and utensils.



From a Kitchen Island

Masterfully tailored to their spaces, these kitchen workstations show how to combine utility with panache

BY JOHNNY GREY

If you ask me, getting the island right is the defining moment of kitchen design. The island is the link that connects every piece of furniture and all the diverse activity that takes place in a kitchen. The island is the ingredient that helps to make meal preparation a pleasurable punctuation to the daily continuum of life.

That's what a kitchen island should be. In reality, however, there are as many ways to get islands wrong as there are varieties of kitchens. The size of the room, the placement of the windows, and the relationship of the kitchen to adjacent spaces are just a few of the variables to think about. Those considerations don't even take into account the various functions that an island can include.

This article is about picking a path through those variables to get you to the best island for your kitchen. Some common-sense rules loosely govern the sizes and the materials that you should consider.

First, decide how big the island should be

I think of a kitchen island as a collection of parts that can be assembled in different combinations and sizes to suit the dimensions of the room and the functions desired by the cooks who use it. The average front-to-back depth of an island is between 4 ft. and 5 ft. This depth allows multiple worksurfaces of more than one height. (If the island is less than 40 in. deep, a single-height surface is better.)

At the most, an island should take up about 25% of a kitchen's available floor space. That figure might be reduced to 15% in a more confined room, depending on the sizes of other furniture pieces and cabinets. In a kitchen narrower than 14 ft., a full-fledged island will be difficult to fit. Instead, consider a peninsula or a worktable whose continuous, single-height surface is narrower than an island.

Where the regular use of adjacent countertops is likely, leave at least a 4-ft. passage between the island and the counters. Near a doorway, a table, or an oven, expand the passage by at least another 1 ft. Allow 2 ft. in width for each person working at a counter.

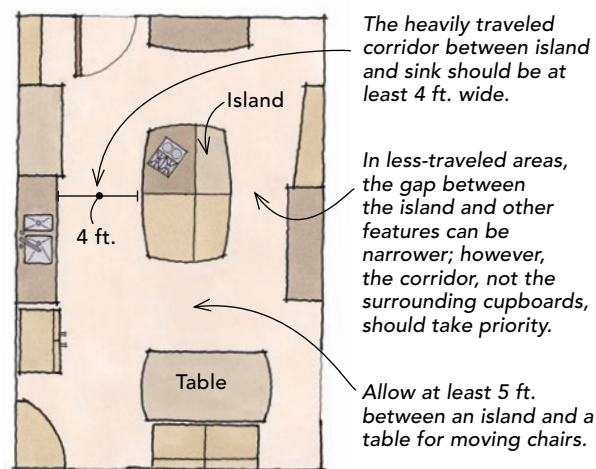
Soft geometry is friendly geometry

Islands can take a number of shapes to suit rooms of different sizes. An island's presence can be likened to a piece of sculpture in which weight, mass, texture, light, and shape interplay. The added complication is that we don't just look at an island. We stand next to it. We walk around it. We use it.

I use the principles of what I call soft geometry to help shape the kitchen islands that I design. Soft geometry recognizes that we don't move in straight lines through spaces, and that we respond in subliminal ways to rounded corners versus sharp ones. Think of the kitchen

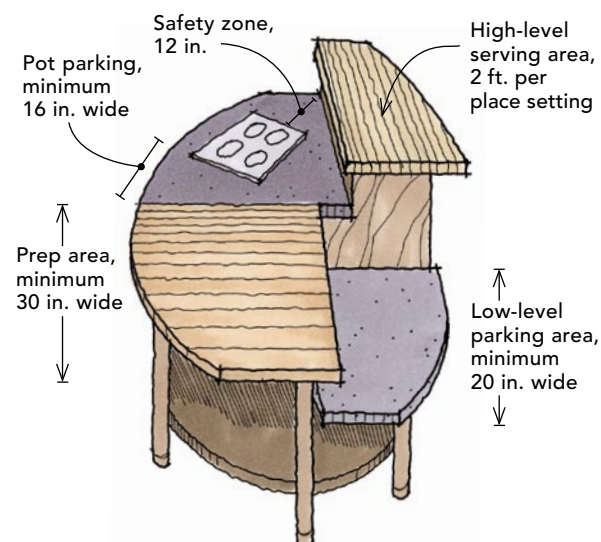
CLEARANCES ARE CRITICAL

An island is the hub of kitchen activity, providing not only a place for serious culinary work but also a way to enhance social connections. An essential step in the design process is establishing the island's scale and its connection to other features in the room. The object is to avoid any sense of claustrophobia.



Three-level-island basics

Multiple worksurfaces at different heights make the island more functional, but when island depth is less than 40 in., a single-height worksurface is better.



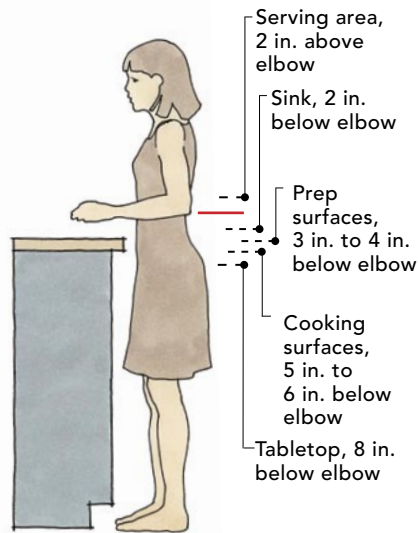
in geological terms: A river has cut through it over time and ground away the hard edges, creating a path that flows easily.

With this in mind, I typically design islands with rounded corners, which are easier than sharp corners on the occasional encounter with a hip. Rounded shapes in an island foster better traffic flow around it.

I don't use curves everywhere, however. They can add expense to a cabinet budget because molds need to be made prior to building curved cabinet doors and carcasses. The trick is to keep to one radius and to use curves only where necessary, with deliberation and in places where they yield the most benefit. The ends of an island are more appropriate than the middle; curves also work well in food-prep areas because our bodies can approach a curved shape in a more relaxed manner. With curved countertops that are open underneath, you can avoid using complex cupboard fronts, thereby lowering costs.

A good way of reining in a furniture budget is to use the room's architecture to take on the strain of storage. Install a large pantry that lessens the need for large, expensive cupboards; use shelves instead of upper cabinets, which are expensive for their relative size. Simple hanging rails work well for storing pans and cooking utensils. The best plan is to make do with fewer pieces of furniture and to formulate a design that is thoughtful and expressed with panache. Less is more here.

Bear in mind that the contrast between round and rectangular shapes works well. For example, soft geometry recognizes the desirability of wedge-shaped cabinets or islands that conform to traffic patterns. These wedge shapes can occupy otherwise unused chunks of space in a kitchen and create exciting compositions when combined with curves. Use these geometric elements to compose multilevel islands of different shapes and functions to fit rooms



WORKING HEIGHTS



of different sizes (see the sidebars on pp. 90, 93, and 95).

Make the height suit the user and the task at hand

The best kitchen islands make the cook feel like an orchestra conductor, all parts working together harmoniously. An island helps to organize the cooking process without screaming, "I am a workhorse for drudgery." When the cook is working alone, the view from the island should make perfectly good company by itself.

Of course, none of this can happen if an island is not designed for comfort. Standard counter height is 36 in., but this rigid guideline ignores the fact that various tasks are performed best at different heights. To find the correct heights, start with the distance from the floor to the cook's flexed elbow (drawing

left). Then make some simple calculations:

- Add 2 in. or more for a food bar/serving area.
- Deduct 2 in. for the top of the sink.
- Deduct 3 in. to 4 in. for a food-prep surface.
- Deduct 5 in. to 6 in. for the cooktop height.
- Deduct 8 in. for a tabletop.

When the cooks in a household are of very different heights, the island should include prep surfaces that can accommodate each person comfortably.

On the business side of the island

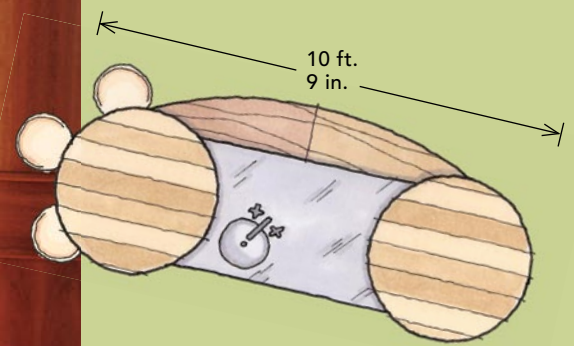
Prepping, cooking, and serving food all should be done facing into the room so that the cook has eye contact with family or guests. A sense of order should prevail with just the right amount of island space allocated for each function.

What's the right amount? Only 6 ft. of workspace is usable at any one time without moving your feet, so a counter measuring about

Where islands go wrong

KITCHEN ISLANDS can be difficult to design. They not only must be functional, but they also should make an aesthetic contribution to the room without overpowering it. I've seen more than one island that doesn't quite live up to its potential. Here's where islands often seem to miss the mark:

- **The scale is wrong.** Either too big or too small is a killer. If the island dominates the space, then overzealous countertop planning has gotten the better of you. If the island is too small, it isn't useful.
- **Cooking is not focused on the center of the room.** As a result, the pleasure of socializing in the kitchen declines.
- **The island does not unite the functions of cabinets on opposing walls.** It should shorten distances between cleaning, cooking, prepping, and serving areas.
- **The meal-prep area has no view.** Ideally, it should overlook the table, the entry door, or the garden.
- **The island doesn't free enough space for a sofa, a hutch, or an architectural feature.** If any of these details can't fit in the final design, your plan needs review.
- **Circulation space is cramped.** Enlarge surrounding passages by shrinking the island or by moving it into the center of the room.



SOFT ON BOTH ENDS

This generously sized island, 10 ft. 9 in. long, includes a circular prep table at one end and a circular serving area and breakfast bar at the other. The prep circle is closest to the sink and the range; the other circle is near a set of French doors that lead to the deck. These surfaces are connected by a slightly lower rectangular counter with a small vegetable sink. The stone surface of the central area can take punishment from heavy or hot pans and is easy to wipe clean. An even lower counter on the opposite side of the island can be used for a variety of activities (photo above).

The circular worksurfaces overlap the rectangular base cabinets, which made the island less expensive to build. One notable aesthetic detail is the colorful painted band just below counter height, a decorative contrast to the more subdued hues of the wood.



24 in. deep by 6 ft. long is an ideal worksurface. If necessary, you can squeeze two tasks into an area just 4 ft. long.

The cooktop should face the seating area and have a “parking space” on each side that’s a minimum of one pan wide (about 16 in.), more if the cooktop is on the edge of the counter. To the right of the cooktop, assuming users are right-handed, should be a prep surface that’s at least 24 in. deep and up to 48 in. long.

Stripped down to bare essentials, an island should provide a food-prep surface at least 24 in. deep by 30 in. long (or try a round chopping block that is at least 24 in. in dia.). If the island includes a cooktop, there should be a higher-level serving/plating area in front of it (drawing p. 91). This will help to hide messy cooking activities from the kitchen’s social zone.

If you don’t include this higher shelf and the cooktop is within 7 in. of the edge of the counter, make sure there is a barrier such as a strip of safety glass (photo p. 90). It should be at least 10 in. to 14 in. tall to prevent hot food from splashing and to keep children from getting

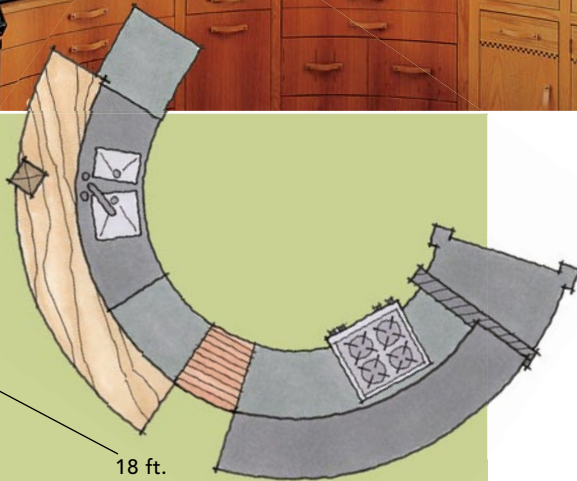
their hands on hot pans. Any wood counters should be a minimum of 14 in. from the cooktop to prevent charring. If you need a second oven, the island is a good place for it.

An overhead hanging gantry, or pot rack, is essential. Its shape should reflect the footprint of the island. The gantry not only provides space to hang everyday cooking essentials, but it also can house an exhaust vent above the cooktop and present an opportunity for accurately positioned task lighting.

A low-level area that’s 20 in. long minimum (3 ft. is better) and adjacent to the prep surface can double as a parking place for small appliances. It’s also a good spot to rest large vessels awaiting filling or to allow young children to assist with meal preparation.

Preventing the family pet from getting underfoot can help with meal preparation, too. If I visit a client’s house for the first time and notice that the family owns a dog or a cat, then I consider a design that includes room for a dog nook or a cat platform below the island. In addition, storage below decks should include deep drawers for pots

An island helps to organize the cooking process without screaming, "I am a workhorse for drudgery."



RESTAURANT-STYLE ISLAND

At nearly 18 ft. in dia., this circular counter is clearly meant for a large kitchen. It's more like a continuous restaurant-style bar than a conventional kitchen island. On the business side of the island, the flow is smooth and linear, uninterrupted by opening doors or pedestrian traffic. At one end is the main cooking zone that allows the chef to face her audience. At the center of the island are the chopping block and the main prep area; a little farther down the curve are the sink and the dishwasher.

The high-level wraparound counter creates a barrier that hides the clutter and mess of the work zones. It can be used as a serving area or as a place to lean for a drink or a chat. Breaking up the island into dedicated work areas reduces its scale and gives it both character and visual interest.

and pans; shallow drawers for utensils, oven trays, and lids; and possibly a pull-out waste bin.

On the social side of the island

The nonculinary side of the island should accommodate social needs, not meal prep. Storage should be related to the needs of the table or to infrequently used equipment. This side of the island can be devoted to home-office activities, or if there are children in the household, it can be used to store toys. For a long time, my family used the cupboard below our island's serving area for children's play costumes.

A long raised-height counter, sometimes called a breakfast bar, has many uses. It works as a self-service buffet or plating counter suited to contemporary eating habits. Displaying just-made dishes here shows the triumph of the chef's achievement; they are appetizers in themselves.

Self-service bars need to allow about 2 ft. per person when in active use, so a length of 6 ft. to 8 ft. would be ideal for a family of four. The height should be upward of 39 in. If stools or chairs are used at a raised serving bar, don't forget to include open legroom below.

Get bold with materials, patterns, colors, and finishes

Because an island is composed of a series of functional elements, using different materials and finishes in each section can give clarity and formal expression to the design. Different veneers from light, dark, rich, or plain woods can direct the mood of the room. Such variety also emphasizes the handmade, individually constructed nature of kitchen furnishings. I think it's best to choose one dominant dark wood such as walnut or a medium-colored one like oak, then balance it with paler, less demanding woods such as maple or sycamore. Small horizontal bands—for example, a row of drawer fronts—can be emphasized with rich, intense veneers such as burl ash, elm, madrona, or mazur birch.

Using color to express different elements can lend vibrancy and a sense of fun to an island design. Artwork or colorful patterns overlaying painted panels also provide personal expression and give character, style, and depth to kitchen décor. □

Johnny Grey is a kitchen designer with studios in England and San Francisco. He has written and lectured widely on kitchen design. Photography © Jacqui Small 2004, from *Kitchen Culture: Reinventing Kitchen Design* by Johnny Grey (Firefly Books, 2004).

ON OUR WEB SITE

- See additional work by Johnny Grey, plus three conceptual island designs for kitchens of different shapes and sizes on www.FineHomebuilding.com.

