

Breakfast-Booth Basics

For informal meals or intimate dinners, there's an eating nook that fits your kitchen and suits your family

BY ROE A. OSBORN

When I walk into a restaurant and I'm offered the choice of sitting at a table or a booth, I always choose the booth. Booths lend a feeling of informality to a meal, along with an element of fun. A booth can also seem like a private room for more-intimate dining.

A breakfast nook can create that same feeling at home. Nooks are typically carved from spaces too small for a conventional table and chairs. Just like in your favorite family-style eatery, a booth can add a note of fun and casual intimacy to a kitchen. On a bench, there's always room to squeeze in one more person.

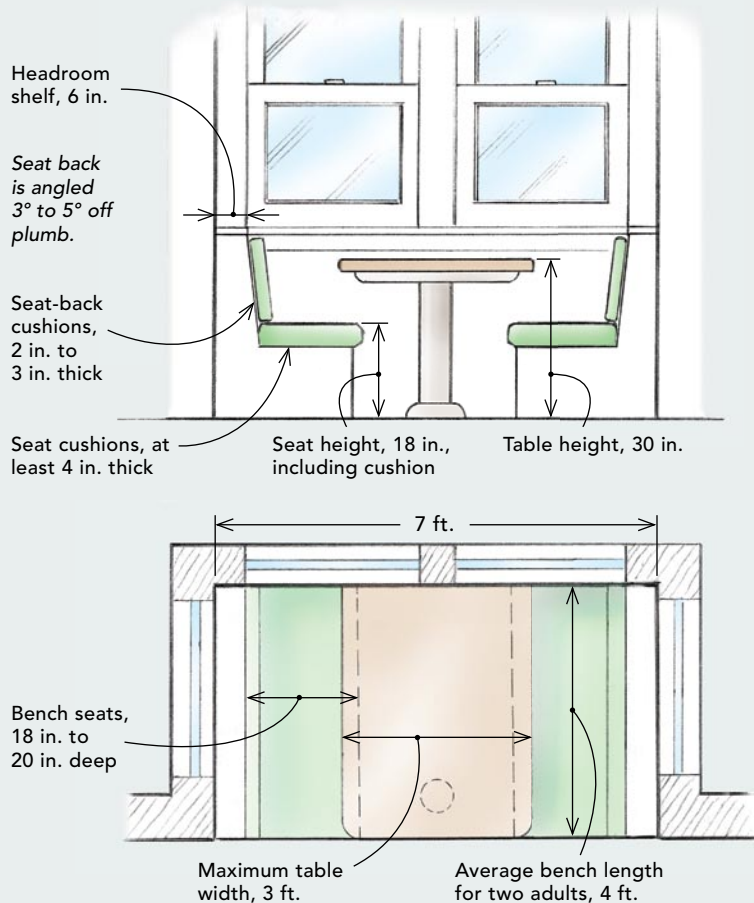
Begin with the bench configuration

A breakfast nook can sit in a dedicated space such as a box bay or an angled bay, or you can put one in a corner with chairs that complement the built-in seating (drawings pp. 92-93). If the nook breaks up a line of kitchen cabinets, the seats can extend to the front face of

BONUS: TURN TO P. 94 FOR DETAILS ON BUILDING THIS BREAKFAST BOOTH.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING A COZY, COMFORTABLE BREAKFAST BOOTH

A nook built into a simple bump-out is probably the most common configuration. In this scenario, a table can be attached to the outer wall of the bump-out with a single support at the other end to maximize legroom. At 4 ft. deep, the booth seats two adults comfortably; any deeper could make serving meals difficult. A chair at the end provides additional seating, and a 6-in.-deep shelf at neck height allows you to tip your head back.



the cabinets so that the bump-out doesn't have to be as deep. Kneewalls can also define the nook.

As you determine which configuration works best in your kitchen, you also need to decide the length of the benches based on the number of diners to be accommodated. The book *Architectural Graphic Standards* (Wiley, 2004) suggests that benches 42 in. to 52 in. long are fine for two adults. A length of 48 in. uses materials most efficiently. Just remember that if a breakfast nook is built into a corner, the area where the two benches intersect should not be included when figuring the needed seating length. Two opposing 48-in.-long benches should be fine for two parents and three small kids.

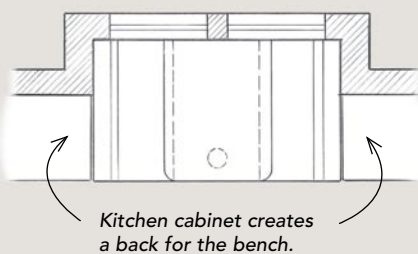
Incidentally, an L-shaped booth with chairs along one side is especially well-suited to families with youngsters. Portland, Ore., architect Keyan Mizani says, "One bench side is great for keeping the kids in place, short of a force field. The parents get the chairs, making it easier for them to get to and from the table. Also, having more room on one side of the booth allows a high chair to be positioned at the end of the table with some extra legroom to get past."

The slant on seats

Most folks agree that seat backs should be angled (about 3° to 5° off plumb) and that the seat level should be 18 in. off the floor, a height that includes cushions. While angling the seat back adds a modicum of comfort to a built-in bench, it also takes up more space. If space is at a premium, you might have to settle for straight backs.

I've never heard anyone complain about having too much storage in a kitchen, and if a breakfast nook is a solution to limited space, it makes a lot of sense to use the benches for storage. Drawers on the ends of the benches with full-extension slides are the best approach (see pp. 94-95). Another way to take advantage of that space is with a hinged bench seat. Because the access is limited,

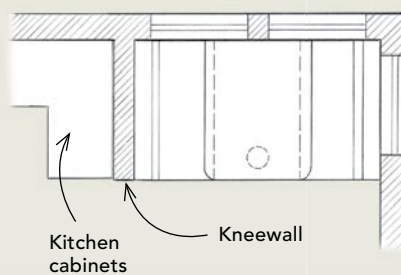
Same size booth, smaller bump-out



Kitchen cabinet creates a back for the bench.

In this scenario, the nook breaks up a run of kitchen cabinets. Extending the benches to the front of the cabinets translates into a much shallower bump-out, which might better fit a house's exterior design. The adjacent countertops also can act as staging areas for meals in the nook.

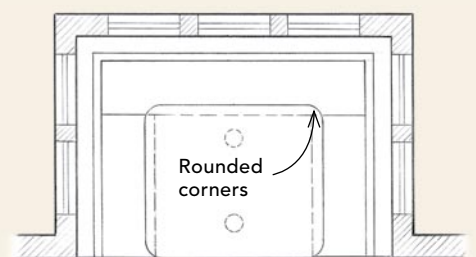
A kneewall replaces the bump-out



Kitchen cabinets Kneewall

A kneewall makes it easy to build a nook with opposing benches without the expense of a bump-out. In this design, a kitchen corner creates one side of the nook, while a kneewall defines the opposite side. Kitchen cabinets end at the kneewall.

Horseshoe booth maximizes seating



Rounded corners

To maximize built-in seating, a three-bench booth is the best way to go. The table in this arrangement has to be freestanding; rounded table corners make it easier to slide into and out of the "landlocked" bench. As in the corner plan (right), two adults might knock knees if they sit in adjacent corner seats.

though, hinged-lid storage should be a place for seldom-used items.

The bottom line on cushions

I've sat on comfortable breakfast-booth benches both with and without cushions. Beyond padding for the posterior, cushions keep the hard edge of the bench from pressing into the backs of your legs. For optimum comfort, seat cushions should be at least 4 in. thick (sidebar right).

Keeping cushions clean can be a challenge. Salt Lake City architect Warren Lloyd sent his family's cushion-cover material to Americo (www.americo-inc.com) to be vinylized. Now the cushions in their breakfast nook are impervious to spills and stains.

Entering and exiting a booth usually requires sliding, and the right cover is critical. Smooth fabrics without a lot of nap are best; otherwise, you might drag the whole cushion with you when you slide. Seats without cushions should be sanded smooth and varnished to promote sliding and to discourage splinters. Less important are back cushions. They should not be as firm as seat cushions, and because they don't bear a diner's full weight, they don't need to be as thick; 2-in. to 3-in. foam is fine. If space is tight, forgoing back cushions can save a few inches of space per bench.

A table for legroom

A pedestal table with a center support that doesn't restrict legroom offers the easiest way of getting into and out of a booth. In a nook with a wall at one end, the table can be attached to the wall with minimal support at the other end.

Table height should be between 28 in. and 30 in., depending on your size. If you remember a booth that you've been comfortable in, I suggest measuring it and jotting down the dimensions of the table and benches. A table that's 30 in. to 36 in. wide has enough room for place settings with serving dishes in the middle, but it's not so

Foam facts

THE TYPE OF FOAM you choose for breakfast-booth bench cushions can mean the difference between achy and comfy. The two most-common foam materials are latex and urethane. Both types of foam can be ordered in different levels of firmness (firm is better for seat cushions). Latex lasts twice as long and costs twice as much as urethane. Top-quality urethane foam should last 10 to 15 years.

Each of the Web sites listed here has easy-to-navigate instructions for calculating the dimensions of cushions in a range of firmness and quality levels. Most also offer a ballpark price quote. Most companies strongly recommend a Dacron wrap for each cushion, which makes the cushion look

better by rounding out the edges and filling out the cover. A Dacron wrap also makes it easier to slip the cover onto the foam.

When calculating cushion size, foam companies suggest making the foam slightly longer ($\frac{1}{2}$ in.) and slightly thinner ($\frac{1}{2}$ in.) than the cover. The extra length of the foam plus the Dacron wrap fills out the cover nicely. If your plan includes back cushions, order them made of softer, thinner foam; a 2-in. thickness is typically fine. Many companies can also make custom covers for your cushions.

ONLINE SOURCES

Foamfabbed.com

Foamorder.com

Foamproducts.net

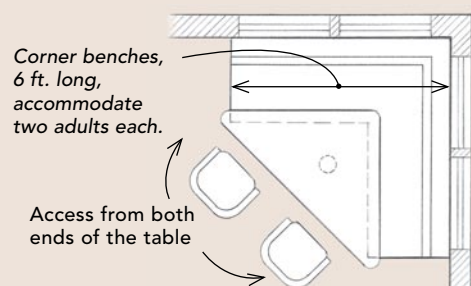
Foamsource.com

wide as to diminish the intimacy of the nook. Because the table usually overhangs the edge of the seats by 4 in. or 5 in., you'll have plenty of room to get into the nook but won't need to lean forward uncomfortably to reach your plate.

A freestanding pedestal table has its advantages. If you need a bit more room, the table can be moved slightly to let diners by.

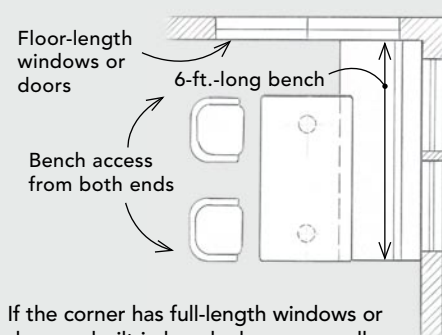
A former *Fine Homebuilding* editor, Roe A. Osborn is now a freelance photojournalist living on Cape Cod.

Taking advantage of a kitchen corner



The table in this plan cannot be attached to the wall. Although the table can be square, a triangle is a viable option when space is at a premium. Chair seating is possible opposite the bench. Sitting in adjacent corner seats might be tricky as more than one person's legs try to occupy the same space.

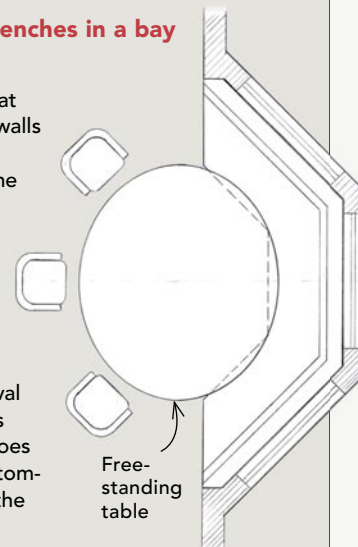
A bench along one wall



If the corner has full-length windows or doors, a built-in bench along one wall can be the answer. In this plan, the bench can be longer than in typical nooks, and the table can be attached to the adjacent wall or left freestanding to allow enough space at both ends for bench access.

Angled benches in a bay

Angled benches that follow the walls all but eliminate the cramped-corner effect. In this setting, a free-standing round or oval table works nicely, as does a table custom-built to fit the angles.



BONUS: BUILD A BREAKFAST-BOOTH BENCH

by John White

This bench is patterned after a Craftsman-inspired breakfast booth (photo p. 91) designed by architects Elliott Elliott Norelius of Blue Hill, Maine. Its comfortable proportions, straightforward lines, and readily available materials make it a great home-improvement project for beginners who want to learn about basic cabinetry, or for builders who want to expand their roster of built-ins.

The bench is composed of three boxes made of $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. cabinet-grade plywood: the seat, the back, and the drawer. Once they are fitted together, the boxes can be trimmed with clear poplar or pine to create the legs, the drawer front, and the smaller details. The wainscoting on the seat back is formed MDF, but solid-wood wainscot can also be used. I gave all the edges of the trim a small bevel with a block plane, both to soften them and to provide for better paint adhesion.

The boxes are constructed with simple butt joints held together by 2-in. drywall screws. The boxes are plenty strong without the time and mess of gluing. For tight joints,

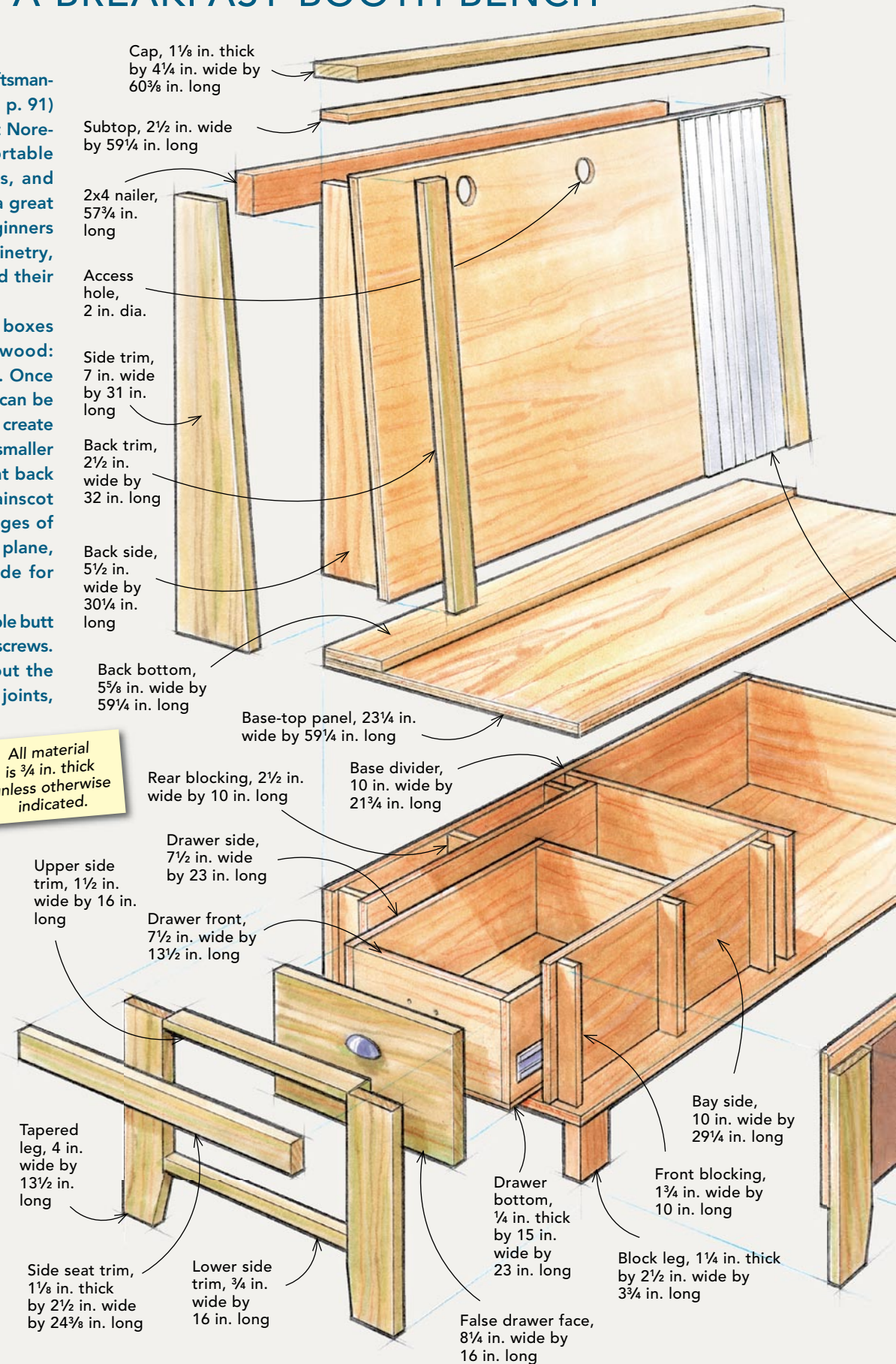


Cutting plywood can be unwieldy. Sometimes the best solution is to cut it with a circular saw guided by a fence.



Install full-extension drawer slides. Place the slides atop a spacer block during installation to ensure correct alignment.

All material is $\frac{3}{4}$ in. thick unless otherwise indicated.





Trim the top first. The 1½-in.-thick rim pieces at the top of the base box rise ¾ in. above the plywood to retain the cushion.



Cutting tapers. A pair of stop blocks screwed to a wooden sled position the tapered leg as it passes over a tablesaw blade.



Attach the backrest. Screw the tapered box to the base box. Avoid screw points extending into the drawer section.



Clamps help. Test-fit the top and side trim pieces, and clamp them together to ensure a tight fit as the nails are driven home.

drill countersunk clearance holes in the faces of the sheets and pilot holes in the edges. Having each bit in a separate drill can save a lot of time. To avoid trouble when applying the trim, make sure the plywood rectangles that make up the boxes are square so that the surfaces are flush where the pieces come together. As you cut the plywood into pieces, check them with a reliable carpenter's square, and also check that the opposite sides of each rectangle are identical in length.

Before placing the top panel on the base box, install the drawer-track hardware and

test-fit the drawer. Next, attach the backrest, and set the assembly on sawhorses or on a worktable to do the trimwork. The bench is heavy enough now to require two people to move it.

There is a logical order to installing the molding. Almost everything is butted against the two pieces of 1½-in.-thick stock (commonly called 5/4) that form the raised rim around the top of the base, so the rim pieces go on first. Like all the trim, they are nailed in place with finish nails.

Next, install the three visible legs with their tapered edges, along with the simple block leg in the back corner of the base. The three tapered legs all have blocks screwed to their back surfaces that serve to bear the weight of the bench. The blocks should be about ½ in. longer than the tapered legs so that all the weight rests on the blocks.

Once the legs are finished, install the smaller pieces of trim around the drawer

opening and the front face of the base. The solid-wood false drawer face is cut to leave a bit of clearance on all four sides.

I use double-sided tape to temporarily attach the face to the drawer in the closed position. Once the face is positioned properly, I attach it permanently with screws driven from inside the drawer. A

½-in.-thick MDF panel completes the front of the base.

With the bottom half trimmed, the tapered trim on the end of the backrest can be cut and nailed on, followed by the top rail. Now you can attach the backrest to the wall with screws driven through a 2x4 nailer into the wall framing by way of the screw-access holes. Install the wainscot, and paint according to your taste.

—Former Fine Woodworking shop manager John White is now shop foreman at Yestermorrow Design/Build School in Warren, Vt. Photos by Krysta S. Doerfler.

FineHomebuilding.com
For an in-depth video on building this bench, visit our Web site.

