

A small kitchen that's fine-tuned for comfort and efficiency

A Surprisingly Roomy Little Kitchen

BY PATRICK SUTTON



Margaret Lewis raised her family in a stone farmhouse on a bluff overlooking the Potomac River in Washington, D.C. After 30 years and approximately 30,000 meals, Margaret's kitchen was simply worn out and sorely in need of an upgrade.

Margaret grew up in England, and she envisioned a classic English-farmhouse kitchen with freestanding furniture for storage, a forgiving wood countertop, and a central work-

table like the one she grew up with. All well and good, but there were obstacles to Margaret's plan.

Hard realities temper the design

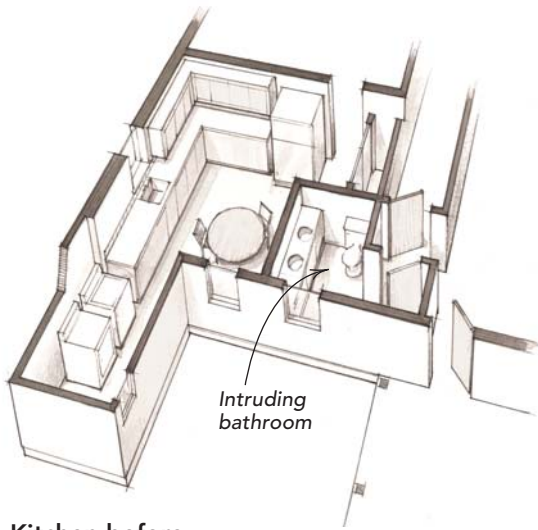
The only downstairs bathroom in the house encroached on the kitchen. Margaret's budget couldn't accommodate the bath's removal, so we had to work around it. Unfortunately, a big, blank bathroom wall was the first thing one saw when entering the kitchen. The wall

needed something but couldn't accommodate anything with much depth, such as a cabinet (floor plan, facing page). Because the bathroom substantially constrained the kitchen's width, the design challenge was to give the L-shaped back corner of the house new life and to let the entire space breathe a bit easier.

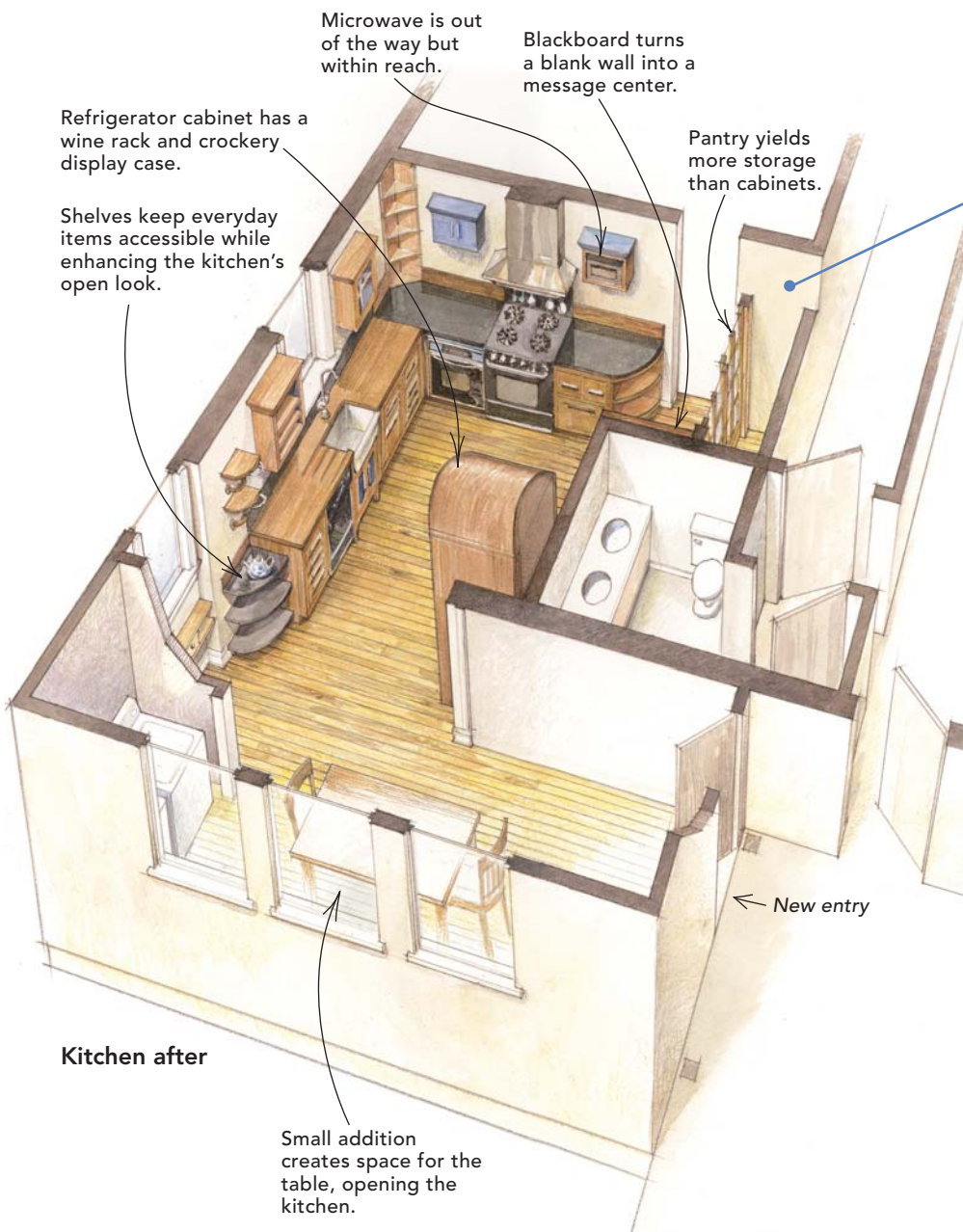
Both the cramped, rather dark nature of the space and the farmhouse-kitchen theme suggested the need for a looser, less built-in look. But the "unfitted" approach also had a

When an intruding room has to stay, how do you capture more space?

By working around it, of course. A small addition allowed the table to be moved out of the kitchen, freeing some space. And by interviewing the homeowner, the author learned how she lived and worked in the kitchen. Then, by emptying her cabinets and separating the chaff from the essential items, he could determine how much space she needed for storage and appliances; the rest stayed open.



Kitchen before



Kitchen after



Enlivening a dark and cramped entry. The old out-swinging pantry doors were replaced with custom cherry and reeded-glass sliding doors for \$2,500. The reeded glass obscures pantry clutter without visually closing off the space. A recessed halogen light brightens the entry, and a cherry-framed chalkboard that cost \$750 invigorates a previously unusable blank wall.



“Margaret didn’t need a lot of kitchen storage; what she really wanted was space.”



downside: It meant not filling the kitchen with wall and base cabinets and giving up some storage. In discussing the problem, Margaret said she didn’t need a lot of storage locations in the kitchen; what she really wanted was space.

The storage that Margaret chose holds her cutlery, crockery, utensils, and food stores, but no more than that. The result is a kitchen that blends fixed cabinets and freestanding furniture with as much room as we could grab. However, no amount of creativity could overcome the intrusive bathroom that narrowed the kitchen, so Margaret’s original idea of having a large central worktable shrank to a freestanding butcher block that is located next to the refrigerator (photo below right).



One challenge was to keep the refrigerator’s proportions in perspective. A butcher block for prep work and the teak spice shelf are positioned next to the refrigerator to reduce its drastic proportions and to connect this space to the rest of the kitchen.

This kitchen was designed for a real “tea-totaler.” Shelves especially planned as a tea center are lower for easier access to the items used every day. The lower shelves are granite with a teak backsplash. The maple shelves above were stained with boiled-down black tea.

Making flaws into features

We fixed the kitchen's unfriendly entrance by turning the blank wall at the entry into something that positively demands attention. The blank wall is now a floor-to-ceiling chalkboard that Margaret manages to fill easily, thanks to her busy real-estate practice (inset photo, p. 93). The cherry frame is rabbeted to hold a chalkboard and is lighted with a recessed halogen down light. To the left of the chalkboard is a pantry with attractive cherry sliding doors that have transparent reeded-glass panels (photo p. 93).

I played a shell game trying to make space for the large side-by-side refrigerator. It is housed in a cabinet with a rounded top. A wine rack crowns the refrigerator, and above it is a neat little cubby where Margaret can display her collected crockery (photo right, facing page).

In front of a deep-set window was the natural place for the apron-front fireclay sink and its flanking wall cabinets. The cabinet to the right is for drinking glasses, which are hidden behind the reeded glass in the door. The wall cabinet to the left holds the everyday earthenware, and the inside of that cabinet is painted blue just for fun.

The sink counter in the kitchen is 2-in.-thick veneer-grade teak, and the sink is on the shallow side so that Margaret doesn't have to bend into it (photos right). Every project has a "gotcha" or two, and in Margaret's kitchen, the slope of the draining area in the teak worktop is a bit too severe: When a cup starts hydroplaning, it catches its wind and then crashes into the sink. The toll so far is one teacup.

Would you care for a spot of tea?

Margaret demanded a dedicated place to make tea. English to the core, she keeps a tea kettle going all day long in her kitchen. So we built her a tea station at the end of the teak counter, still within reach of the sink. The black granite counter, cut in a teacup profile, is all but stainproof.

This teacup theme continues with the 1½-in. maple teacup shelving on the wall above. The deep, even amber tone comes from ½ lb. of black tea boiled down to a few ounces of liquid and applied like regular stain; we combated the potentially finish-ruining acidity of the tea stain by using a rubbed tung-oil finish rather than lacquer. Custom aluminum "handles" serve as tea-towel bars (photo left, facing page).

LIVING WITH A WOOD COUNTER



Historically used as ship's decking, teak is a great wood for countertops. Mine was custom-built and installed for \$2,000. Although it's ideal for wet areas, hot pans and sharp knives will damage the surface. To ensure the counter's long life, I rub it down with mineral oil once a month or so.

I love my teak countertop and drain board. Softer than granite or concrete, it doesn't chip my crystal or china. And it is aging beautifully. —Margaret Lewis is a real-estate agent in Alexandria, Va.



The finished kitchen is just the beginning

The final result is gratifying. When I think of the classic farmhouse kitchen, I think of a place that is free of any prefab, ready-to-install cabinetry. Maybe I unduly romanticize these things, but I think a kitchen design should be personalized to the homeowner and executed skillfully with close attention paid to every detail. It doesn't happen overnight, but neither does putting down roots in a home. It's my cherished hope that with Margaret's project, the end result is a useful kitchen with a lot of good years and memories ahead of it. □

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