



Photo: Jackson Building & Remodeling, San Diego, CA

Reveling in Retro

Retro design in kitchens is enjoying a comeback. Here, in the third article in *KBDN's* new style series, designers discuss the ins and outs of this happy 'blast from the past.'

BY LIS KING

When HGTV, the premier on-air authority on everything design, shells out \$2 million to buy the iconic Brady Bunch ranch in the Hollywood Hills and vows to restore it to its 1970s glory, you know that a trend is underfoot. As the show unveils celebrity designers' takes on the Brady family's rooms, the retro look will surely get a giant boost.

As if it needs it. Designers report that retro – or vintage, as it's sometimes called – is already making a strong comeback. In fact, Orion Creamer, whose Big Chill company produces vintage-styled appliances, says that retro is proving one of the most iconic periods for design in American history. "We've seen major growth in the retro market for 15 straight years," he states. "And there are no signs of things slowing down."

This look is more apt to show up in a kitchen than any other room in the house, and Margie Grace of Grace Design Associates, in Montecito, CA, feels that's only natural. "A retro kitchen is such a happy place," she explains. "It's fun, unpretentious and not afraid to be a bit funky. You can't help smiling when you enter such a kitchen."

A FLEXIBLE STYLE

But there is a lot more to retro than the Brady Bunch look. "Retro" is actually short for "retrospective," which means "looking back." Today's retro style can be inspired by anything from the 1920s up to the psychedelic patterns of the 1960s and bold color uses of the 1970s. Sometimes even the 1980s and 1990s are referenced. For, as designers remind us: Nostalgia has a lot to do with retro's appeal, and the end of the 20th century was when the millennials were kids.

This is not to say that an era's particular look has to be copied slavishly. On the contrary; mixing styles from different eras is perfectly acceptable, and select vintage elements can even add welcome interest to a kitchen designed in 2018.

New York City designer Terry Stewart applauds what he calls "the broadening eclecticism," and he adds, "Mixing styles, from retro to modern, has never been more widespread. I see it all over, and I love that my clients often share unique combinations and varied resources and inspirations with me."

Rosella Gonzalez, senior interior designer at Jackson Building & Remodeling, in San Diego, CA, agrees. "There's

Photos: Mark Ehlen



➤ Designer Christine Nelson adds a lot of up-to-date function and bursts of retro color in this food writer's kitchen.

➤ A remodeled kitchen designed by Rosella Gonzales is unabashedly retro, but provides all the function of 2018.



an overall trend toward personal expression in design," she explains, "and vintage is right in step with that trend. Today's clients are definitely curious about using vintage elements or accessories in their homes, even if the general look isn't necessarily retro.

"A kitchen we remodeled recently illustrates how well you can marry retro and up-to-date functionality," she continues. "Our client, a single homeowner, loved retro design, but she also wanted the conveniences of a contemporary kitchen. We borrowed some extra space from an adjoining office and chose bright, optimistic yellow as the dominant color. Even the retro-inspired appliances are buttery yellow. Simple maple cabinetry was painted white, and playful positioning of contrasting floor tiles, again using yellow and white, is a quirky interpretation of the traditional checkerboard pattern. Radius corners, rounded edges and black trim of the expansive ceramic countertop recall art deco. It all works, and the client is ecstatic."

Meredith Ericksen of Tuscan Blue Design, in Frederick, MD believes that a true retro-styled space feels quite specific, but agrees that the overall style and its details blend beautifully with other styles.

"It's easy to add a bit of retro style, say, to a craftsman or farmhouse-styled home," she notes. "The clean lines and fun shapes of retro design add a bit of vintage charm to spaces."

Those clean lines came to the aid of Bart Lidsky of The Hammer & Nail, in Ridgewood, NJ when he was asked to design a kitchen for a fan of modern art. He explains that the space feels colorfully mid-century modern and yet totally up to date.

QUALITY FACTOR

Often, a retro kitchen is an updated version of what was already there, according to designers. "People who are attracted to older homes usually fall in love when they see a retro kitchen," says Grace. "Then it becomes a matter of updating it to make it work and look its best. In our area, there are a lot of craftsman bungalows, and retro kitchens suit them. Plus,



Photo: Amy Baur

➤ Minneapolis designer Christine Nelson uses handcrafted ceramic tile in retro colors to add personality to a kitchen.

these older homes are built really well. There's a lot of quality there. They're worth keeping. For example, the cabinets are usually very solid and it makes sense to keep them and just paint or refinish them."

Grace Design Associates is actually an award-winning landscape design firm, but Margie Grace admits that kitchen remodeling has become her passion. She is currently working on her 27th project and, like all the rest of her designs, it's retro-inspired.

Older homes are also well-loved in the Minneapolis area, notes Christine Nelson, an award-winning kitchen and bath designer. In fact, her own house was built in 1927 and, naturally, she remodeled the kitchen. Featuring striking cobalt tile work as well as warm orange and red accents, this kitchen shows influences of mid-century modern, a perfect match, it turns out, with a contemporary vibe, winning it honors in the National Kitchen & Bath Association's design competition.

A fan of Susan Susanka's *Not So Big House* books and philosophy, Nelson has become known for designing smaller,



Art deco influences, including lacquered curved cabinetry and metal backsplashes, mix well with other retro elements in this kitchen designed by Terry Stewart.



Photos: Wifio Fort

vintage-styled kitchens brimming with color, and when one of them is featured on Houzz, the popular design web site, she hears from lots of people. “People in our area understand and appreciate older homes,” she says. “And they aren’t interested in anything crazy, like two oversized islands. They just want a warm, functional, charming kitchen.”

A kitchen designed for retired food writer Lynda Kochevar is typical of the Nelson approach. Kochevar wanted more counter space, better functionality and a fresher look in the kitchen of her home, which was built in 1951. So Nelson created a space that she describes as “mid century modern meets modern Sweden,” with white-painted maple cabinets, white subway tile backsplash and warm wood counters, plus orange

walls and avocado green cabinets on the range wall. This is a retro color scheme worthy of the *Mad Men* era.

As part of the remodeling, Nelson replaced a small corner table and chairs with a built-in banquette with storage inside. A 36"-wide stainless steel farmhouse sink replaced an old cast iron sink, a dishwasher was added and cabinetry was re-configured to provide lots of organized storage, including a shelf for the microwave that previously sat atop a roll-about cart, and a two-tier Lazy Susan for a previously blind corner.

Two aluminum-framed frosted glass upper cabinets flank the sink window. “I love putting glass doors on either side of a window because it makes it feel like we’re bringing in the outdoors,” comments Nelson.

The mint-colored stove, a favorite of the homeowner, became the focal point of a kitchen designed by Meredith Ericksen of Tuscan Blue Design.



Photos: Mary Kate McKenna



Photos Courtesy of Big Chill

EAST COAST RETRO

Retro isn't just a West Coast and Midwest passion. It's making serious inroads on the East Coast as well. In New York City's Chelsea neighborhood, for example, Terry Stewart convinced a client to go retro with art deco when she asked him to help make over her kitchen,

"After all, her apartment was in an art deco building with genre-specific trim, fixtures and hardware," he explains. "And I love working with this style. It's glamorous and mixes well with other looks. In this kitchen, art deco elements include lacquered, curved cabinets, a gleaming metal backsplash and a black-and-green-patterned linoleum floor. But the appliances are decidedly up-to-the-minute, while the walls are mid century pistachio green, and the table and chairs are 1960s-inspired diner style. This kitchen has become the client's favorite room in the apartment."

In Frederick, MD, the owner of an old townhouse knew she wanted the look of the 1940s-1950s when she remodeled her kitchen, but she realized she needed professional design help. Enter Meredith Ericksen, who came up with a new layout and all the details of the design.

"The client had her heart set on a turquoise retro range from Big Chill," tells Ericksen, "so that became the focal point of the space. I repeated the turquoise in wide bands of tile on the wall. Then the rest of the kitchen became the backdrop.

"We added orange, a favorite color in retro-style places, such as pendant lighting, and in the kitchen accessories that the client had collected for years. And I was happy that we were able to tuck a little breakfast nook by the window," adds Ericksen.

VINTAGE APPLIANCES

Often a retro fan is born when he or she comes across a vintage refrigerator or range, explains John Jowers, head of Antique Appliances in Clayton, GA.

"But that appliance will almost certainly need restoration," he admits. "That's where we come in. But a word of caution," he continues. "Every component, inside and out, is restored, and deteriorating wiring replaced. This can be a time-consuming process, and we're usually booked out for 18 to 24 months for gas stoves, 30 to 36 months for refrigerators and 12 months for electric stoves."



■ White appliances were au courant in the mid 1900s. Here, green tile and yellow walls continue the retro vibe.

■ Big Chill's vintage-inspired appliance line includes dishwashers and microwaves, conveniences even retro lovers don't want to be without.

And what does a restoration cost? At the low end, it can be \$3,000, but complicated projects, such as ranges with many burners and four ovens, can cost as much as \$30,000, he notes.

"If a designer or homeowner can't wait to have an appliance restored, we may have a few items that have already been restored and are available for immediate shipment," he adds.

Antique Appliances also has an inventory of items not yet restored. Those, as well as examples of restored appliances ranging from the Victorian era to the 1950s, can be viewed on the firm's website, www.antiqueappliances.com.

Big Chill has seen success with its ever-expanding line of vintage-inspired appliances that look the part, while boasting

☑ Lively floor patterns are a favorite design tool for Margie Grace's colorful updates of vintage kitchens.



Photo: Holly Lapeere

up-to-date convenience, such as temperature management, automatic moisture control, ice maker and Energy Star performance for refrigerators and electronic ignition systems, convection fans and 18K BTU burners in ranges.

The company also features dishwashers and microwaves to match their refrigerators and ranges in the delicious colors that bring the retro vibe home.

But manufacturers of conventional appliances have also been listening, offering small appliances in colors that any retro kitchen fan would swoon over. Think mixers, toasters, coffee makers, kettles and more in colors like aqua, cobalt, tomato red and pistachio green. Designers recommend checking out the wares of such companies as KitchenAid, Keurig, Cuisinart and DeLonghi for those retro colors.

RETRO COMPONENTS

The floor is an important part of the retro kitchen, and as far as Margie Grace is concerned, it offers a great opportunity to create scrumptious patterns. She confesses to scouring sales bins in flooring stores for vinyl tiles in interesting colors; she then maneuvers them into an intricate pattern that will pave the way for high style in the retro kitchen she's remodeling.

She also likes old-fashioned linoleum. Vinyl tiles and linoleum are kinder to the feet than tile, she notes.

For countertops, she likes laminate. "It's true to the retro look," she maintains, "and it comes in myriad patterns and colors. So you can't put a hot pot on it or chop on it. So what? Use a cutting board. I had a bit of trouble finding authentic metal edging for the countertop in the last kitchen I remodeled, but Rejuvenation came through for me. It's a terrific resource for anything retro."

Marmoleum, a vintage flooring product that's enjoying an impressive revival, is a favorite for retro kitchens. Meredith Ericksen, for one, swears by it. "It's so natural, it's claimed you could eat it," she says, laughing. "I suppose you could if you like linseed oil and pine rosin. But it's extremely eco-friendly. It also lasts forever because the color goes all the way through, and it comes in both solid sheets and tile format, so the design possibilities are endless."

Lighting is another chance to add pops of color, and Nelson, Grace and Erickson all chose orange, a true retro color, for pendants in recent projects. Again, Rejuvenation is the name that crops up as an excellent source for vintage products.

Accessories for a retro kitchen couldn't be easier, designers say. If it's a pretty shape and a fun color, it'll work. Think orange, red, yellow, green – could be a red tea kettle, a stack of decorative cake tins or Fiesta ware. Think of a couple of open shelves for all that color. "It'll make you smile even when chopping onions," says Grace.

Art belongs in the retro kitchen as well, designers agree. Abstracts in vivid colors work well. But so will framed vintage movie posters...still more proof that retro is best when it doesn't take itself too seriously. ■



Photo: Peter Rymond

☑ Abstract art and vivid accessories add retro flair to a kitchen designed by Bart Lidsky, The Hammer & Nail, Ridgewood, NJ.