The Sociable Kitchen

A PLACE TO FEEL COMFORTABLE:



Between living and dining. *Strategically placed in the center of the house, the kitchen largely is composed of two freestanding islands. Shelves at the back of each island act as screens to conceal kitchen clutter from the rest of the house. Photo taken at A on floor plan.*

As the old saying goes, "No matter where I serve my guests, they like the kitchen best"

BY CHRISTOPHER LARSON

When I was 19, my father designed and built a unique house for my family. The house included an octagonal spa, a spectacular sunken living room with lofty ceilings, and an open dining room with a heavy wooden table and chairs from Mexico. Our kitchen also had a style of its own. It had a table for informal dining that wasn't quite inside the kitchen but not entirely outside it either. Adjacent to this table were a cozy love seat and an overstuffed chair. Despite how nice the rest of the house was, 90% of the activity took place in our kitchen and the comfy hang-out zone next to it.

People are attracted to the kitchen like no other room. Given the opportunity, they will leave the cushy living-room sofa behind and stand and talk in a kitchen of almost any description for long periods of time. So if folks are that determined to hang out in the kitchen, why not give them a place to do it?

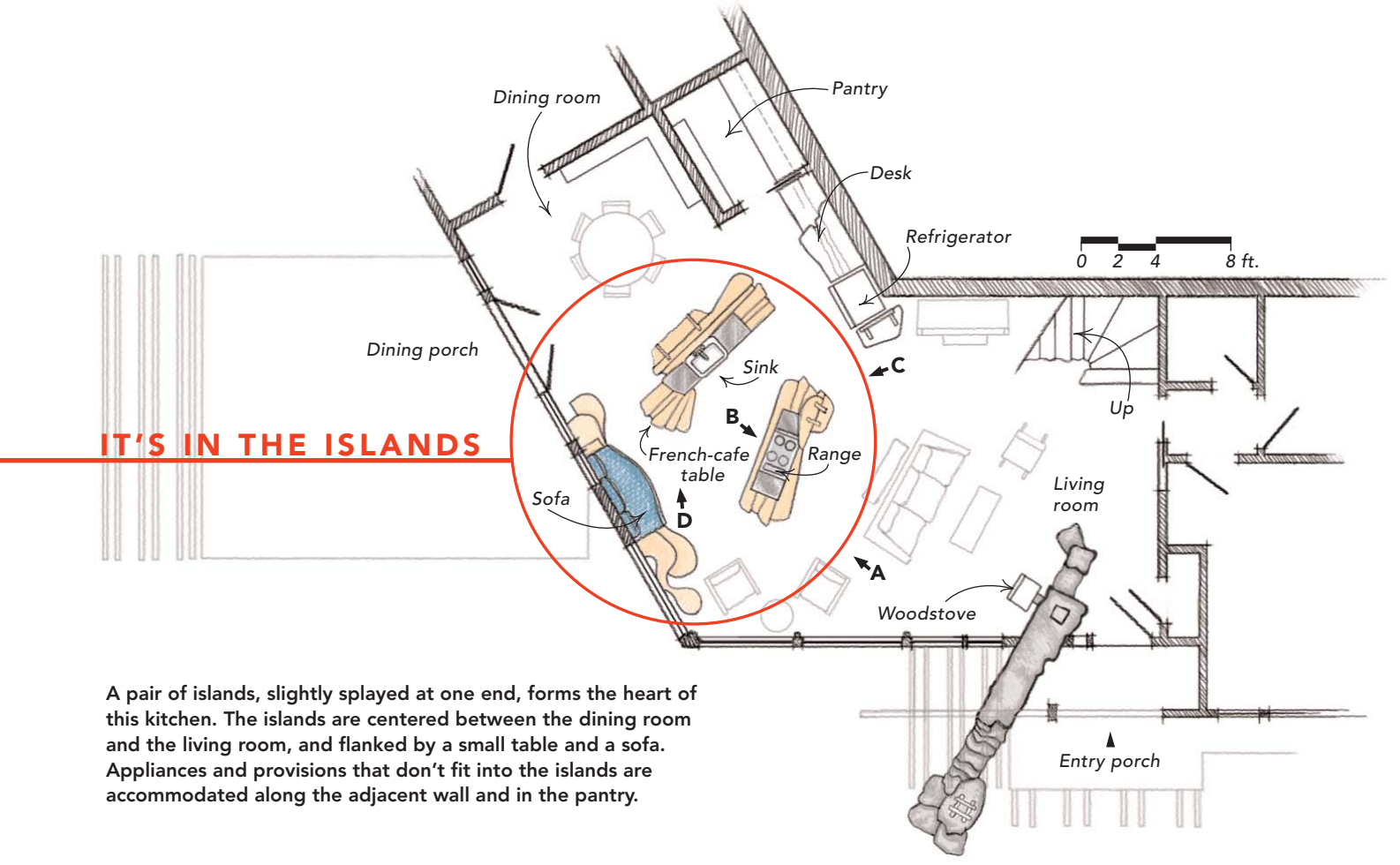
Over the years as an inhabitant, observer and architect of houses, I have tried to expand the notion of the sociable kitchen as the hearth and heart of the home. Call it an evolving effort to identify why kitchens already are sociable places and how they can be made more so for the enjoyment and benefit of those who inhabit them. Recently, I put some of these notions to work in a house for my own family.

Space, views and light

A recent trend in kitchen design has been to reduce or eliminate the number of upper cabinets, allowing for more natural light, better views and a greater connection to adjacent interior space. Using this design trend as a starting point, the sociable kitchen no longer has any walls but is part of an interconnected interior landscape. In the sociable kitchen, you look across open space to windows and views beyond. Space, perspective and light are allowed to flow freely through the kitchen.

In our house, two islands—one for the range and one for the sink—define the kitchen work areas (floor plan below). Storage shelves attached to the back sides of the islands act as screens. On the nonkitchen side, the shelves block some of the clutter and present a more formal face to the adjoining rooms (photo facing page). On the kitchen

IT'S IN THE ISLANDS



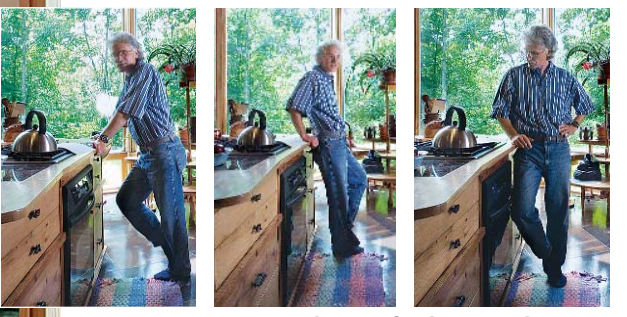
A pair of islands, slightly splayed at one end, forms the heart of this kitchen. The islands are centered between the dining room and the living room, and flanked by a small table and a sofa. Appliances and provisions that don't fit into the islands are accommodated along the adjacent wall and in the pantry.

Drawing: Paul Perreault

"A countertop conversation requires no commitment—all options are open for staying or moving on ... "



Cooktop with a view. *Overlooking the woodstove, the food-prep island is just a few feet from the living room. A granite sink cutout next to the cooktop makes a good place to put hot pots. Photo taken at B on floor plan.*



Some counters are better for leaning than others. *For a person of average height, a countertop between 36 in. and 40 in. is just right. The counter should be a little bit below your center of gravity.*

side, the shelves help to define the kitchen, and they make convenient places to keep the everyday stuff handy. The woodstove in the next room adds to the warmth of the kitchen (photo above).

The countertop principle

This much is certain: People love to lean on countertops. They are powerful social catalysts. The number of conversations that take place near countertops is astounding. A countertop conversation requires no commitment—all options are open for staying or moving on—and sociable distances and eye contact are easy to maintain.

A sofa conversation is another animal altogether. It's more of a commitment, and sociable distances and eye contact are not as easily maintained. At the office, the most sociable area is where the coffee maker and water cooler are located, usually another countertop meeting place. Columns in open space are similar to countertops as social catalysts: They exude an attraction to people who love to linger and lean.

For an average-height guy like me, a countertop between 36 in. and 40 in. is ideal. This height is just below my standing center of gravity. A 30-in. counter seems a bit too low, and 44 in. a bit too high. But with 38 in. of counter height, I can do some serious leaning. There are several variations of leaning, the most popular being one hip leaning into the countertop, one hand on the countertop with the other on the waist, and one foot carrying most of the weight with the other resting on it (photos above). People love to linger and chat in this position (arms folded is another popular version). Try it and see if it doesn't seem familiar.

The French-cafe principle

People are drawn to hanging out where the action is. Unlike our four-legged housemates who have perfected the art of being exactly

underfoot at inopportune times, however, people want to be just close enough to sense the energy of what's going on, but still be situated off to one side with a good view. This is the French-cafe principle. Small tables next to busy places are quite popular (bottom photo).

In our sociable kitchen, the range and sink islands are splayed slightly, opening the space at one end for the placement of a small table (an extension of the countertop). This spot is where most quick meals take place. The convenience is terrific, which is a major factor in sociability. This small table is a great place for a child to sit and do homework, easily assisted by the cook between strokes of culinary genius. Or it's a good spot for chopping when the cook just won't let you rest. The height of this table is the height of a dining table (about 30 in.), so comfortable feet-on-the-floor chairs can be used here to encourage lingering.



A soft place close by. *A love seat a few feet from the "French cafe" makes yet another sociable spot for family and guests to gather near the kitchen. Photo taken at C on floor plan.*

The sociable kitchen is completed with the addition of a window seat or sofa (photo left). This soft place to sit adjacent to the sociable table caps the open end of the splayed counters and is mostly open to the kitchen work areas. There is now a small dining area and living area as part of the kitchen. People can relate to the energy of the kitchen and to each other in many different ways without being in the way. And intimate but comfortable social distances are encouraged between involved. When mixed all together—the countertops for leaning, the comfy places to sit, the comfortable social distances, and the attraction and convenience of being in the kitchen—things happen. And the best part is that no one has to do anything to make it work. It all happens on its own. Conversations are spontaneous: Kids talk to parents, parents talk to kids, husbands and wives let each other know what's going on, and guests and hosts trade tall tales.

The sociable-distance principle

If you observe yourself and others throughout the course of a day, it's easy to discover that conversations tend to take place when people are at the same eye level and an arm's length from each other. If they're not, people often will move closer together until these conditions are met and the conversation can begin. This proximity and height equality seem to guarantee undivided attention. Tables help to foster this connection and conversation because they maintain that optimal arm's-length distance.

Living rooms do not do as well in maintaining these intimate social distances. The distance between people sitting on sofas and chairs is greater than around a kitchen table, so it's easier for your attention to wander and for people not to connect. I am never fond of the time when dinner guests are shooed from sitting around the dining-room table and on into the living room; I know things won't be the same.



The cafe is open. *A tiny table, placed at the correct height for dining chairs, abuts the sink island. The comfortable chairs welcome lingerers. Photo taken at D on floor plan.*

Work and storage areas have to be functional and convenient

All the above would be meaningless if the kitchen didn't work well for meal preparation and cleanup. One edge of the room serves as a storage wall and includes the refrigerator, the kitchen desk and cabinets with doors. A nearby walk-in pantry houses a countertop for small appliances, a nook for brooms and shelves for everything else. Everyday items are still within easy reach. Plates are stored vertically in the drying rack over the sink, allowing handy access to any of them without the need to sort through a heavy stack. □

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