

Suburban Cooks: Changing tastes challenge kitchen remodeling expert set to appear at Naperville home show in April



Jenny Rice gets ready to mix up a batch of Kugel, a traditional noodle dish served for Jewish holidays. (Judy Buchenot/Naperville Sun)

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People who love to cook do not always love their kitchens. When Jenny Rice, who is in charge of sales and design for Icon Building Group, sits down with a client seeking a kitchen change, her first question is, “What do you dislike about your kitchen?” The most common response is “everything.” Rice then begins to sort out the needed changes to create a dream kitchen.

“Aesthetics is a big part of a kitchen remodel, but so is functionality,” Rice said. “Layout and traffic are the number one concerns.” Decades ago, the cook would often be alone in the kitchen, but things have changed. “When you have people over, everyone is in the kitchen. It’s where everyone gathers, so there has to be space.” Kitchen construction codes require a 30-inch space between countertops, but “I see that as too tight. I always go with at least 36.”

When possible, Rice tries to create the perfect work triangle where the refrigerator, sink and stove are no farther apart than five to eight feet or two to three steps from each other. This allows the person cooking to have all the necessary food prep tools easily within reach. The pot of boiling water can be quickly drained in the sink and refrigerated ingredients can be easily reached in the refrigerator.

“The challenge is older homes where the kitchen is small and has no island,” Rice said. “Everyone wants an island and most want an island with seating.” In homes where the dining room is next to the kitchen, Rice is often able to reconfigure the two spaces and gain needed kitchen space from the dining room.

A common dilemma for homeowners is deciding whether to keep current cabinets.

“People will tell me that there is nothing wrong with their cabinets. They still hold all the dishes. And I do support their concern about sending things to landfills, but I can’t reconfigure a kitchen using only the existing cabinets,” she said. “There have been a lot of changes to cabinets. New cabinets have drawers that fully extend so you don’t have that hidden area in the back. The doors and drawers are soft close. Roll-out trays in cabinets make finding things much easier. There are also specialized cabinets, like a garbage drawer that holds two cans — one for trash and one for recycling”

Deciding whether to get new appliances is another hurdle.

“The big decision is whether to go with a standard range or a cook top and a double oven. If you don’t like leaning over to get things in and out of the oven, a double oven is a good choice if you have space in the kitchen.” A space-saving option is a combination microwave and convection oven, which is like having two appliances in one space.

Placement of the kitchen sink is also changing.

“For many years, the kitchen was in the rear of the house and the sink was in front of a window that looked into the back yard. Kitchens are now being placed in other locations and the sink can go in the island or other space,” Rice said. Many homeowners are switching to large single-bowl sinks instead of double-bowl sinks since most dishes are placed in a dishwasher. Rice recently found for a client a four-foot wide sink with a lip where sliding cutting boards and strainers can be inserted.

One item that most homeowners are willing to part with is a trash compactor. “No one seems to use them anymore,” Rice said.

Some homeowners are interested in WiFi-compatible appliances they can control from remote locations.

“My concerns with all the high-tech items is whether they can be updated easily. Technology changes so quickly, so it is important to see if upgrades are possible,” she said.

Rice has found that many of her clients watch television remodeling shows.

“Those shows are great for inspiring people to love their home, but not so great about giving realistic budgets or time lines.” A kitchen face-lift without major structural changes can take a month while a remodel that reconfigures space can take around six weeks.

Icon Building Group and other builders will be participating in the Fox Valley/Naperville Home and Garden Show on April 6 and 7.

Rice has worked with many Naperville homeowners and her husband, Charlie Murphy, grew up in Naperville and graduated from Naperville North High School. They currently live in Crystal Lake. Rice enjoys cooking simple dishes and is looking forward to celebrating Passover by making the traditional noodle kugel.

“It is very common part of Jewish meals, a common as potato salad at picnics. It is firm when it is cooked and you cut it into squares like lasagna,” she said. She shares both a kugel recipe and her favorite breakfast strata recipe for others to try.

Jenny's Culinary Cue

When you decide to remodel your kitchen, choose a contractor with care. You will have to work closely with this person and need to be able to communicate changes and concerns. It is important to have a good working relationship.

Noodle Kugel

½ pound wide egg noodles, kosher for Passover

¼ cup butter, melted

16 ounces cottage cheese

2 cups sour cream

½ cup sugar

6 eggs

1 teaspoon cinnamon

½ cup golden raisins

Boil noodles in salted water until tender, about four minutes. They do not need to be completely cooked because they will be baked. Strain the noodles and pour into a large mixing bowl. Add remaining ingredients and combine well. Grease a 9-inch by 13-inch pan and pour in mixture. Bake at 375 degrees for 30 to 45 minutes or until mixture is set and the top is golden brown. Cut into squares to serve. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Bacon, egg and cheese strata

12 thick slices of white bread

¼ cup crumbled cooked bacon

2 cups shredded cheddar cheese

1 ½ cups fresh mushrooms, sliced

12 eggs

2 ½ cups half and half

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

Cut bread into one-inch cubes. Toss together with bacon, cheese and mushrooms. Place in a greased 9-inch by 13-inch pan. In a separate bowl, whisk together eggs, cream and mustard. Pour evenly over cubed bread. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight. To bake, remove plastic wrap and place in a preheated 350-degree oven. Bake about one hour or until top is golden brown and mixture is set. Let stand 10 minutes before serving. Spinach or other vegetables can be substituted for mushrooms. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

If you go

What: Fox Valley/Naperville Home and Garden Show

When: 10 a.m. until 5 p.m., Saturday and Sunday, April 6 and 7

Where: Players Sports and Event Center, 1740 Quincy Ave., Naperville

Cost: Admission and parking are free

More information: www.foxvalleyhomeshow.com

Judy Buchenot is a freelance reporter for the Naperville Sun.