

Published June 23rd, 2010

Outdoor Kitchens for Outdoor Living

By Susie Iventosch



The Kronenbergs' outdoor kitchen in Moraga, designed by Garden Lights of Orinda Photo Doug Kohen

You might not find gold in "them there Lamorinda hills," but you will find some amazing outdoor kitchens! These days outdoor kitchens are equipped with a variety of fascinating appliances and toys, such as plasma T.V.s , inflatable movie screens, Wii, under-counter refrigerators, BTU burners, meat smokers and two kinds of barbecues-gas and charcoal, not to mention icemakers, pizza ovens, fireplaces, and fire pits.

Lafayette-based home designer Victoria Singh says that most outdoor kitchens also include some sort of water feature, whether it's a hot tub, waterfall, bubbling pot fountain or a fountain built into a retaining wall. Hilly terrain can necessitate the use of a massive wall structure and incorporating the water feature into it softens that look and is a good use of space as well. The sound of water is soothing and gives the sensation of being in a park or at a resort. In fact, many outdoor kitchens are built as part of a larger landscaping project.

"The outdoor kitchen has come a long way since it was just a barbecue and an old-fashioned picnic table," Singh remarked.

"Today's outdoor kitchens have stainless steel appliances and cabinet doors, and granite or stained concrete countertops, which are great for hiding the dirt."

There are specialty bar sinks with racks for glasses and usually a very large main sink- sometimes with a garbage disposal. And, often the kitchen is part of a larger outdoor living room complete with upholstered furniture.

No need to move the party inside with all of this outdoor luxury. According to Singh, one of the things that has changed over the years is the availability of real outdoor furniture including wrap-around sectionals, coffee tables, dining room sets and even chandeliers. Covers such as a canopies, gazebos, arbors or trellises, and ever-bigger umbrellas protect the outdoor furniture from the elements. Still, most cushions are brought inside to be stored in the wet, cold winter months.

Steve Gardelle of Gardelle Construction & Landscape, which specializes in outdoor construction from pool remodels to kitchens and landscaping, has built low-voltage lighting and space heaters into arbors in many of his projects. This stretches the use of outdoor space to nearly three seasons.

"Some of the outdoor kitchens we install are so elaborate, they're actually nicer than the indoor kitchen," he noted. "People are going crazy with them ... we're seeing more and more of them. People live in California for the outdoor living, so the outdoor kitchen is a natural."

The Food Network and similar shows have made cooking so popular that kitchens and cooking are now the big trend, whether inside or out.

"I think people naturally entertain more in the summer, but they don't want to be stuck cooking inside when the guests are all outside," Gardelle said. "By moving the kitchen outdoors, the hosts can be a part of all the outdoor fun."

For the Huff family of Lafayette, the outdoor kitchen they are currently installing will allow them to turn dead space (that has been primarily dominated by pool equipment and garbage cans) into a fully functional extension of the home.

"It is a perfect complement to the existing veranda," said Desta Huff. "The design that Victoria created will give us everything that was important to our family in an outdoor kitchen, including an entertainment aspect with enough seating and a fire pit to keep both kids and adults comfortably engaged. My husband wanted a charcoal grill/smoker in addition to the gas grill and I wanted the large 15-gauge steel sink and burners with enough BTU to accommodate my Ethiopian cooking. Our son can't wait to make s'mores with his friends in the outdoor fire pit without our help!"

"Victoria was in tune with our lifestyle and she made the whole process 'user-friendly' with a careful eye towards our budget," she added. "Steve Gardelle was very flexible and recommended some enhancements that further complemented the design and functionality."

Singh says the Internet has been revolutionary in providing an almost unlimited selection of products for outdoor kitchens and living space. Homeowners can select natural stone for retaining wall surfaces, appliances, furniture, barbecues, pizza ovens and all the toys

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on the "outdoor wish list" with the click of a mouse. Design and implementation are quite another matter!

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Many of today's outdoor kitchens have stainless steel appliances and granite counter tops Photo Doug Kohen



The Huffs' outdoor kitchen is still in the construction phase Photo Doug Kohen



A finished kitchen Photo provided by Garden Lights, www.gardenlightslandscape.com



Victoria Singh Photo Doug Kohen

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