

The history of the kitchen

These days, the minimum we expect of our kitchens is hot and cold running water, electric refrigeration and lighting, cooktop and oven with accurate temperature control and hygienic surfaces for food preparation. If desired, we can also add a self-cleaning oven, microwave, dishwasher – the list goes on.

It's easy to forget that all these conveniences we now take for granted are very recent innovations indeed. Prior to the 20th century, cooking and food preparation and storage were arduous, demanding and time-consuming tasks on a scale unthinkable today.

The taming of fire and the creation of cooking utensils such as clay pots saw the birth of cooking as a human art.

The first "kitchens" were open fires and the first cooking pot was a large stone with a hollow in the middle which was placed in the centre of the fire and the hollow filled with water. Food was then boiled by adding hot stones.

The cultivation of grain and the domestication of animals marked the next turning point as early civilisations changed from a nomadic existence to a more settled state. For these early grain producers, unleavened bread was a staple food, first baked on a flat stone beside the hearth then in the first primitive ovens. The rise of the great ancient civilisations saw an increase in the variety of foodstuffs consumed and the development of more sophisticated cuisine. The ancient Roman kitchen was well equipped with utensils and ingredients and the true forerunner of the kitchen as we know it today. Patrician Romans enjoyed their food and dined on exotic delicacies such dormice steeped in honey.

Early Roman kitchens were located in the atrium, where smoke from the fire could escape without risk. When the atrium later became used as a living space, the kitchen was relegated to a separate room at the rear of the house. Poorer Romans lived in crowded tenements where fire was a great risk, so communal cooking areas developed for the safe preparation of food.

Common cooking methods were grilling and spit roasting over charcoal fires, using a tripod to support cooking pots over the fire. Other implements found in Roman kitchens were the pestle and mortar, a type of double boiler, and an open vessel in which separate jars of different foods could simmer away – rather like a modern bain-marie.

While the concept of the kitchen remained non-existent or at best rudimentary for the poorer populace through the ensuing centuries, for the wealthy, the kitchen remained the preserve of servants. Cooking in the huge kitchens of medieval castles and fortresses was a communal affair. Men lifted heavy cauldrons and stoked the fires as well as doing the cooking and serving. Foodstuffs hung from the massive rafters, out of the reach of rodents. Surrounding the main kitchen would be special chambers for baking, brewing and storage of spices, wine and grain.

Changes in kitchen technology between the 12th and 17th centuries concentrated largely on the problem of how to regulate the heat of an open fire, and various devices were developed to adjust the distance of the pot from the flames to regulate the heat they were exposed to.





With timber stocks in Europe seriously depleted by the early 18th century, coal began to appear as an alternative cooking fuel. But the new fuel required a new type of hearth as coal needed a draught coming from beneath to burn freely.

In the country houses of the wealthy, entertaining became more important and frequent. Some kitchens in these houses of the gentry featured long stone sinks with a piped cold water supply and some even had their own ice houses for cold storage – brick-lined cellars cut into a hillside and filled with ice. Cooking became a way of expressing refinement and cultivation, not just a matter of domestic management and basic sustenance.

Then came the Industrial Revolution and rapid developments in the kitchen. The biggest innovation was the development of the enclosed iron stove, with an oven for baking or roasting and top plates for boiling and simmering. These ranges warmed the kitchen and supplied hot water as well. "Slaving over a hot stove" was literally that – summer and winter regardless – as the Victorian cook spent hours each day attending to the family's meals in over-heated and poorly ventilated conditions. Pity also the lot of the poor kitchenmaid, who got up at dawn each day to rake out, sweep, black lead and polish the range before a fire could be lit and a kettle boiled!



Birth of the modern kitchen

Many of the advantages we take for granted in today's kitchens were first developed in the late 19th century. The principle of artificial refrigeration was discovered in the 1870s and the gas stove first appeared in the 1850s. There is even a design for a dishwasher dating back to the 1850s. With refinements to these original ideas and the introduction of domestic electricity in the 1920s, the modern kitchen was born.

Hygienic surfaces such as laminate became popular, appliances borrowed their streamlined appearance from aeronautical developments and brought the machine age into the average home.

With the rise of the middle class and demise of the servant except in the households of the extremely rich, housewives had to manage their households single-handedly and the fitted kitchen – the product of the latest research in ergonomics – became all the rage after the Second World War.

Today we have ovens that clean themselves, fridges that automatically defrost and have icemakers and internet access and appliances for every conceivable cooking method. We dine on cuisines from around the globe, no longer in a separate formal dining room but in open plan spaces where the kitchen is very much the heart of the home. Exposure to the kitchens of professional chefs has added new functional ideas to the domestic kitchen and led to the popularity of materials such as stainless steel.

Today's kitchen has also been strongly influenced by café and restaurant design trends and the streamlined stainless steel espresso machine has replaced the old kettle on the hob.





The kitchen of the future

And what of the future. Could we possibly fit any more gadgets into our groaning kitchen cabinetry? Kitchens have now become logistical centres. And that means that they no longer consist of the traditional fitted elements but can be integrated into any living space. The kitchen's function must encompass environmental friendliness, convenience, ergonomics and versatile use of living space.

Developed by Hettich for the Interzum trade fair held bi-annually in Germany, the Concept 2010 kitchen was designed to showcase the kitchen of the future. In the Concept 2010 kitchen residual warmth from ovens and extraction systems is harnessed to provide a supplementary source of energy, household waste is sorted automatically by intelligent systems and central technical modules regulate the heating and control the heat storage units and hot water supply.

Ergonomically designed drawer systems and storage systems maximise storage capacity, are engineered to hold heavy loads and glide open and shut smoothly and silently.

In response to demand for more convenience and time-saving elements, the kitchen incorporates stable oven trays that can slide out individually at worktop level, sliding racks to facilitate loading and unloading the dishwasher and rotating sections in the refrigerator to ensure that, at a voice command, the desired foodstuff is made available through a small aperture.

A bar-code reader allows automatic ordering of replacements, recommends recipes and checks expiry dates. An interface to the internet automatically permits a dialogue with the local supermarket, which takes orders and delivers the goods required.

Other innovations include mobile hot plates which can be transported to the serving area, air extractors controlled by sensor technology to continuously check the air quality and size adjustable sink basins.

When all this is generally available, all we'll need next is an automated chef.