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Not Just for Cooking Anymore: Exploring the Twenty-First-Century Trophy Kitchen

abstract | *The ideal American kitchen of the twenty-first century, often referred to as a trophy kitchen, in many ways breaks the mold that defines the kitchen itself. In opposition to how the kitchen has been historically understood as a room for cooking and despite predictions that technological innovations would render the space obsolete, today's ideal kitchen is now considered the central hub of the home, hosting a variety of functions other than food preparation. Drawing from design history, popular culture, home improvement trends, and kitchen consumption research, this paper discusses the multiple meanings of the trophy kitchen in the United States. Using the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this paper demonstrates the trophy kitchen's role as a potent status symbol, as well as its additional roles, including a social space for entertaining that merges the public and private spheres, a theatrical site for future hopes and dreams, and a space where gender roles are negotiated. This analysis elucidates the evolution, role, and meaning of the trophy kitchen, especially in scenarios where it is not used for cooking.*

More than ever before, the American kitchen is center stage. With a deluge of television networks, TV shows, magazines, and websites, images of the dream kitchens used by famous chefs, owned by celebrities, and purchased by aspiring homebuyers bombard American viewers. The near constant barrage of ideal kitchen images has contributed to the redefinition of the kitchen, explaining in part its ascent within the home and the American consciousness. This paper draws from kitchen design history, American popular culture, current U.S. home improvement trends, and kitchen consumption research from the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, demonstrating that today's ideal kitchen breaks the mold that defines the kitchen itself. Once a space for cooking alone, the trophy kitchen now takes on a new meaning that is often disassociated from cooking and food preparation. As function has become secondary, status has become primary and the kitchen has emerged as a potent status symbol among both middle and upper class demographics. The trophy kitchen also exists as a social space that combines the public and private spheres, a site for future hopes, dreams, and fantasy, a performance theater for entertainment and leisure, and a space where

domestic gender roles are negotiated. This analysis elucidates the evolution, role, and meaning of the twenty-first-century trophy kitchen, especially in scenarios where it is not used as a space for cooking.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TROPHY KITCHEN

The kitchen has been defined as, "The domestic space where food is prepared... primarily an indoor space, the place where people go to chop, mix, roast, boil, and bake" (Carlisle and Nasardinov 8). For hundreds of years, the American kitchen has served these purposes. Although early colonial kitchens hosted a range of domestic duties, the kitchen eventually became a space for cooking alone. Starting with running water and electricity, technological innovations greatly revolutionized the kitchen space and filled it with an ever-growing array of appliances, gadgets, equipment, and specialized décor. Kitchen design and architecture have also evolved, particularly in affluent homes. At one time detached from the house and run by domestic servants, the kitchen was reintegrated into the home in the mid-twentieth century, featuring the more open floor plan common in contemporary kitchen design.

In opposition to how the kitchen has been historically positioned and understood within the home, the twenty-first-century trophy kitchen is now considered the central hub of all domestic activities, serving the combined purpose of multiple rooms—the dining room, living room, study, and kitchen—in one open and coordinated space (Carlisle and Nasardinov; Hand and Shove; Plante). One can observe this evolving role by analyzing three kitchen design books published in successive decades from the 1980s to the 2000s.

Published in 1986, Robin Murell's planning resource, *Small Kitchens: Making Every Inch Count*, presents kitchen designs for small spaces with a primary focus on kitchen function and a secondary focus on design and style. Emphasizing functionality, nearly all photographs in the book include depictions of food being prepared in the kitchen, including a scene where a cake is being prepared with bags of flour, sugar, and other ingredients opened near a mixing bowl. Published in 1993, *Terence Conran's Kitchen Book* reveals a shift in the balance between kitchen function and style, as well as the new influence of the public world of professional food preparation on the domestic kitchen. This public energy is clearly apparent as the first chapter addresses not floor plans, layouts, or styles, but an overview of the high-end restaurant kitchen, crediting it for shaping the home kitchens of not only the elite, but also an increasing portion of the population (Wilhide et al. 16). This guide also contends that the kitchen is the "hub of the home" (Wilhide et al. 30). As such, function is emphasized less than style and displaying one's personal taste becomes increasingly important. Compared to Murell's guide, Conran's book features far fewer photographs of food being prepared. More often, ornamental foods—such as, a fruit bowl, a formulaic display of fresh vegetables, or plated meals—are perfectly displayed on a countertop or table. These images present an aesthetic kitchen space rather than a functional one. The role of the kitchen evolves further in Joanne Kellar Bouknight's *New Kitchen Idea Book*, published in 2004. She claims, "The kitchen isn't just for cooking anymore," arguing that it is instead "the true heart of [the] home...

less utilitarian and more creative" (book jacket). This kitchen design book also reframes and elevates the home cook as a "home chef," an informed consumer who goes "beyond the basics to build a kitchen that's worthy of an upscale restaurant" (book jacket).

This small sampling from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s suggests that the role and significance of the kitchen has changed within the home, evolving beyond its traditional definition as a space where the primary function is food preparation. Instead, the kitchen takes on a variety of other meanings, which *Terence Conran's Kitchen Book* contends have taken hold of the desires of more than just the elite. The trophy kitchen reveals itself as not only a room for cooking, but also as a site for homeowners to express style and demonstrate taste. As they acquire and display expensive and rare materials, appliances, and décor, affluent trophy kitchen owners exemplify Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption. Their lavish spending habits perform and confirm their social position, as well as fuel the aspirational desires of the middle class for a trophy kitchen that symbolizes a homeowner's status and identity.

THE TROPHY KITCHEN: STATUS AND DISTINCTION Pierre Bourdieu's theories of status, distinction, and consumption are in conversation with Veblen's theories of conspicuous consumption (Trigg 100) and can be used as a lens for discussing the trophy kitchen as a status symbol and site of personal expression. According to Bourdieu, consumption is the principal means through which class-based social distinctions are reproduced. In *New Kitchen Idea Book*, Bouknight demonstrates the current trend of kitchen consumption as a method of expressing distinction when she urges readers to consider crafting a kitchen "worthy" of not only the domestic space but of a restaurant. Bourdieu's work also contends that members of the higher social classes desire products that are original, authentic, and personalized, which Dale Southerton argues makes the kitchen a space for self-expression (Southerton 189).

In his study of kitchen consumption, Southerton conducted interviews with thirty-five English households of varying socioeconomic status. His findings revealed that while working-class homeowners judged the quality of their kitchens by their durability and function, wealthier owners judged quality by the exclusivity, rarity, and price of kitchen objects (Southerton 192). Importantly, Southerton concluded that kitchen consumption and identity formation not only depended upon the symbolic capacities of the objects themselves, but also how they were used (201). For example, the symbolic power of the kitchen changes when it is used primarily as a domestic space for food preparation, compared to when it is used for socializing and entertaining. When dining and cooking are viewed as leisure activities of the more affluent, the kitchen becomes an increasingly conspicuous site of consumption.

Bourdieu's work also argues that members of the *petite bourgeoisie* are marked by the desire to follow the taste of the bourgeoisie. The cycle of kitchen remodeling demonstrates this trend, as kitchen renewal is popular among the middle class as well as the more privileged. Notably, however, participation in trophy kitchen consumption and access to the status it provides are largely limited to those with the capital to purchase their own home as opposed to those who rent.

According to those in the kitchen design and appliance industry, many homeowners do consider the trophy kitchen as a status symbol, emphasizing the kitchen's meaning beyond the function of cooking. In an article published in *Gourmet Retailer*, Simone Mayer, owner of a kitchen and bath store in Miami Beach, suggests, "The idea of having a 'trophy kitchen' is very much the new status symbol. To some consumers, having a certain brand of cookware is just like having a Mercedes in the driveway" (Brookins). Leslie Clark-Van Impelen, director of bridal services for Macy's West in Northern California, goes further, revealing that brides desire high-end cookware that can be put on display in their homes, even if they do not cook (Brookins). In this way, the kitchen demonstrates a combination of fantasy and status. As brides and

grooms plan their "dream weddings," they plan for their future life together. In the current ideal home, the focal point of this life is the kitchen, thus making it and the equipment within it among the first status symbols that an aspirational couple own.

Some kitchen design experts credit the television show *MTV Cribs* with elevating public perception of the kitchen to a status symbol and enhancing desire for the kitchen appliances owned by the rich and famous. Jill Notini, spokesperson for the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers, claims *MTV Cribs* contributed to increasing sales of high-end refrigerators: "When they showed the kitchens, it was all about the fridge" (Konicus). A special edition episode of the show featured rapper 50 Cent's home and his gleaming kitchen ("50 Cent Special"). As he begins the tour, he opens his Sub-Zero refrigerator revealing nothing but rows of beverages. He then opens the double wall oven showing that it is full of cardboard boxes and laughs, saying, "No one's touched it." 50 Cent explains this by boasting that his home has six kitchens. The one being shown has never been used. As he moves from room to room, it becomes clear that the kitchen with its granite countertops, custom cabinetry, and large, shiny appliances is on display in an unused state just like the literal trophies, rare works of art, and expensive furniture throughout the home. Showing the kitchen and its state of near complete disuse is an ultimate display of status.

An ornamental trophy kitchen—an expensive, luxurious, state-of-the-art kitchen that is rarely used for cooking—is not unique to this episode of *MTV Cribs*, but a common cliché that appears in each episode. Nearly all stars profiled admit that they rarely use their kitchens ("MTV Cribs' Gives Peek..."). Notably, *MTV Cribs* only features celebrities, individuals who fulfill the role of the trend-setting bourgeoisie and *nouveau riche*, to which Bourdieu refers. They possess the economic and cultural capital to create the kitchen consumer culture that the *petite bourgeoisie* will desire. The ornamental trophy kitchen of the celebrity set may be setting a precedent for larger domestic cooking trends. Some sources indicate that cooking at home is declining, revealing that less than 50 percent of at-home

dinners were cooked on a stove in 2004, down from 67 percent in 1985 (“Cooking Up a Status Symbol”). Ovens were used 28 percent of the time, down from 31 percent over the same period.

These paltry statistics are reflected in kitchen designs that are largely disassociated from cooking. For example, a Darren Morgan kitchen design features both an “in use” mode when it is being used for cooking and a “stand-by” mode for when used exclusively for entertaining (Morgan). When in stand-by mode, the kitchen appliances are completely hidden from view and the opal glass kitchen island, backlit by color-changing LED lights, immediately conjures the look and feel of a nightclub rather than a kitchen. In an article from Florida’s *Sun Sentinel*, the authors discuss the similar trend of “the disappearing kitchen,” an ultra-sophisticated kitchen “that reads more like a bar than a place to roast a chicken, designed for those who regard the telephone as the only piece of kitchen equipment of practical use” (Green and Baldwin). Calvin Tsao, an architect of luxury condos in Manhattan, confirms this view of the kitchen, saying, “The kitchen has morphed into a place to arrange the food, not actually make it... Is it a kitchen, or is it a credenza?” (Green and Baldwin). These luxury spaces provide examples of Bourdieu’s trend-setting bourgeoisie who possess the financial resources to create lavish kitchens, which capture the imagination of the middle class in an aspirational fashion. Although these are not the kitchens of the average American family, they project a spreading ideal of the status symbol kitchen as a space that is not for cooking.

Home and Garden Television provides myriad examples of middle class homebuyers purchasing and recreating the fantastical kitchens that they see on television, in magazines, and on the Internet. Shows such as *House Hunters* contain nearly unending examples of mostly middle class homebuyers who consider a trophy kitchen not only an aspirational item within their dream home, but also a new minimum standard for what a kitchen ought to be. Even among first-time homebuyers, granite countertops and stainless steel appliances are considered “must-haves” rather than “wish list”

items. For example, in one episode of the show, newlyweds Cara and Adam vehemently dislike one house because it does not have a second story, but they change their mind when they see the remodeled kitchen, calling it “a total game changer” (House Hunters – Cara and Adam). They view a second house with a large, light-filled kitchen that has white appliances and non-granite countertops. When Adam asks Cara if she could “live with this kitchen for a year or two,” she responds without hesitation, “No. I would need it updated immediately” (House Hunters – Cara and Adam). While it may seem that Cara is a particularly petulant guest of the show, this sentiment is often repeated. In another episode, a husband and wife expecting their third child are looking for a larger home to suit their growing family. When discussing their wish list, the wife says, “I love my kitchen. To move somewhere with outdated appliances would really hurt” (House Hunters – Madison). She gestures to the side-by-side refrigerator with icemaker on which sonograms of her unborn child are held up with magnets. She hugs the refrigerator, saying, “It’s our pride and joy” (House Hunters – Madison). Viewers cannot be sure if she is referring to her baby or her beloved appliance. These episodes provide evidence of growing expectations among some homebuyers, who consider many elements of the trophy kitchen to be standard requirements rather than aspirational goods.

This television programming shapes the desire for trophy kitchens among viewers as well, making crafting a trophy kitchen one of the most popular home improvement projects (Parrott et al.). As demonstrated on *House Hunters*, homebuyers featured on the show tend to consider anything less than granite and stainless steel a deficit in need of upgrading, no matter the cost. Homeowners undertake considerable financial burdens to create dream kitchens with the average midrange major kitchen remodel costing over \$57,000 (DiClerico and Saltzman). A newly remodeled kitchen is also considered a key feature when selling a home. DiClerico and Saltzman suggest that kitchen remodels yield the highest return on investment of all home renovation projects, making it a venture that

yields both cultural and economic capital. As such, fashion and status are often the leading drivers of renovations. In their survey of 72 individuals who participated in an “Explore Your Dream Kitchen” workshop at Virginia Tech, Parrott et al. found that the majority of respondents considered appearance a top criterion when selecting kitchen products, more so than durability or cost (118). An online *Consumer Reports* poll of 518 voluntary responders also found that updating style was the most popular reason for remodeling a kitchen, trumping functionality, energy efficiency, and return on investment (“Why Are You Remodeling...”). This reinforces the role of the kitchen as far more than a functional space, but rather one that communicates status and style.

THE TROPHY KITCHEN: ADDITIONAL MEANINGS Beyond status, the trophy kitchen also takes on several other meanings, which are also divorced from cooking. Evident in architecture and design, the trophy kitchen is increasingly a social space that reflects the evolving relationship between public and private within the home. In the past, the kitchen was an isolated room. The current ideal kitchen is the focal point, the hub, the command center, and the heart of the home (Carlisle and Nasardinov; Harrison). This central nature of the kitchen means that it is always within view, making it a room for self-expression, status making, and conspicuous consumption. In her ethnographic research of home decoration in London, Alison Clarke concludes, “The house objectifies the vision the occupants have of themselves in the eyes of others and as such it becomes an entity and process to live up to, give time to, show off to” (qtd. in Shove and Hand). In this way, status and sociability are linked. As the kitchen becomes a more public space meant for socializing rather than a private space for cooking, status plays a larger role.

Applying Clarke’s findings, trophy kitchen owners are more likely to invite friends and acquaintances into their kitchens in order to show off their status and taste. In an article that appeared in *The Boston Globe*, new trophy kitchen owner Jay Garner is profiled after having spent \$33,000 to update

his kitchen with high-end appliances and marble countertops. He suggests that the kitchen boosts his and his wife’s social standing, saying, “My wife loves it. She likes it when people come over and say, ‘Wow!’” (“Cooking Up a Status Symbol”). Southerton’s research also confirms the tendency to show off a kitchen in order to gain status. In his study of English homes, working class families did not socialize in the home and viewed their kitchens within a functional frame only. More affluent families, however, considered their kitchens to be social spaces whose use and decoration were linked to identity. Southerton concludes, “Consumption is most readily understood as symbolic when others have the opportunity to read the message; the lack of visitors...reduced [the kitchen’s] symbolic potential” (196).

From these examples, it becomes clear that socializing makes the kitchen a space for status making. This is also evident as Leslie Mann begins her *Chicago Tribune* article, “What’s Your Kitchen Style? Ideas and Tips to Help You Create Your Dream Kitchen,” by warning readers, “Your kitchen style not only says a lot about you, but sets the tone as family and friends gather around the hub of the home.” Mann interviewed several kitchen style experts to identify the latest trends. Among them, she found that, “Islands have replaced peninsulas and are more often at bar height. Their stools welcome visitors as though they are part of the neighborhood pub or martini bar.” As with Darren Morgan’s LED-lit kitchen island, these images of trophy kitchens emphasize the public over the private. Even as a space for family and friends to gather, the trophy kitchen emphasizes status, socializing, and public entertaining, rather than private domesticity and cooking. In this space, the brand of one’s appliances and whether or not one has a kitchen island are reflections of one’s distinction and social worthiness.

Within the trophy kitchen, high-end commercial appliances previously reserved for the professional kitchen, such as stainless steel refrigerators and ranges, outwardly communicate status as they demonstrate the merging of public and private. While popular designs of past decades attempted

to conceal or camouflage appliances, current trends put them proudly on display. Outfitting one's kitchen with high-end appliances is not just a demonstration of status and distinction. It is an act that blurs the line between public and private, as the trophy kitchen becomes a location where dreams and aspirations are played out in a sort of culinary theater.

An idealized space, the trophy kitchen emerges as a site for future hopes, dreams, and fantasies. Shove and Hand's research on kitchen consumption found that people made kitchen design decisions for a desired future state "in order to foster habits to which they aspire" (10), revealing an orientation toward a future self rather than the present. In her analysis of kitchen renewal trends in New Zealand, Christina MacKay makes a similar argument, stating, "The twenty-first-century kitchen appears to have become bound up with the pursuit of happiness. The ideal of a 'dream' kitchen is a common aspiration" (5). The concept of the dream kitchen is a powerful one that resonates deeply with homebuyers and homeowners who seek to purchase a space in which they can imagine a brighter future and better version of themselves.

As a site where future aspirations, dreams, and ideals come to life, the kitchen is also a space for culinary romance and fantasy. For example, Jack Schwefel, the CEO of Sur La Table, attributes part of the company's success in selling high-end kitchen gadgets throughout the most recent economic recession to "the romance" that the gadgets provide (McArdle). Simply by purchasing the object, consumers can imagine themselves using it. Imaginative use of these culinary tools can symbolize a variety of fantasies, representing anything from nostalgia for simpler times to nuclear families eating round the kitchen table to the ideal of the housewife and homemaker. These fantasies reinforce the kitchen as a center for domestic ideals. While achieving these ideals can be challenging or impossible, culinary consumerism fulfills these fantasies at least on a surface level.

A romanticized site for dream making, the kitchen also serves as public theater within the private domain. For example, MacKay argues, "The practice of viewing kitchens as a 'stage-set' is

common in [the] USA" (5). Kitchen design, décor, and use act out a culinary theater. By virtue of its central location, the kitchen's literal positioning within the home casts it in the leading role of the homeowners' domestic and social life. Increasingly, kitchen décor has put kitchen equipment and ingredients on display rather than hiding them away in cupboards. For example, gleaming pots and pans often dangle in trophy kitchens from racks on the wall or from the ceiling like pieces of modern art. Open-air cupboards or translucent cupboard faces put dishes within view and on display. Lighting under or within cabinets creates an effect not unlike a museum exhibit. Considered a key feature in today's ideal kitchen, the kitchen island is also a performative prop that puts cooking front and center and in easy view of all guests. With such props, the kitchen takes on theatrical qualities, especially when men are doing the cooking.

The expanding role and rate of men cooking in the home—referred to as the "dudification of cooking" by Helen Rosner, the online editor for *Saveur*—not only reshapes domestic gender roles, but also changes the role and meaning of the kitchen (McArdle). The kitchen enacts the separate spheres division of labor in which women are primarily responsible for cooking in the home to feed the family, while men more often cook professionally as chefs in restaurants. Trends reveal that more men are taking on the role of home cook, however. A 2007 Los Angeles based study reported that men prepared one of every five meals in the home (Sullivan). A 2006 Pew Research Center study found that 32 percent of men say that they very much enjoy cooking, an increase from 25 percent in 1989 (Jenkins). While these numbers may suggest increasing domestic gender equality, men's and women's home cooking appear to be perceived differently. Even when working outside of the home, a woman who cooks for her family is viewed as unexceptional, while a man who cooks is viewed as a celebrity within his own home (Swenson 20). Some have attributed this to the number of male chefs featured on the Food Network, which has transformed cooking from a feminine duty into a masculine performance. For example, Rebecca

Swenson argues, "Food television adopts a 'masculine domesticity' that helps redefine the private kitchen in ways that give men a place at the stove" (47). Furthermore, she states, "The vocational roots of professional chefs allow male hosts to embrace the private kitchen as an important site of work" (47). Increasing male interest in cooking is exemplified in cooking show viewership. The Food Network estimates that men make up 35 to 40 percent of their viewing audience and characterize the network's prime time programming as "gender neutral" (Levine).

Whether on television or within the home, a man cooking transforms the domestic kitchen space. Hugh J. Rushing, the executive vice president of the Cookware Manufacturers Association, states, "Growing male interest in cooking is one of the bright spots in the kitchen retail market. Men tend to have no problem buying a special pan for paella, if the recipe calls for it, whereas women will make do with a regular skillet or pan" (Guzman). He provides support for this male consumer behavior, stating, "Specialty cookware sales are up 17 percent since 2000." Dr. Ross Koppel, an adjunct professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, traces the rise of male family cooks back to the 1980s and contends, "It's only since men have been cooking that you can justify the \$275 knife" (Guzman). Guzman extrapolates, saying that male interest in cooking is part of what has contributed to the growing trend of trophy kitchens. As evidence, he notes "the replacement of trophy heads on the walls of the den with glistening granite trophy kitchens packed tight with All-Clad pans and stainless-steel professional-style appliances." In this way, gender roles not only influence who performs home cooking and how it is perceived, but also shape the role and meaning of the trophy kitchen.

CONCLUSION The emergence of the trophy kitchen demonstrates that the kitchen has evolved significantly and its intended purpose is now more complex. With the rise of "foodie" culture, the multitude of trophy kitchen images in the media, and the ideal of the kitchen as the focal point of the home, possessing the latest in kitchen technology

and design stands out as potent status symbol. As such, the kitchen is not only a symbol for who one is, but for who one desires to be. The kitchen is no longer simply a room for cooking but a space within the home that symbolizes class status and dreams for the future. The kitchen is an apt nexus for aspiration as the kitchen has been historically viewed as the production site of dutiful housewives, unified families, and daily sustenance. By possessing a trophy kitchen, individuals consume symbols of an ideal life, even they do not cook in it.

The ironic phenomenon of the ornamental trophy kitchen expertly communicates "the restlessness of society" which is "manifested in the details of kitchen design and décor" (Shove and Hand 2). Since the 1950s, the convenience food industry has developed a plethora of products in order to make cooking optional, if not obsolete. In doing so, it would follow that having a kitchen would also become optional. Yet the opposite has occurred.

Those who have imagined the kitchen of the future predicted its gradual disappearance. Turn-of-the-century feminists argued for kitchen-less homes that would free women from the burden of daily cooking (Hayden). Frigidaire's Dream Kitchen of Tomorrow, featured at the 1957 Paris Exhibition of the Future, included "an IBM punch card recipe file, automatic dispensing, and online TV ordering" (Alter). In her history of the kitchen, Molly Harrison predicted that the kitchen of the future would take the form of a cylindrical station, including all appliances and equipment in a compact unit well suited for a spaceship (187). Instead of realizing these visions, the kitchen has become the focal point of the home. Rather than shrinking away, it has become more prominent by assuming the social functions of other rooms. The kitchen emerges victorious as a social space that communicates self-expression, style, taste, status, entertainment, and hopes for a better future. Although this paper reveals a trend in which it is no longer used primarily as a space for cooking, the kitchen is still the heart of the home, as it has been for hundreds of years. ■

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