

A Fitting Challenge

A tiny, outdated kitchen gets fully equipped and fashionably updated in an extensive, inventive remodel.

BY IVY GRACIE

They say good things come in small packages, but sometimes fitting all those goodies into a tiny parcel is easier said than done. Such was the case in a St. Louis Park home, where a spatially challenged kitchen languished in a décor last seen in the early '80s. Tired of its cramped quarters and ancient appliances, the owners turned to Ispiri, a Woodbury-based design-build firm, to bring the kitchen into the 21st century. With inventive ideas and innovative implements, the Ispiri team maximized the kitchen's potential and created a space where modern-day efficiency and timeless design intersect.

"I was intrigued by this project because it's an older home, a very small space, and we were not going to be able to do an addition," recalls Joseph Robbins, senior design consultant with Ispiri. "The longer you do this, the more intrigued you [are] by specific design challenges. Not everything that's fun has to be huge and overly ornate."

And according to Robbins, there was nothing huge or ornate about the job. "It's an older, two-level home that's been cobbled together," he says. "It's had a lot of things done to it along the way." But the kitchen hadn't been touched since the end of the disco era. "It was a poorly functioning layout in a very tight space. They had the most basic of the basic: a range, a sink, a refrigerator and a microwave." Outdated cabinets and laminate countertops completed the dismal look.



Fit For the Task

Ispiri's comprehensive design process helped identify and address the kitchen's challenges. "We wanted [the clients] to start thinking about how they live in their kitchen," says Bjorn Freudenthal, vice president of marketing, design and sales. "What are the shortfalls? What are the frustrations? In a perfect world, what would you like to accomplish? Are you left-handed or right-handed? How many cooks will be sharing the kitchen at the same time?"

After extensive fact-finding, the Ispiri team formulated a plan for the kitchen and presented it in a 3-D format. "A lot of people look at a blueprint or floor plan and can't picture what it's going to look like,"

Freudenthal explains. "So we work with Chief Architect, a 3-D modeling software. We can walk through a space plan in 3-D on the screen. When people see it, they say, 'I didn't know this was possible.'"

Beyond the virtual realm, Ispiri's state-of-the-art show room offered a hands-on preview of what the clients could expect from their kitchen. "We have five kitchens that display all the newest materials and finishes," Freudenthal notes. "Seeing and touching is so critical. The show room gives our clients an idea of what's possible."

Finding the Right Fit

Working within the kitchen's existing footprint, Robbins transformed the suffering space into a high-functioning, high-end chef's delight. The work triangle (refrigerator, sink and stove) remained in place, revamped with a large farmhouse sink and state-of-the-art appliances. An ersatz pantry and cluttered desk area were repurposed as a bake center, complete with designated storage for cookie sheets and pie tins, a drop zone for pulling hot items from the oven, and a mixing center with enough space for rolling pie crusts or working with dough. And the range was converted from electric to gas. "It's a wonderful gourmet move," Robbins states. "You move closer to how a chef would cook."

An avid cook himself, Robbins channeled his love for all things culinary into the design. "I love to cook and am fairly well-versed," he says. "I think it helps serve clients. You can have somebody that cooks primarily in a wok — that's different from someone who's classically trained and needs five burners. Any designer needs to understand his client."

Fitting In

In an effort to blend the up-to-the-minute kitchen into a home that honors its 1940s origins, the design team let the 8-foot island set the tone with semi-custom cabinetry designed to resemble traditional furniture. Semi-custom, enameled white cabinets were chosen to maximize storage and impart a timeless feel, their crispness balanced by creamy-toned, gold-flecked, organic granite countertops and work surfaces. And new 1½-inch-wide classic flooring was matched to the existing red oak hardwood to maintain a consistent flow throughout the home's first floor.

Yellow walls and a coral-hued island were selected to resuscitate the formerly all-white space. "The family had been working with Suzanne Haugland of Decori Designs for years, so we worked with her on some of the details, like palette choices and finishes," Robbins recollects. "The color is her selection. It has intensity."

Now a high-efficiency, high-energy gathering spot for the owners, their family and guests, the kitchen strikes a balance between modern and traditional in both form and function. "It was difficult to get this much out of the space," Robbins admits. "But we went from what was a simple, range-only kitchen to having a bake center, a gorgeous new refrigerator, a farmhouse sink — really fun stuff. I'm not saying it's a vintage kitchen, but it's a classic. It's a timeless design." **AL**



design appeal Ispiri married the home's 1940s charm with modern functionality.