



**FACING PAGE** A commercial grade Thermador cooktop and oven are just what the chef ordered; above, a faucet is handy for adding water to soups and other dishes. Conveniently positioned perpendicular to the stove, the butcher block-topped island is a staging area for food prep and divides the room from the clean-up area on the other side.

# Cooking from Scratch

Feeding frenzy: Chef-designed kitchens are the hottest thing going when it comes to cooking at home.

By Heather Staible  
Photography by Jack Thompson

It isn't unusual to find Houston chefs Robert Del Grande, Scott Tycer, and Jason Gould in the kitchen. The acclaimed chefs routinely wow the taste buds of diners who frequent their respective restaurants, Café Annie and Gravitas, but a new project has them looking beyond their own restaurants and into the kitchens of Houston homeowners—not as chefs but as designers.

When developer John Elford of the Elford Building Corporation was contemplating the ideal kitchen for his Tuscan One townhomes in the Museum District, he knew just whom to call. After all, Elford had built Del Grande's original Café Annie kitchen 25 years ago; wasn't it about time his old friend returned the favor? Del Grande was immediately on board with the idea, dubbed the Chef's Design Collaborative. The fact that the kitchen would be the first chef-designed kitchen in a spec house was, well, icing on the cake.

"My initial reaction was, 'Yeah, that's cool!'" Del Grande said. "I like kitchen design and I like the relationship between the home and the kitchen. Most people spend most of the time in the kitchen anyway."

Del Grande already had experience designing a residential kitchen—he had turned his own walled-in, 50s-style kitchen into a wide-open space that could accommodate a range of options, from a cozy chat with his teenage daughter to a casual dinner party with friends.

In the brand-new Tuscan One kitchen, Del Grande bypassed the predictable restaurant-specific stainless steel, instead choosing color as an element to encourage

an inviting atmosphere in which to cook and socialize. A soft green on the walls envelops the room in unflustered calm, while a large island is perfect for preparing food or lingering over a glass of wine or a cup of coffee. Obviously, cooking is the top priority in the kitchen, but Del Grande's design lends itself to something even more important.

All my fond memories have to do with the kitchen. When I grew up, my parents would have dinner parties. The men would wear jackets and ties and the dinners would be scheduled weeks in advance," Del Grande said. "Now dinners are more impromptu. There is less pressure when cooking at home. You just roast the chicken and eat it—it's about having fun."

There are many design elements in this new kitchen that balance fun and practicality. The sink is deep, and wide enough to accommodate large pots, while the microwave is tucked away under the counter instead of sitting on top of it in plain view. Counter space is plentiful and the light wood butcher block island is just right for plating up the food for a large dinner party or for serving a buffet-style meal. Plus, the cook can easily move between sink and stove with one swift turn.

Since the kitchen opens onto the dining room, Del Grande took the view between the two rooms into consideration. He envisioned that a homeowner would place a large table in the dining room, and that would be where guests would sit. While the expansive island—where the cook is stationed—has a clear view into the dining room, all the inevitable mess that accumulates in the kitchen is less visible from the dining room thanks



to dimmer lights. Away from the bright lights of work, Del Grande confesses he's a traditionalist: "I do lean toward a romantic look in the kitchen as opposed to a more modern one," he admits. "After all, the kitchen is really the heartbeat of the house."

The beat also goes on in a Highland Village home where Scott Tycer and Jason Gould have applied their kitchen intelligence to create a space any cook would love—a space, in fact, that would inspire creativity.

"There are a lot of home chefs out there who are good," says Tycer, "but they could be so much better if the kitchen were laid out better." The two chefs collaborated on a design that gracefully accommodates the various stages of food preparation, including a cleanup space separate from the main cooking area. Gould says they were after the "perfect magic triangle between the refrigerator, sinks, and cooking area," which eliminates the need to do a lot of extra walking around in the kitchen while cooking.

As in Del Grande's kitchen design, the sink is deep and the microwave is hidden low. A high bar area (similar to a chef's table) on the other side of the cooking space lends itself to conversation simply by adding barstools or chairs. A Sub-Zero wine chiller was also slipped in under a counter in the cooking area, and a steamer was installed in the countertop.

"We don't steam a lot of vegetables at the restaurant," Tycer notes, "but I have small children and I steam a lot of vegetables at home. We definitely wanted to include that in the kitchen. We wanted the kitchen to be comfortable and convenient at every turn."

While these three chefs won't leave an instruction manual behind when a kitchen is completed, they will do something even better: prepare a meal for new homeowners and their friends. Del Grande regards that as the real payoff of the project: "I am really looking forward to cooking in this kitchen," he says.

For the chefs involved, the kitchen design project came to represent freedom from the constraints of their real jobs. "This has been a great creative outlet for me," says Jason Gould. "I would like to do a lot more of it the future." That's good news for future homeowners—even those who worry about too many cooks messing around in their kitchen will always know that at least one of those cooks was a real pro. ■

**FACING PAGE** Concrete counters by Del Gunnels and "Stove Pipe" ceramic tiles behind the cooktop make for a durable work surface. Interior designer Ginger Barber made sure the ambience was good for work: Martin Senour's "Linen Weave" paint was cut by fifty percent for a tailored off-white color against which the chef can really show off.

