

Good Read

An Old-Fashioned Kitchen

CONVENTIONAL ADVICE SAYS THE BIGGER THE KITCHEN, THE HAPPIER THE COOK. NOT FOR RUTH REICHL, WHO WILL TAKE HER SMALL, EFFICIENT PREP SPACE, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.



AT THE MOMENT, I'm standing in the gorgeous kitchen of the Airbnb I've rented for a few weeks in Los Angeles. It has every bell and whistle: dark marble counters, computer-equipped stove, European dishwasher, a cool sculptural vent. There's a huge refrigerator that is so tastefully camouflaged by smooth wooden panels you'd never know it was there. Every nook and cranny of this kitchen has been designed so that even the usually inaccessible corner spaces have pivoting shelves to hold the many machines—food processors, spice grinders, mixers—hidden beneath the counter. On top of that, it has a view of an immaculate garden much loved by a neighboring cat who resembles a tiny tiger.

There is not one thing wrong with this kitchen...except for the fact that I hate it.

Despite its glamorous efficiency, this kitchen and I have yet to produce a delicious meal. I'm not surprised: All the money that's been poured into this room has made it cold, clinical, unwelcoming. "Go away!" it seems to shout when I walk in.

It is proof that the Great American Kitchen is utter nonsense. You know, that myth that it's impossible to produce a decent meal unless you have a battery of arcane appliances. New and supposedly necessary gadgets are constantly entering our lives. Last year it was the Instant Pot.

This year it's the air fryer. Next year it might be the Anti-Griddle (such an object really exists; it is to cold what ordinary griddles are to heat). The people who produce these things want you to covet computerized refrigerators that warn you when you're about to run out of milk, intelligent ovens that tell you when the roast is done, and countertop cookers eager to produce an entire meal at the press of a button.

I've been breathlessly introduced to each of these items. But I don't want them. The truth is, given a few excellent ingredients, a reliable source of heat, a sharp knife, and a couple of pots, anyone can produce a great meal. What she (or he) can't do is cook that meal in a kitchen that makes her (or him) miserable.

THE FIRST KITCHEN I COULD truly call my own occupied the corner of a bare-bones loft on New York City's then-ungentrified and fairly scary Lower East Side. We built our counters by scavenging wooden pallets that had been discarded by our industrial neighbors. (Back then, downtown

New York was still filled with factories.) Our stove was a cranky old creature someone had left on the street. There was, of course, no dishwasher, which has given me a lifelong appreciation for washing dishes. (I find creating order out of chaos extremely fulfilling.) We had no money, so when I needed a rolling pin, it made more sense to buy a bottle of cheap wine and use that to roll out my pastry. (The wine was terrible, but it went into a terrific stew.) And I'm convinced I invented the Microplane: When I needed to grate Parmesan, I rifled through my husband's tool box and borrowed his rasp.

That kitchen may have been shabby and small, but it was always filled with music, and I danced joyfully around as I taught myself to make good meals out of cheap cuts, bake bread (in discarded ceramic flower pots), and feed the hungry friends who showed up whenever mealtime rolled around. The kitchen made me very happy, and I ended up writing a cookbook. (If you can find a copy of *Mmmmm: A Feast-iary*, you will discover that it contains not a single recipe requiring a food processor or stand mixer.)



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I moved on to a communal house in Berkeley, California, where we rarely sat down to dinner with fewer than a dozen people. We still had no dishwasher or fancy food machine, but people stood around that kitchen talking, chopping, drinking wine, rolling out pasta on an old-fashioned chitarra, and stretching one chicken to feed a crowd. I don't think I've ever served better meals than during the 10 years I lived in that house.

My next kitchen was in Los Angeles, in an old house with a scarred linoleum floor and a single electrical outlet. Once again, no dishwasher. But it was an airy space with a view of distant snowcapped hills, and bougainvillea came in through the window. Despite the antique stove and scarce electricity, I cooked Thanksgiving dinner for 30 people every year, and no one ever complained about the food.

FOR MOST OF HUMAN HISTORY, feeding your family was backbreaking work. You had to raise the animals, tend the garden, butcher the meat. You had to fetch the water and light the fire. You had to preserve summer's bounty to see your family through the winter.

Modern life has changed all that. Indoor plumbing, refrigeration, and supermarkets (not to mention online shopping) have turned cooking into something that is no longer a chore. Today cooking can be—should be—pure pleasure. So here's my advice: Forget about all the appliances you think you need. Just turn your kitchen into a space you love; everything else will follow.

Get the most from a compact cook space with the storage tips and tricks at realsimple.com/smallkitchen.

I can't tell you what your dream kitchen should be. We all cook so differently that one kitchen couldn't possibly please everyone. But I can tell you what makes me happy.

I prefer small kitchens. Standing in the middle of mine, near Hudson, New York, I can stretch out my arms and touch the sink on one side and the stove on the other. About that stove: I invested in a very fancy one, and I'm sorry I did. My previous stove was the cheapest six-burner model on the market, and I loved it. It shot up to temperature in minutes, while the behemoth I now possess takes almost half an hour to reach 450 degrees.

I like to bake pies (yes, I now own a rolling pin), so I covered my counters with a green stone called serpentine, which allows me to roll out dough anywhere I want. This material is not only beautiful but extremely sturdy, and I can plop the hottest pots on top without giving it a thought.

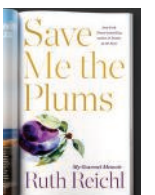
I do have a dishwasher, but the truth is I wish I didn't. It takes up too much room, and if I could do it over I'd put the garbage can where the dishwasher lives. It would be a major improvement; you're always tossing things while you cook, and the dishes can wait until later.

I'm lucky: At five feet six inches, I'm average height for an American woman, and most standard kitchens are designed for me. But if you're not, fix it. Chopping at the wrong height is exhausting. If you're short, put in layers of rubber mats; if you're tall, add chopping blocks so you don't have to bend over each time you pick up a knife. This is a small thing. It is also everything.

Some people like their kitchens spare. I don't. I prefer color and chaos, my counters covered with bowls of fruit and jars of spices. I have a few antique appliances too. My favorite is an old juicer that reminds me of a friendly elephant. It cost \$2 in a junk shop, but it makes me laugh every time I walk into the room.

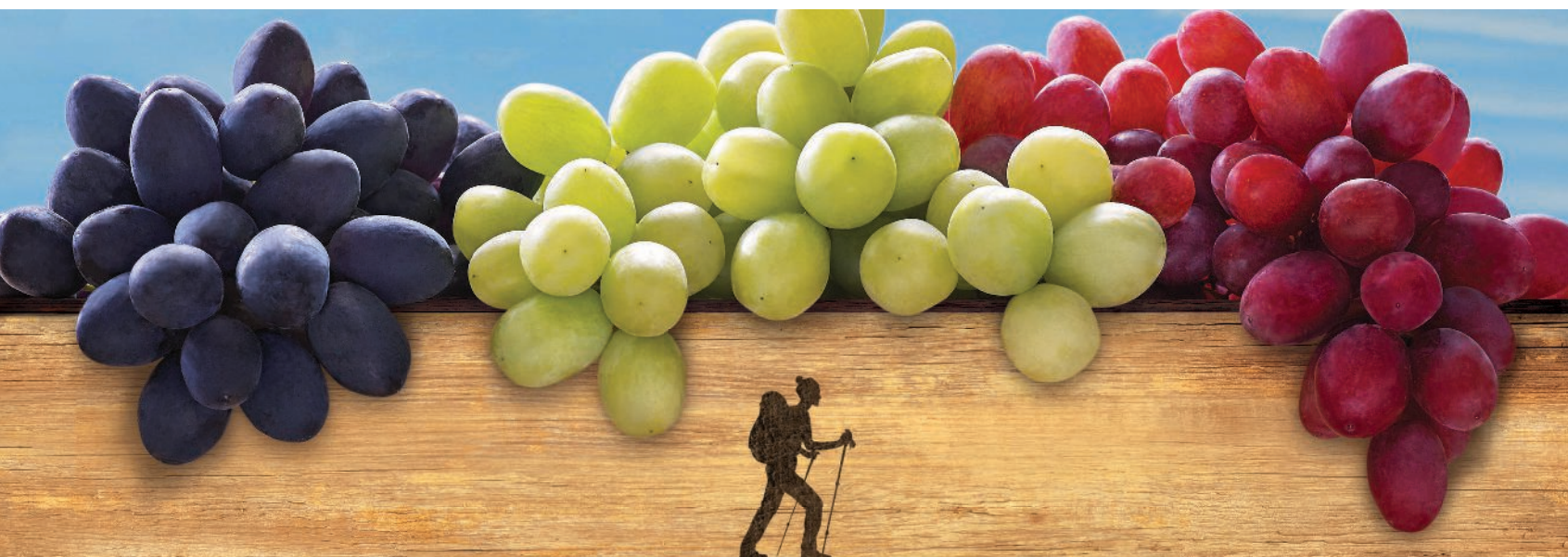
There is no place I would rather be. My kitchen has light and air and music. Though it's small, there's plenty of room for any friend who wants to lend a hand. That happens fairly often, because this room is an invitation to cook. The cats like it too. They come in purring loudly and twine around our ankles. But even when the room is empty, I am never lonely. When I stand at the stove, the ghosts of all the women who taught me to cook are there, cheering me on.

Most of all, each time I caramelize an onion in butter or fill the kitchen with the fine yeasty scent of bread rising in the oven, I'm reminded of all the little things that make life worth living. Because that's the real secret of a great kitchen: One you love is genuinely life-changing. It not only makes you a better cook; it makes you a happier person.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruth Reichl was the food editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, restaurant critic of the *New York Times*, and editor in chief of *Gourmet*. Her recent memoir is *Save Me the Plums*. She lives in upstate New York with her husband.



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