

epicurious

The Ultimate Baker's Kitchen

Love to bake? Design your kitchen to suit your passion with tips, equipment, and layout advice from designers and industry experts

BY JULIE SCELFO



Anyone who's ever baked five dozen cupcakes for their child's school, Christmas cookies for a crowd, or (heaven help us) a wedding cake knows that in many ways, the average home kitchen isn't designed for a big-batch, nearly professional baker. We turned to experts for their suggestions about the ultimate kitchen layout, tools, and equipment for committed bakers.

When Alex Hitz, baking enthusiast and founder of the Beverly Hills Kitchen, a line of frozen Southern meals sold on HSN, opted to step back from the restaurant business

and reinvent his career some years ago, the change also inspired a vision of another sort of makeover: the ideal baker's kitchen. Over time, Hitz developed a template that other avid bakers can follow to create their own.

"Having had a restaurant kitchen, I knew what a dream home kitchen would be," says Hitz, whose favorite things to bake include biscuits, yeast rolls, and "a lot of Southern desserts, like caramel cakes and coconut cake and hummingbird cake, which I love."

Today Hitz, whose first cookbook, *My Beverly Hills Kitchen: Classic Southern Cooking with a French Twist*, is scheduled to be published by Knopf this fall, has realized his dream and enjoys a space that functions pretty much like a commercial kitchen—but is too attractive to be mistaken for one.

Equipment

Baker's Doubles

Hitz has a set of double ovens, a commercial-grade Viking stovetop, and two dishwashers. Plus, his dream baker's kitchen boasts a Sub-Zero side-by-side refrigerator/freezer, as well as a second bottom-freezer Sub-Zero in the pantry—a model he prefers: "A side-by-side is not wide enough to store half-sheet pans," he explains.

Essentials

Double Ovens

These marvels allow the baker to cook two dishes at different temperatures at the same time.

Commercial-Grade Stove Top

Warhorses designed for line cooks, with five to six burners to handle candy-making and the like.

Dishwasher

A baker's best friend.

Bottom-Freezer Refrigerator

Many recipes require refrigeration prior to baking. You'll need a wide fridge with a bottom freezer to fit the quarter- and half-sheet pans in the refrigerator.

Food Processor

This tool can cut fat into pastry dough in no time.

Stand Mixer

Serious bakers have more than one, and double or triple up on the bowl attachments so they don't have to stop to wash them before moving on to the next phase of a baking project.

Quarter- and Half-Sheet Pans

Get commercial-grade sheet pans. At \$16 to \$22, they cost twice as much as their grocery-store siblings, but they don't warp while baking.

Pan Rack

A wise indulgence for a busy baker, the pan rack (used to cool cookies and cakes) frees up your counter space.

Cookie Cutters

Not just for sweets! Use them to beautify quiches, tarts, and other savory concoctions.

Stone Countertops

They stay cool, making pastry dough easy to roll. But watch out! Some stones, such as marble, stain easily.

Recently Hitz, who routinely hosts and entertains large numbers of guests, added a refrigerator in his laundry room for overflow supplies. "There can never be enough counter space, and there can never be enough refrigerator space," he says.

Twice the Power

As important as the major appliances, Hitz notes, is a strategic layout of electrical receptacles. In his kitchen, abundant outlets line the walls and the sides of the island so he can operate several standing mixers and a food processor at the same time.

"I went to town on that," says Hitz, who also insisted that his electrician double the power supply specified in the architectural plan. "I knew if we blew a fuse," he says breezily, "I would blow a gasket."

Maximize the Mixers

Hitz owns four KitchenAid mixers, and at least two are 20 years old. "The key to everything in life is the KitchenAid stand mixer," he continues. "They're all just excellent. I don't see how anybody can do anything without them."

Keep Tools Within Reach

Whisks and wooden spoons are kept on countertops in ceramic crocks, pastry cutters and other special baking tools in easy-to-reach drawers. The top drawer under the wall ovens holds two stacks of cookie sheets, one for quarter-sheet pans and another for half-sheet pans, the only sizes he has. "Having just two sizes keeps things orderly," he says.

Go Cookie Cutter

The second drawer under the oven is devoted entirely to cookie cutters and molds. "I use cookie cutters to cut everything," Hitz explains. "I bake quiches in sheet pans and cut them with cookie cutters to make them pretty. I cut brownies with cookie cutters. Anything with a crust on the bottom! So we have just that perfect fluted mushroom tart, in any size."

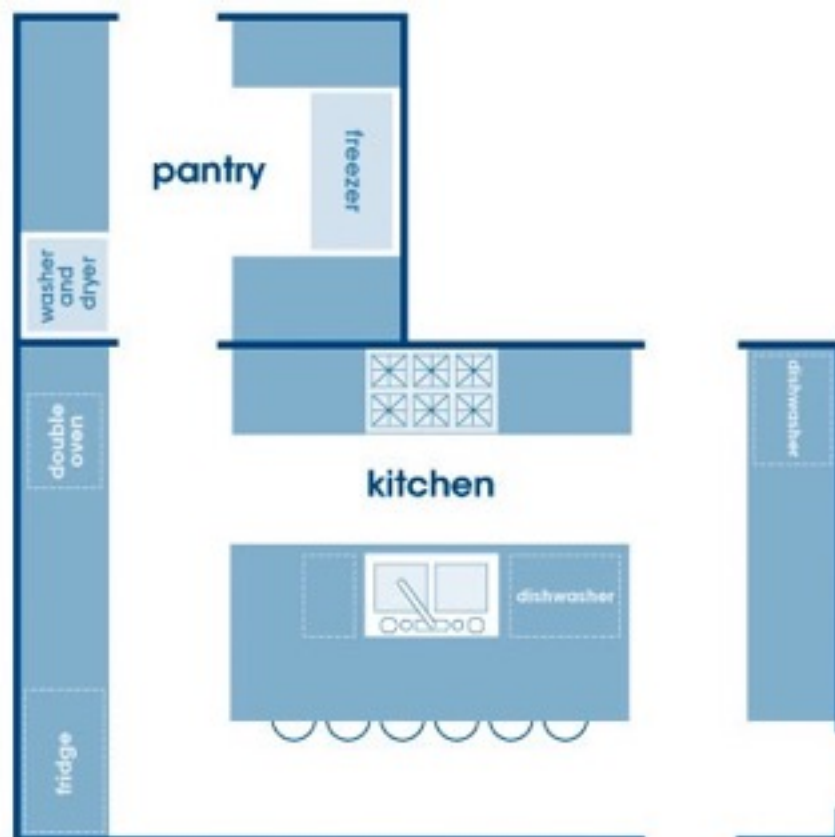
Get Industrial

Another essential piece of baking equipment is a speed rack, which Hitz stores in his pantry and rolls into the kitchen when he needs extra space for cooling cookies and cakes. "Baked goods must cool," Hitz notes, and a speed rack "gets them off your kitchen counters so you can still do whatever else you need to do." These racks, sometimes called pan racks, are available at local restaurant supply stores in an array of sizes.

Upgrade Your Trays

The final keys to Hitz's baking success, he says, are good-quality baking sheets. "This has been a whole epiphany for me," he says. "All those things we used to bake on in the old days are horrible. Thin baking sheets burn things and are useless. Throw them away. Invest in some heavy, commercial-grade sheet pans, and you will use them for the rest of your life."

Layout



Isle of Right

At the heart of Hitz's kitchen is an enormous island measuring 4 by 9 feet. Even with a double sink in the middle, there are still two expanses, each about 3 feet wide, where he can roll out cookie dough, shape breads, and cut out hundreds of biscuits at the same time. "It's humungo," he says. "I use it for everything. Not only do I roll out Christmas cookies at that island but we can dust the flour off it and seat six people there for dinner."

There is also counter space on three walls, providing plenty of room for Hitz to bake with friends or hired help, which he brings in for large parties. "Ideally, I'd like to have counters on four sides," Hitz says.

Walk-In Pantry

Hitz devotes significant time to keeping his spacious pantry (7 by 9 feet) organized—a key piece of his strategy for a shipshape kitchen. "Whether it's for baking or for cooking or both, to really plan a kitchen correctly, you have to have a vision, you have to have experience, and you have to have a little touch of obsessive-compulsive disorder, too," he jokes. "You know, how many people think it's fun to sit around and label the pantry on a Saturday? The more you obsess about it, the better it's going to be."

Customize Counter Height

Carole Bloom, the author of 10 dessert cookbooks (with another on caramel due next year), says home cooks who are serious about baking should consider installing countertops at a custom height or lowering a section of an island so it's the right height for rolling out dough. "I'm short, and most counters are too high," she explains.

No Side-by-Side Fridges

Bloom suggests buying a bottom-freezer refrigerator with shelves that are wide enough to hold baking sheets. "Often times you have to put things in the refrigerator to chill, and it's really difficult to fit a sheet pan in a side-by-side refrigerator."

Organizing

Turn the Island Into Party Space

Hitz has a small slab of granite that matches the countertops to cover the sink so the island can be used as one long buffet for large parties. "The faucet becomes a piece of sculpture," he says.



Mixers at the Ready

Standing mixers and the food processor should be kept on the counter so they're easy to use.

Bloom also suggests purchasing at least two bowls for the mixer, and two each of all the attachments, like whisks and flat beaters—a rule she follows for her food processor, too. "That way you don't have to stop and clean them during various parts of a recipe."

Maximized Shelving

Pull-out shelves make it easier to find pans and access pantry items quickly. Bloom, like Hitz, also recommends organizing the pantry into specific sections, and has flours, sugars, chocolates, and flavorings each on their own shelf.

Wide-Mouth Containers

Another tip from Bloom's home kitchen in Southern California: Keep dry ingredients in wide-mouth containers. "It's much easier to scoop a cup measurement into them and get the ingredients out," she says.

An Organized Pantry

Make sure spices in cabinets or drawers are arranged so they are easy to see, and "preferably not right next to the oven, where they get hot and dry out," Bloom advises. Stack bowls and pans by size, and install pull-out drawers whenever possible.

Baker's Toolbox

Bloom considers a rolling pin display rack to be helpful but not necessary. A scale, on the other hand, is essential for weighing chocolate and other ingredients, she says.

Make sure important tools like measuring cups and spoons, thermometers, heat-resistant spatulas, timers, cutters, cake testers, and hot pads are kept where they are easy to reach, like an open crock or top drawer.

Bloom bakes so often that she removes measuring spoons from the ring and keeps them separated by size in small containers near her mixer and food processor. "You measure so many things in baking," she explains. "If you have to grab spoons by the ring, then you are always searching for the right one."