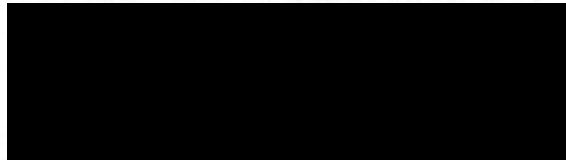
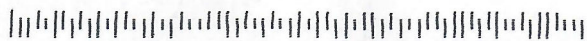
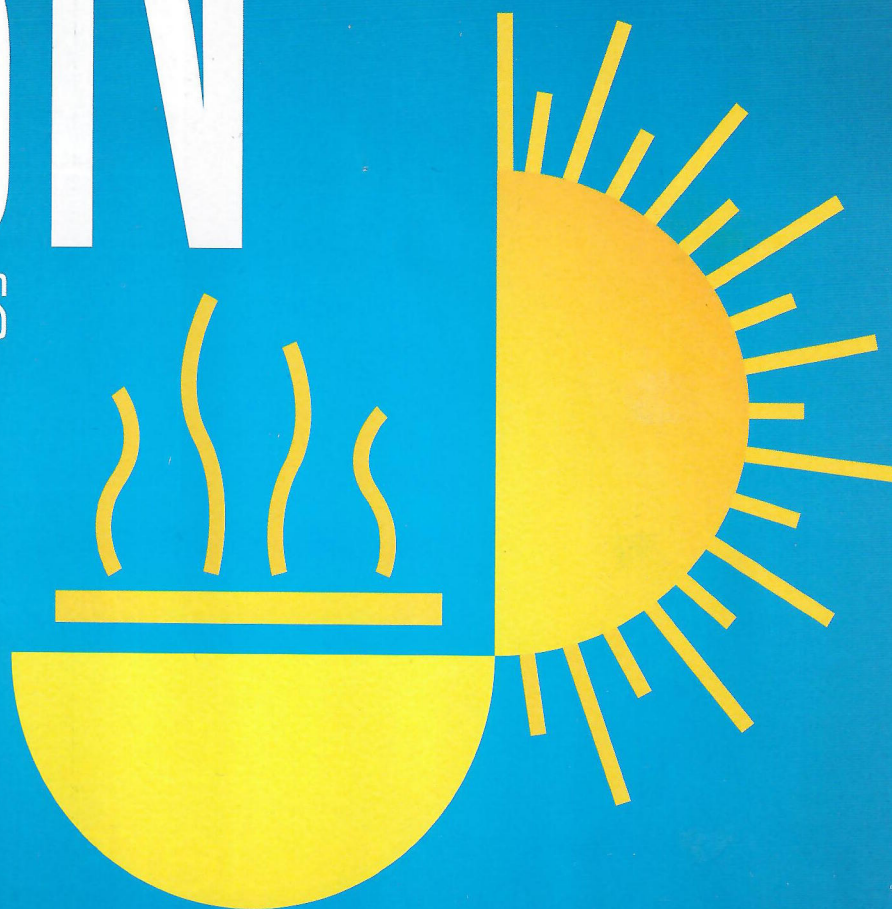


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POOL AND SPA NEWS







BACKYARD HUB

Outdoor kitchens take center stage,
just as surely as they do inside

BY REBECCA ROBLEDO

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— Kurt Kraisinger

Is there any such thing as a "barbecue area" anymore?

Not when a design professional becomes involved.

What used to be a small barbecue tucked in the back corner has evolved into the hub of the backyard space.

"When you entertain in your house, it's hard to get people out of your kitchen," says Scott Cohen, president of Green Scene Landscape and Pools in Northridge, Calif. "You can put appetizers all over the place, but they're always hanging out in the kitchen. The same thing is true in the backyard."

Evolution has changed the approach professionals take to these increasingly crucial areas, somewhat complicating their design and construction. Designers must draw on their acute sense of placement and flow, just as they would with any other primary space. They also must acquaint themselves with an increasing number of products and features — and gain an understanding of which ones make sense in this special setting, and which are impractical or unnecessary.

Place of importance

Not too long ago, conventional wisdom said the grill area should go right next to the house. This approach persisted for two reasons: It eased the path for transporting prepared food from indoor kitchen to grill; and it kept the kitchen out of the way.

While today's designers may find this strategy the most appropriate in some cases, it's no longer assumed. Where the grill area was a utilitarian spot to keep out of the way, the backyard kitchen now is meant to attract.

"Just like inside the house, it's the central location that everything sort of revolves around," says Chuck Hess, principal of Hess Landscape Architects in Lansdale, Pa. "So if you go inside, it's your family room and kitchen all tied together. Well, outside we're finding much the same."

This means it takes center stage — literally as well as figuratively. Often kitchens

are combined with pool houses, cabanas or arbors to create a destination.

"Instead of ... looking like an afterthought or appendage to the design, it should be a part of the overall design and be celebrated," says Kurt Kraisinger, PLA, LEEDAP, president of Lorax Design Group in Overland Park, Kan. "Make it a part of the overall design so that it looks like it was meant to be there."

In response to this change of approach, Kraisinger and his associates often design their kitchens "in the round," with an island in the middle.

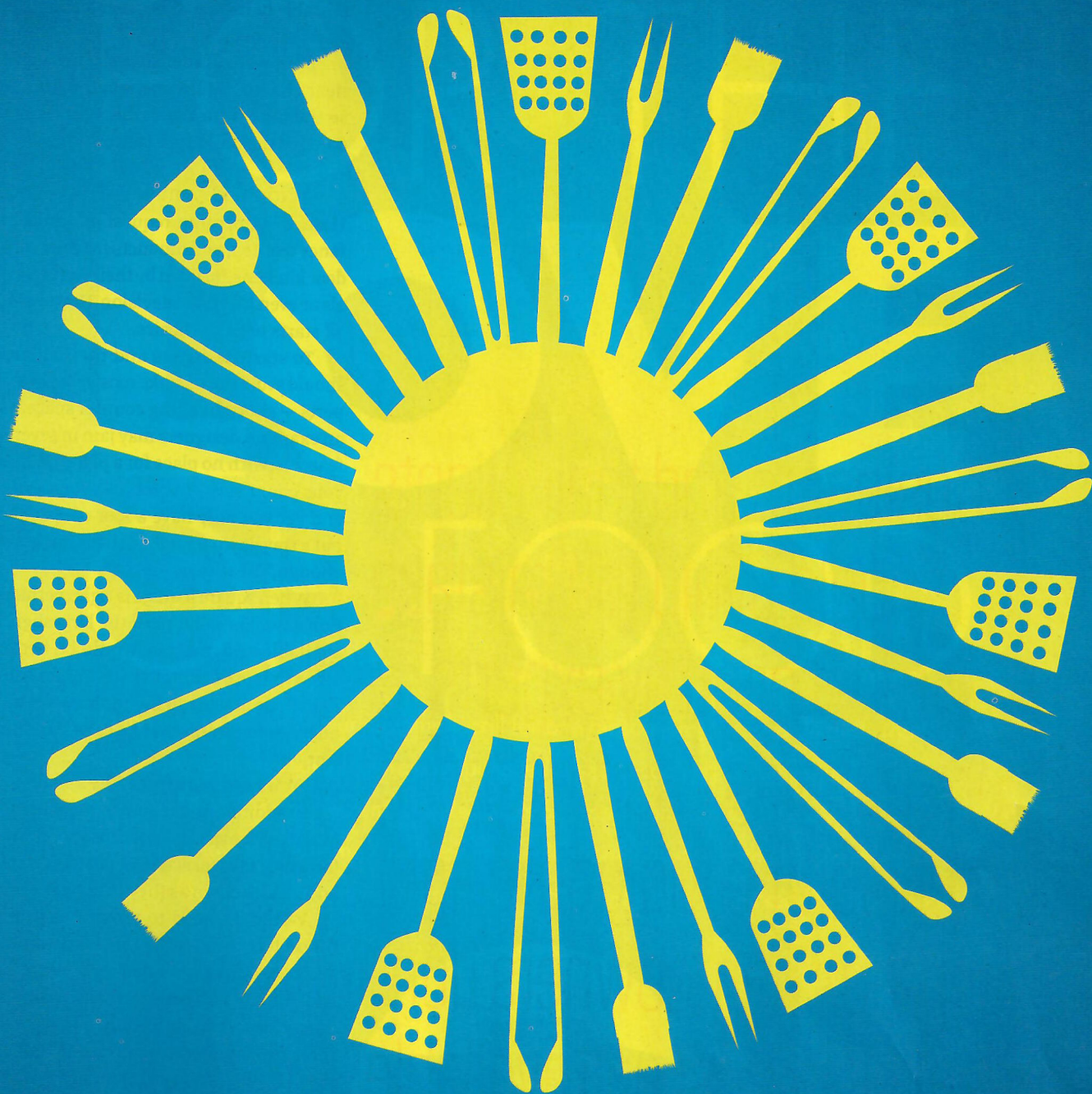
"Then everything around it kind of embraces it, and it becomes part of the overall design," he says. "When you're standing behind the grill top, you're actually engaged with everything else that's going on. People could belly up to a bar that's adjacent to you so that they could be part of the conversation."

To create a true destination spot, designers sometimes even combine the outdoor kitchen with a living room space, including such features as fireplaces, fire pits, televisions and comfortable seating.

This is all great for the grill master, who no longer has to choose between cooking and socializing. "I was a grill guy, and I got upset a lot of times because I wasn't even part of the rest of the conversation and other activity in the yard," Kraisinger says.

Of course this means more space needs to be allotted to this congregation area. Cohen, author of two books about backyard design, likes to start with a counter for cooking and another for bar and beverage service. There also must be enough room around the kitchen so it doesn't block traffic and flow through the rest of the yard.

Sometimes, close to the house is most appropriate — for instance, when the backyard is located in a cold region and the users like to grill in fall and winter. But even then, outdoor heaters help with climate control. And for those with space and budget to spare, designers can create





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a much smaller area near the house for a portable barbecue to be used during the cold months.

But a word of advice: If placing a grill near the house, leave enough distance so the heat from the barbecue does not damage the building exterior.

Function and comfort

Homeowners often request all kinds of fancy features and products for their outdoor kitchens, inspired by their world travels or even lifestyle television. However, it all starts with the basics.

To start, designers and their clients should avoid the mistake most cited by experts — shortchanging counter space. As an example, designers may jam in several features, with no place for a plate. “When your client says, ‘I want a 52-inch grill,’ and yet you only have a foot of space to put a tray down next to it, that’s not quite enough,” Hess says.

When square footage is tight, perhaps homeowners don’t need the largest grill available and, instead, would be better off with more counter space. Cohen tries to include at least 16 inches between appliances to create what he calls “landing stations.”

“You need workspace,” he says.

In addition, make sure to include adequate service space — just a bar or counter for people to eat or even just put their plates and glasses down as they circulate.

While it’s good to provide as many linear feet as possible for the counters, designers can get carried away with the width. “So you have somebody with human-sized arms, and they can’t reach across the counter to put food out,” Cohen says. He suggests 18- to 24 inches — more than enough to accommodate the standard 9-inch dinner plate, but not so much that it’s difficult to reach the other side.

However, the rules change when counters take island form. Being accessible from both sides, they can be wider.

Either way, build the surfaces at the proper heights — 34- to 37 inches for a



kitchen countertop; 40- to 44 inches for a bar. When working with clients of different sizes or physical abilities, variations can be considered, but you also should discuss how this could affect the home resale value.

For countertops, Cohen is a fan of the L configuration, with the grill set as the smaller leg. This helps control the input of visitors whose company may be wanted, but who don't need to engage too closely.

"When [friends] say, 'I'll keep you company,' what they really mean is 'I'll supervise you and make sure you don't burn dinner,'" Cohen says. "So you want them out of your hair a little bit. An L-shaped counter gives them a place to hang out, belly up to the bar, but I don't want them in my face while I'm cooking."

When devising countertops, designers and their clients should consider the benefits and drawbacks of split-level counters. In this scenario, the outer perimeter stands at bar height while the inner plane, near the grill and sink, sits at standard counter height. With this configuration, the sink and grill are concealed from the pool and other outdoor areas, plus it gives friends a place to sidle up when they want to keep the grill master company. It also provides a backsplash for the sink. On the downside, this means that each counter will be narrower, so there isn't as much room for hors d'oeuvre trays or to work on one's laptop.

You know the grill

With all the new features being introduced for backyard kitchens, it's easy to get carried away. That's why designers are learning which ones prove useful for the long haul, and which don't live up to the hype.

Many have found that, in addition to traditional grills, the kamado-style ceramic models get quite a bit of mileage. Designers have found inventive ways to build around them by creating stations for them. When doing this, access must be provided for so users can reach the coals at the lower level.

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"To give it a more built-in effect, I usually create a shelf or ledge for it to set on within the design of the kitchen, and set the height at a level where the top of the grill ends up at normal counter height," says Randy Angell, creative director and lead designer with Pool Environments in Plano, Texas. "It ends up about 12 inches above floor level, and then that puts the grill at about the level of the counter height. And the dome lid is higher than the counter."

Since pizza ovens began to appear in backyards, some have wondered if they're worth the cost of admission or just a fad. Designers find their clients end up using them for years to come. Not only can they cook pizza, but they can handle a variety of cuisine.

"They're pretty confident they're going use it for all their meals," Kraisinger says. "They don't necessarily want a grill. They're going to cook steak, pizza and pasta."

However, that doesn't completely answer the question of value. Traditional pizza ovens are relatively costly to build and take up a fair amount of space, so they may not always earn their keep. Newer, pre-fabricated pizza ovens, on the other hand, seem to be proving worthwhile.

"Now that they have the pizza ovens that are in stainless steel, a smaller-scale countertop format and a little more affordable, it's becoming a much more popular addition," Angell says. "I love those big authentic clay pizza ovens, but they're huge and very expensive."

Being gas-fired, the newer versions also are easier to use, he reports.

There also are less glamorous features that can be overlooked but will be used repeatedly, if without thought. Count among these a stainless steel trash drawer next to the grill.

"They may think about putting a trash bin inside a cabinet or something like that, but to have a pull-out trash door next to the grill is a very handy thing," Angell says. "It's just a cleaner way to do it. You're not having to worry about animals getting into it and

all that mess. It's very easy to access while you're cooking and your hands are dirty, and then you just close it and it's put away and you don't have to worry about it."

Proceed with caution

On the other side of the equation are features that seem as if they'd be handy but prove too costly or problematic.

At the top of the list for designers are sinks — especially those with hot and cold running water or garbage disposals.

"I tell my clients that, unless it's something you absolutely know you're going to use on a regular basis, it may not be worth the expense and the trouble as far as the maintenance of having a sink outdoors," Angell says. "If it's not well protected, you always have to be concerned about freezing in the wintertime, and winterizing the plumbing to that sink. Cost-wise, tying an outdoor sink into the sanitary sewer and the hot and cold water from the house can be extremely expensive."

In many jurisdictions, running the sink to the sewer is not an option — for reasons ranging from legal to health to the feasibility of your company. In California, for instance, failing to send the runoff to the sewer is a serious offense. "It's a health code violation, and it carries a \$2,000 fine, and after two of them, they'll take your license away," Cohen says. "So if we're going to install an outdoor sink for clients, it's going to be connected to a sewer line, which can be \$3,000 to \$4,000 at a minimum."

Some areas permit sending the runoff to gray water or ground seepage. But routing it to the street can be dangerous. "This becomes a problem if you're cleaning chicken outside, washing salmonella down the street," Cohen says. "Then there might be a little kid playing with a boat in the gutter out there. It's just not safe."

In most cases, it is fine not to have a sink. Many homeowners do not need to use running water as much as they expect, plus they're engaged by all the other features the space has to offer. **PSN**