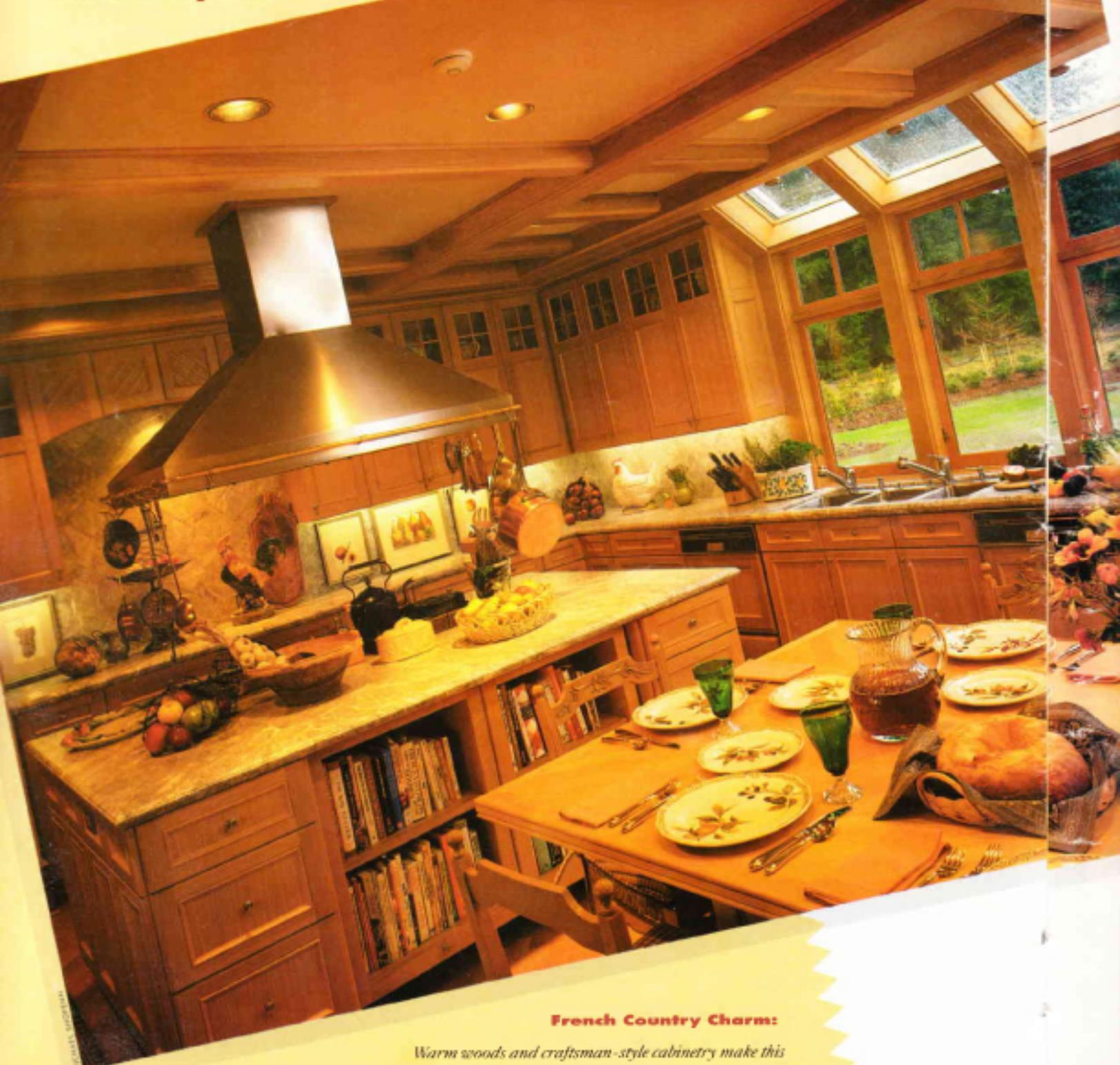


**Tired of sleek styling
and cool colors, designers
return to the comfort of
kitchens past**



French Country Charm:

*Warm woods and craftsman-style cabinetry make this
Woodinville kitchen a favorite family gathering place.
Zoning allows several activities to occur at once.*



**Fun
Follows
Function:**

Bright colors and unpretentious finishes give Joseph McDonnal's Madison Valley kitchen the casual air of an Italian country kitchen.

THE WATCHWORD in kitchens today is "warmth." As Americans beat a recession-driven retreat back to home and hearth, the sleek, Euro-style look of the 1980s is giving way to an eclectic approach designed to tantalize the eye and soothe the soul. Comfort is in, and the latest kitchens are capitalizing on this with natural materials, spirited colors, and furnishings designed to make both family and friends feel right at home. After all, today's kitchen is more than just a cooking center—it's a social center as well.

To accommodate the crowds, the parameters of the kitchen have softened, with walls and partitions giving way to islands and peninsulas. As the boundaries between kitchen and living spaces blur, so do the activities taking place within them. Delores Hyden, a certified kitchen designer with The Showplace Kitchens and Baths in Redmond, says today's kitchens must fulfill a variety of functions. They need to provide a place to eat—be it a table, bar or island extension—and include comfortable seating for reading, watching television or conversing.

The idea of the kitchen as social center is nothing new. Some see models for today's comfort kitchen in kitchens designed hundreds of years ago. "I get my

by fred albert

inspiration from drawings and paintings of kitchens that were built in Italy and France in the 1700s and 1800s, and in England in the 1900s," says Eugene, Oregon, restaurant and kitchen designer John Hurst. "They were great big rooms. They had high ceilings. They didn't hide things. They had romance."

Hurst likes to include lots of natural light in his kitchens, as well as easy access to the outdoors, so that cooks can pluck an herb fresh from the garden or dine al fresco just steps from the stove. To make the space feel more like a regular room, he sometimes places a table lamp on the counter, hangs original art on the walls, and

KITCHEN COMEBACK

displays fruits and vegetables as accessories.

Like Hurst, caterer/designer Joseph McDonnal of Market Place Caterers gets his inspiration from the past. The Madison Valley kitchen he shares with Virginia Wyman was modeled after ones he admired on trips through rural Italy. Architect Tom McCallum worked with McDonnal to realize his vision of a civilized country kitchen. The pair turned the dining area and kitchen into a single entertaining space, which McDonnal embellished with painted floors, a tile-lined hearth and hearty, unpretentious finishes. "You don't stand up

shelves brimming with pots, pans and Italian crockery. "There are many people who want everything behind closed doors," McDonnal says. "They want it absolutely pristine, like the operating room at Swedish Hospital. I want my kitchen to look like a big hooly-balooly mess, which has a very definite organized structure underneath, but you have to look twice before you see it."

With the proliferation of two-career couples and latchkey kids, many families are sharing cooking duties and even getting their friends into the act. "You find more people are entertaining out of the kitchen," says Hyden. "Many parties are done with the guests becoming involved in the cooking process itself."

To accommodate these changes, designers are abandoning the traditional sink-stove-refrigerator triangle in favor of floor plans that divide the kitchen up into work stations. Separate areas for cooking, baking, preparation and clean-up allow several activities to occur at the same time.

In a sprawling country home in Woodinville, interior designer Pamela Pearce and architect Dennis Marsh of Anderson Olason Marsh worked with the owners to design a kitchen suited to both conventional cooking and the voracious appetites of four growing boys. The designers divided the kitchen into a central cooking area, an adjacent baking area and a kids' snack area, with its own sink, microwave, trash compactor and dishwasher.

The kitchen was designed using warm, natural materials that are sympathetic to the home's French country decor. Wood floors and a beamed ceiling are paired with cabinets crafted from both rift-cut and plane-sliced white oak, for added visual interest. The cabinets extend up to the ceiling; glass "windows" at

the top of the doors showcase porcelain collectibles. To make the marble counters look less slick, the surface was honed to a dull finish—a technique that also minimizes scratching and spotting.

A table extends from the custom-designed room divider, which features a telephone message center and a roll-out television. The table was built high enough so that it could double as a food-preparation surface. Even though there's an informal dining area just around the corner, Pearce admits the family seems to prefer the kitchen table.

The new comfort kitchen recognizes the appeal of variety—of having cabinets of different sizes and shapes to break up the oppressiveness of order. "We used to have all the cabinets lined up very neatly and precisely. We're not doing that so much any more," Hyden reports. She says The Showplace Kitchens and Baths is varying the height of upper cabinets, joining some with those below to create tall storage compartments and alternating solid fronts with clear or frosted glass, to add visual interest and help make the kitchen feel less confining. They're also varying the height and depth of lower cabinets to accommodate different functions (baking, cooking, eating) and introduce a little movement to the room.

Designers are also adorning cabinets with molding and specifying decorative woods such as cherry and bird's-eye maple to make them look more like pieces of furniture. Smallbone, a British firm with showrooms in Los Angeles, New York and Connecticut, pioneered what it calls the "unfitted kitchen," in which freestanding custom-built cabinets—150 pieces in all—can be chosen and combined to form kitchens that feel like furnished rooms. The Smallbone units are embellished with columns, cor-

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