



Well designed and equipped, these open-air kitchens showcase smart ideas for deck, backyard, or rooftop entertaining

Great Outdoor Kitchens

BY BRIAN PONTOLILO

We live in a small house with a large deck. Naturally, we do most of our entertaining outside. Until recently, we've survived with a series of wobbly, hand-me-down grills. But for Father's Day, my family gave me a new gas-light charcoal Weber. It's a great grill because it combines the convenience of gas and the flavor of charcoal. The best thing about my new grill, however, is the attached countertop. Gone are the days of balancing food, utensils, and my beer on the deck railing. After all, cooking outside is about having fun, entertaining, and relaxing.

The value of having a small countertop beside my grill has made the allure of outdoor kitchens easy for me to understand. Bringing the conveniences of an indoor kitchen outside allows you to prepare food, cook, and even clean up without missing out on the fun. Although most designers admit that practicality is less important in outdoor kitchens, choosing durable materials, carefully planning the



Austin alfresco. In this outdoor kitchen, the grill, sink, and refrigerator are arranged in a traditional work triangle. Hot water is provided by a 20-gal. electric water heater hidden in the cabinets. The cabinets are stucco over wood framing with tile countertops, which are pitched toward the front to shed water. The Western red-cedar pergola provides shade and a place to mount task lighting. Located closer to the party than the cook, a beverage bin (www.thegrillstoreandmore.com) is recessed into the countertop. The bin can be filled with ice to keep drinks cold and ready. When the party's over, pull the drain and let the ice melt.

utilities, and providing for good ventilation are still essential. To learn as much as possible about this growing trend, I talked to designers from New England to Texas about outdoor kitchens for decks, patios, and even rooftops.

Outdoor-kitchen design hinges on location

Connecticut-based kitchen and bath designer Mary Jo Peterson says there are three elements every outdoor kitchen should have: a grill, a sink, and a small countertop. Beyond these basic elements, the design and number of appliances will vary depending on how close or how far the kitchen is from the house.

There are several benefits to locating an outdoor kitchen next to the house. Utility runs are kept short, the sidewall offers a place to mount lights and speakers, and in some cases, the house can be used to shade the sun and protect the area from wind. And for trips to the pantry, the indoor kitchen can be conveniently close by. The farther the outdoor kitchen is from the house, on the other hand, the more well equipped it needs to be.

For one lakefront property, Peterson designed two outdoor kitchens that illustrate both situations. The first kitchen is located adjacent to the indoor kitchen

9 guidelines for outdoor-kitchen design

1 USE DURABLE MATERIALS

Don't use indoor materials outside. Laminated materials, including butcher block, will delaminate, lighting fixtures and electrical devices will fail, and even some tile (if it's not waterproof) can crack. Use durable, rot-resistant hardwoods, vitreous or impervious tile, stone, and concrete. And even then, expect to do more maintenance to keep these materials looking good than you would inside.

2 BUILD EVERYTHING TO SHED WATER

You can build a roof and cover the appliances, but rain finds a way into everything. The best thing you can do to prevent water damage is to slope patios and countertops at least ¼ in. every 2 ft. to prevent standing water. In rainy climates, consider installing a drain in the bottom of base cabinets.

3 MAKE AN INTERIOR CONNECTION

An outdoor kitchen should connect well visually and physically with the

interior. Use similar materials or details inside and out, and keep an unobstructed path between the outdoor kitchen and the house for trips to the indoor fridge or pantry.

4 VENTILATE

Only enclosed kitchens, say in a screened porch, require mechanical ventilation. But when you're deciding where to put the grill in an open-air kitchen, remember that smoke and odors blown into your eyes or your house are a sure way to ruin a great evening. Always place the grill far enough away or downwind from the house so that smoke and

odors will not be a nuisance.

5 DON'T FORGET TASK LIGHTING

If outdoor kitchens make you think of sharing cold drinks with good friends on summer evenings, you're not alone. But do yourself a favor and make sure work surfaces have ample task lighting. Put task lights on their own switches or use dimmers so that they won't ruin the atmosphere.

6 CONSIDER COVER

There are plenty of reasons to consider incorporating a roof, a trellis, an awning, or simply an umbrella into your outdoor kitchen. Besides offering a place to mount lights and speakers,

the structure can be used to shade the sun, block the wind, and make the grill usable even when it's raining.

7 BE PREPARED TO WINTERIZE

If you live in a seasonal climate, there are at least three months each year when you probably won't use your outdoor kitchen. However, it still will be exposed to the elements. Turn off the gas and water, and drain the plumbing. Cover or move appliances into a basement, shed, or garage.

8 DON'T USE INDOOR APPLIANCES OUTSIDE

Stainless-steel components aren't the only details that allow outdoor appliances to stand up to extreme tem-

peratures and weather. The brass burners won't rust, the refrigerators have better gaskets, and all the wiring is better insulated. Most appliance manufacturers offer a line of outdoor appliances. The same is true for lights, plumbing fixtures, and electrical outlets.

9 PLAN EFFICIENT UTILITY RUNS

Bringing electricity, gas, and water to an outdoor kitchen can be expensive. Talk to your local building department and utility companies to find out if everything can be buried in one trench and if the plumbing can be drained to a dry well.

(photo bottom right). The gas grill is connected to the house's natural-gas lines and is built in to a small bank of cabinetry. There are two small sinks that are better suited for holding beverages than washing dishes, and there is just enough counter space for serving food.

The second kitchen, complete with a refrigerator and microwave, is in a boat-house (photo right). Double doors open up the small kitchen to a patio with a freestanding gas grill fueled by a liquid-propane tank. When the kitchen is not in use, the weatherstripped doors seal tight to keep out critters and dust, two things that Peterson warns even the best outdoor cabinetry doesn't do well (sidebar p. 97). Regardless of its proximity to the house, an outdoor kitchen has its own set of guidelines.

Ventilation is important outside, too

Like sitting around a campfire, a relaxing evening in an outdoor kitchen can turn uncomfortable quickly if a cloud of smoke engulfs the party. In kitchens that are completely outdoors, a hood fan can't compete with even a slight wind, so it is important to consider the prevailing breezes and to locate the grill downwind. "I usually place the grill so it faces the best view, but I also consider proximity to the house and wind direction," says Paul DeGroot, an architect in Austin, Texas. If the breeze blows smoke away from the house, the grill can be close by. But if the breeze blows toward the house, the grill needs to be far enough away so that smoke and odors will dissipate before they reach the doors and windows. Once DeGroot is sure that ventilation won't be a problem, he approaches outdoor kitchens with the same work triangle used for indoor kitchens.

Recently, though, DeGroot took a slightly different approach with an outdoor kitchen (photo p. 92). He gave the sink priority placement instead of the grill. In the U-shaped kitchen, the grill is located farthest from the house and eating area. Smoke from the grill is not a concern, and the sink and a beverage bin combine to make a useful, easily accessed bar area.

For cabinetry, DeGroot used stucco over wood framing with tile countertops. To make a substrate for the countertop that wouldn't swell from moisture and crack the tile or grout, he specified the use of marine-grade plywood, a waterproof membrane, and a pitched mortar bed. The finished tile countertops slope ¼ in. over 2 ft. to shed water.

Use "bulletproof" materials

Inside or out, kitchens are among the most abused spaces in our homes. While indoor kitchens benefit from spill- and splatter-resistant surfaces, outdoor kitchens also have to stand



An outdoor kitchen indoors. Because it's a long walk from the main house, giving this fully outfitted kitchen its own little house just made sense. Double exterior doors open the kitchen to a great patio, but when the kitchen is not in use, the weatherstripped doors can be closed to keep it clean.

Close to home. Located directly outside the indoor kitchen, this outdoor kitchen has a basic setup: a grill, two small sinks, and just enough counter space to cook and serve food. A retractable awning shades the kitchen from the hot summer sun and dampens the sound of motorboats on a nearby lake.



Not-so-country kitchen. Outdoor kitchens are not a luxury reserved for rural homes and large yards. This outdoor kitchen (photo left), built by Urbane New Haven, is situated on a rooftop mahogany deck. The Denver cabinets (www.denver.com) are made from expanded PVC-foam carcasses with stainless-steel doors. The granite countertops are durable and easy to clean. Pantries built with exterior doors flank the galley-style kitchen.



up to heavy rain, drastic temperature changes, and ultra-violet light. Oregon builder Bob Linnell says that outdoor kitchens have to be “bulletproof.”

Linnell recently built a kitchen that proves choices aren't limited even though the materials have to be durable (photo right). The cabinets are built in place with pressure-treated framing covered with both red-cedar siding and stucco. The countertop and backsplash are concrete, and the sink, cabinet doors, and appliances are stainless steel. Even with a large overhanging roof to shelter the kitchen, Linnell installed a drain inside the cabinets to capture water forced in by wind-driven rain.

Locating the kitchen along an exterior wall allows the mandatory water- and gas-shutoff valves to be inside the house, where they are easily accessible. A veneered stone wall and fireplace mantel extend into the house, visually connecting the outdoor kitchen to the interior design. The roof overhang makes the grill available for use even on rainy days and provides an ideal place to mount speakers and task lighting, an often-overlooked detail in outdoor kitchens.

Consider low-voltage lighting

My backyard looks great in the evening. For ambient lighting, my wife encircled the deck with tiki torches and hung Christmas lights under the railing. Unfortunately, the only task light—a blinding flood-light mounted to the house—ruins the effect.

Sacramento-based landscape-lighting designer Lisa Long says outdoor kitchens need a well-balanced mix of ambient lighting and task lighting. Ambient lighting serves multiple purposes. It lights the way for people to move around safely, it highlights the landscape and architectural features, and it helps our eyes adjust from bright to dark areas. Long says that to reduce glare, it is a good idea to keep ambient-light sources at low elevations. Low-voltage strip or rope lighting under the edge of a countertop or landscape fixtures planted in surrounding gardens work well.

Low-voltage lights are also a good choice for task lighting because they can be mounted anywhere—to awnings or in trees, for example. If you choose 120v fixtures, use dimmers to soften the light when you don't need it for cooking. To avoid glare, Long suggests orienting task lighting directly above cooking and prep areas, where it can shine straight down.

Utilities and codes can be tricky

Bringing electricity and gas to an outdoor kitchen can be complicated due to local codes and utility-company regulations. When it comes to running electrical and gas lines, Lynn Underwood, a code official from Norfolk, Va., suggests checking with the utility companies first. They often have their own regulations—including how close together different buried utilities can be—that trump the building inspector's guidelines. If possible, Underwood suggests digging a single trench with shelves at different depths so that one utility can be accessed without disturbing others.

Appliances should be installed following local codes, utility-company regulations, and the manufacturer's specifications. Because the International Residential Code doesn't specify how close a grill can be to combustible materials, Underwood says, “Use common sense. Keep umbrellas and other combustibles away from the grill.” □

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Mix-and-match durable materials. This Oregon kitchen proves that even though durability is a must, there are still plenty of material choices for outdoor kitchens. The pressure-treated cabinet carcasses are finished with cedar and stucco siding, stainless-steel doors, and concrete countertops and backsplash. The stone wall and mantel extend into the house to tie the style of the outdoor kitchen to the adjacent interior space. An extended overhang shelters the kitchen.



Use cabinets that weather well



Polymer-board cabinets

If your outdoor kitchen includes cabinets, make sure they are built for exterior use. Indoor-kitchen cabinets often are made from plywood and other veneered sheet goods that will delaminate quickly due to moisture and temperature changes, rain, and sun.

Outdoor cabinets are available in a wide variety of materials to suit your style, including Viking's durable and easily cleaned stainless-steel cabinetry (www.vikingrange.com).

Vermont Islands' rot-resistant ipé cabinets (www.vermontislands.com), and In & Out Cabinetry's rot- and UV-resistant cabinets (photo left) made from All Element polymer board (www.inoutcabinetry.com).

If you want to make your own outdoor-kitchen cabinets, Massachusetts designer Nicole Goldman says, “Think like a boat-builder. If a material can withstand salt water and the harsh elements of the

ocean, it can probably stand up to your backyard as well.” Use solid, rot-resistant woods such as cedar, teak, and mahogany; select stainless-steel fasteners; and apply marine-grade adhesives like West System Epoxy (www.westsystem.com). To keep large critters out, make sure all of the doors have latches, and use rubber gaskets or weatherstripping around the doors and drawers to prevent bugs and dust from creeping in.