

sizzling spaces

BY PAM WILLIAMS

COOKING AND EATING OUTSIDE ARE AMONG THE MOST BASIC OF PLEASURES.

They should be, given that the roots of outdoor grilling go back to the dawn of civilization! In the age of modern conveniences, however, we still bring our food outside for the fun of cookouts, picnics and camping. Some of us cook outdoors at home as often as possible, leaving behind a walled-in kitchen for freedom and fresh air. And as we all know, food always tastes better outside.

Increasingly, homeowners are venturing beyond the basic barbeque grill to create entire outdoor kitchens. Known by the Italians as 'summer kitchens,' they are becoming popular in Wine Country. Perhaps this is in part because *Italians* have a long history in Sonoma County, but also because Californians in general are in love with Italian cuisine and culture. Vacationers who have experienced the Italian countryside want some of that lifestyle at home.

An outdoor kitchen can suit different purposes: it can be a retreat, it can expand opportunities for entertaining, or it can simply increase your living space. Options for sites also vary. Celebrity restaurateur and grilling enthusiast Bobby Flay built an outdoor kitchen on a New York City rooftop.

When attached to the house, a cooking area is convenient to the indoors and the proximity of utility lines. You can also place your outdoor kitchen away from the house – somewhere in the yard with a great view, near a pool or by some other garden feature.

One couple with a second home in Healdsburg had a desire to extend their living space into the front garden. The



al fresco kitchens up the ante on cooking out



level spot was lushly planted, but did not allow for outdoor entertaining. They asked Casey Caldwell of Healdsburg's Caldwell Trouette (who had remodeled the interior kitchen for the previous owner) to build their outdoor kitchen.

"I told them I had never done an outdoor kitchen before," says Casey, "so I just had to keep imagining the walls around us," he recalls. Landscape architect H el ene Morneau was instrumental in all the landscape drawings, layouts and overseeing the entire project. The site was completely cleared down to the soil and rebuilt with separate but flowing areas that incorporated the home's main entrance and its living room.

A Mediterranean-style garden and a seating and dining area flank the welcoming pathway from the front gate. Angling off from the wall of bench seating is a food preparation and cooking structure, and beyond, a swimming pool with patio area.

While the cooking structure is not attached, it uses the house utilities. They were easy to run underground with the yard cleared of impediments. The layout includes a sink with hot and cold plus filtered water, a refrigerator and a separate ice-maker/cooler, a two-burner stove and a DCS gas grill. The countertops are polished aggregate concrete from Bohemian Stoneworks of Occidental and the cabinet facing is made of Richlite, a green building material that is as durable as it is beautiful.

Anchoring one end of the L-shaped arrangement is a Mugnaini pizza oven, with a copper chimney top and ledger stone accents that tie in with the low ledger stone walls lining the site. Two portable outdoor heaters take the chill out of the evening air

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Photos by Sarah Bradbury

Top: Kim Fiori's Michael Comstock-designed outdoor living space takes advantage of views and proximity to the house. Below left: A pool and spa border a seating nook and the cooking area (the dining table is out of view at right). Below right: Close-up of the cooking area by Caldwell Trouette. Previous pages: A Mugnaini pizza oven anchors an outdoor kitchen in central Healdsburg.

when diners linger at the table. Enhancing the transition from inside to outside, the couple used some of their interior color palette for the outdoor kitchen and hardscape – tones of mahogany, copper, yellow ochre and tan.

On a picturesque ridge across town another outdoor kitchen meets a different set of lifestyle needs. Kim Fiori was born and raised around cooking, Fiori's of Occidental having been the family restaurant. He now operates Giovanni's Deli and Catering in Sebastopol and also cooks for his active family and friends.

Two years ago, a dry rot repair at one side of the house turned into another opportunity for Kim to cook, this time outside. Since 1981, he and wife Robin See have gone through three other remodels on their 1970s-era Michael Rubenstein-designed house, which they affectionately dubbed "Christine."

Robin notes that one thing led to another and the repair job expanded into an outdoor kitchen project. "This is a work house—active and heavily used. We have two teenagers, and they have big groups over here all the time," says Robin. In quieter moments Robin and Kim have their morning coffee in this space, enjoying the view and the wild birds that visit their well-stocked feeders.

Kim cooks outside at least three times a week. A vegetable garden flanks one side of the 15- by 12-foot space. "Kim will grab a bunch of stuff from the garden and put it on the grill. We eat like that a lot," says Robin. The elements of the cooking area are contained in one efficient section against the house wall. Facing it are wicker armchairs and a small table—a comfortable spot from which to chat with the chef without being in the way. A larger dining table is steps away on the deck.

His steel frame and concrete cooking unit is ten feet long and finished with stucco. In general, outdoor kitchen structures are not framed in wood because of the moisture it will absorb. Kim's cooking unit has an Avanti refrigerator, a 42-



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...the key to getting through a remodeling job is "trust and laughter." Choosing someone you feel comfortable around and can work easily with is essential.

inch Jenn-Air grill and burner, a faucet with sink, and storage drawers. The countertop is a warm shade of polished concrete sealed with stone wax. Above, a corrugated steel roof covers the heavy wood pergola sheltering the cooking and seating area. Pendant and spot lighting provides illumination over the counter at night. The concrete block floor mimics the pre-existing floating block pathways through the yard.

In addition to choosing the type of outdoor kitchen that suits your lifestyle, you must choose a contractor with consideration to your personality. Designer and general contractor Mike Comstock, a design/build contractor since 1979 brought Kim's outdoor kitchen to life. Robin says that the key to getting through a remodeling job is "trust and laughter." Choosing someone you feel comfortable around and can work easily with is essential. Casey Caldwell notes that flexibility is also needed, as there will always be changes that arise.

Construction of any kind is an expensive investment. "The dream plan may be out of reach financially, but a professional contractor can help you determine all the costs upfront," says Mike. Design work starts at 86 dollars per hour and goes up from there. "You get what you pay for. Go to somebody reputable with a track record and request current job references," he adds.

As to that dream plan, Mike says it's helpful when clients bring in a design they find in a book or even a photo from a magazine. To keep costs under control, he recommends that clients contract for a total dollar amount as opposed to signing for a time-and-materials bid.



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