



# *going with the grain*

**Designers are turning to wood to create bespoke and artful kitchens that replace the white-box formula with striking timber textures. Katrina Burroughs reports.**

I don't like messy shelves and I can't keep them straight; I just want to put everything in the cupboard and close the door. And for an old house you don't want something shiny and metal." He plumped for a beech plywood kitchen from Plain English. "Looking at the craftsmanship, it's proper joinery," he enthuses, referring to his elegant, unfussy pea-green painted cupboards. "And it feels right in the rural setting."

Plain English's trademark cupboards are inspired by early-Georgian cabinetry (kitchens from £35,000). They feature quadrant panel mouldings on doors, tongue-and-groove backed shelves, and dovetailed, pillow-fronted drawers with tiny wooden knobs – all trad touches, but edited back to the bones of the original designs and coloured in a palette pleasing to the contemporary eye. "Whatever the reverse of cutting edge is, that's what we are," says Katie Fontana, creative director of Plain

Right: a bespoke macassar ebony wood and painted cabinet combination by Podesta, from £40,000. Below: the limited-edition Tipping Point kitchen island in reclaimed teak and walnut by Splinter Works, £76,800.



English. Yet the company counts fashion designers, musicians, Oscar-winning actors and a couple of bank CEOs among its customers, and its sublimely spare kitchens are on the radar of interior design's coolhunters.

If the period flavour of Plain English isn't to your taste but consummate cabinetry is your cup of tea, you might try seeking out those designer-artisans who ply the old skills to create stunning, contemporary kitchens. Christian Stevenson, who five years ago founded ChristianPaul, says his clients – professionals who range from online entrepreneurs to surgeons and a QC – are often firmly "anti-gloss", but design-savvy and keen to experiment with different finishes and colours (kitchens from £30,000). "There's a call for an eclectic look where the outer cabinets are painted, often to blend back into wall colours, and then a central showpiece is made in a beautiful timber," says Stevenson. He developed such a showpiece, a 2m long russet mahogany island that "floats", for a family whose kitchen is also their entertaining space. "It's an unusual piece altogether," he comments. "It doesn't look like something from a kitchen, more like an office or a gentleman's club. The client is a boat builder and had a stockpile of mahogany he had bought some time ago [mahogany is now a protected timber]. He wanted mahogany and he wanted it French polished. You wouldn't normally do that in a busy family kitchen, but he liked the idea that it could get a little beaten up after a few years. And we set the island on wheels 2mm off the ground, so when they have a big party, they can clear the centre of the room."

The downside of commissioning truly bespoke furniture makers (rather than the firms that tailor standard designs) is that, since each of their projects is unique and time-intensive, you may have to join

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a waiting list for their services. For example, Matt Podesta, another kitcheneer who specialises in handmade cabinetry in glorious combinations of wood, completes between 15 and 20 one-off kitchens annually (from £40,000, example pictured top right). Cofounder and designer at Buhr, Tom Bullimore creates witty, original, handmade furniture, but only finds time for three kitchens per year (from £25,000). Bullimore's is a plain, rather masculine style, whose lack of adornment draws the eye to the natural grain of the timber. "I let the figure in the wood do the talking," he says. Some of his clients are so devoted to the pared-back look that they ask him to find alternatives to handles on the cabinetry. "We tend to build in finger pulls on the cupboards," he says. "And I'm now working on some touch-sensitive drawers: there's an electronic sensor on the front that triggers a device like a finger at the back, which pushes the drawer out."

And beyond bespoke, what's the next big thing in timber kitchens? Why, the kitchen as art, of course. "It's not so much about the wood, it's more a question of soul," says Miles Hartwell of Splinter Works, explaining what he and his partner in design, Matt Withington, seek to bring to the kitchen interior with their functional artworks. "You often see really beautiful bits of modern

architecture, with incredible interior design and imaginative manipulation of light and space, and then the kitchen is... square white boxes. It almost doesn't fit. Matt and I got to the point where we thought there must be more than these soulless units." Both men trained as product designers and list among their design heroes Thomas Heatherwick, Ron Arad and studio furniture artist Wendell Castle. Their ambition was to introduce a similar inventive, playful wit to kitchen design. In 2009, they teamed up to produce a range of limited-edition "portfolio pieces" alongside one-off kitchen commissions (from £70,000). First came a hemispherical kitchen cabinet in rosewood veneer over plywood, called Dime (edition of 24, £39,600), whose curved shutters open to reveal a solid cherry shelf and a drawer plus a counter, with room to prepare food or eat breakfast. Last year's follow-up to Dime is a curved kitchen island called Tipping Point (edition of three, £76,800, pictured left), in mirror-polished stainless steel with outsize, handsomely figured reclaimed teak drawers. It combines a contemporary edge with a retro sci-fi vibe: Tipping Point wouldn't look out of place on the bridge of the *USS Enterprise*. A kitchen island, Jim, but not as we know it.

If one installation encapsulates the liveliness and spirit that wood can impart, it is the walnut-walled island (from £40,000, pictured on opening pages) created by Joseph Walsh, a design-artist based in County Cork, Ireland. Though kitchen units aren't his comfort zone, Walsh was persuaded to design the piece by a couple who own a collection of his artworks, for their base in Ireland. "They have a period house with a modern extension in parallel and a reflection pool between the two, in a glass-enclosed pass," he explains. "The entire kitchen is concealed behind lacquered cupboard doors. It's quite cold. They wanted a strong island, something warm, textured and appealing." Walsh's creation, a counter wrapped in a curved wall of polished blocks of walnut, completely transforms the chilly space, while its richly hued reflection in the pool links the old and new buildings. "The blocks explore the different textures in the walnut; how it can catch the light and all the various effects the same material can give. In some elements we've cleft the wood, breaking it along its natural grain – which is lighter coloured and more open-textured – and others are highly polished, darker end-grain blocks." An utterly delicious solution to the couple's kitchen conundrum – and certainly not an effect one could achieve with white boxes. †

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