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Sleek Italian Kitchens Cross the Pond

With clean lines and clever storage systems, custom kitchens imported from Italy are finding favor with American homeowners.

BY AMY GAMERMAN ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 16, 2016 | [THE WALL STREET JOURNAL](#)



Italian custom kitchens have become the Prada handbag of luxury real estate. Companies such as Boffi, Scavolini and Pedini are winning over style-conscious homeowners with sleek modular systems. Photo: Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal
WSJ VIDEO

Jeanette Lam doesn't cook in her kitchen. An art collector and devotee of modern Italian design, Ms. Lam prizes her custom Boffi kitchen, made in Milan, as a piece of minimalist architecture, not a place to bake cookies.

"I appreciate great design. It's so aesthetically beautiful, with all the clean lines and shapes," said Ms. Lam, whose bespoke kitchen, which traveled by container ship from Italy to San Francisco for the 2013 remodel of her Pacific Heights townhouse, cost about \$150,000—major appliances not included.

Italian custom kitchens have become the Prada handbag of luxury real estate. Companies such as Boffi, Scavolini, Pedini and Arclinea are winning over style-conscious homeowners with sleek modular systems that integrate countertops, cooktops, hoods, lighting and even garbage bins in one seamless design. They feature a rich mix of materials, ranging from polished polyester to antique barn wood, to lava stone quarried at Mount Etna. Cleverly engineered storage systems customized for everything from coffee makers to chopsticks eliminate clutter. Refrigerators, dishwashers and ovens can be concealed behind retractable panels and pocket doors, giving kitchens the serene atmosphere of a great room, or a gorgeous laboratory.

In Ms. Lam's kitchen—which cost a total of about \$200,000—beveled countertops of stainless steel and graphite-gray engineered quartz float above gleaming white polyester cabinets, unmarred by a single piece of hardware or visible handle. A sculptural plinth of clear glass suspended from the ceiling is the hood for the six-burner, flush-mount gas cooktop; it functions by remote control.

The actual cooking is done by a chef Ms. Lam employs, whose stir-fries sometimes overpower the electronic ventilation system. "It's a lot of smoke and oil, and sometimes it can be a challenge for the delicate Italian design," said Ms. Lam, 46, the owner of Struxtur Inc., a hardwood-flooring company. "I would rather take a good design than a good function."

As more people entertain in their kitchens, the kitchens themselves are becoming more like living rooms. "For entertaining, the Italian designs fit really well. It's so easy to use them, so functional, and then everything closes up and looks so beautiful," said Eleonora Srugo, a broker with Douglas Elliman Real Estate in Manhattan, who has seen a rise in apartments that have gotten the Italian job.

For some high-end buyers, a sexy kitchen provides an element of fantasy—like an Italian sports car parked in the driveway—that can seal the deal on a

multimillion-dollar property. “It’s selling a vision of a certain lifestyle that’s clean and modern,” said Gidi Cohen, a Los Angeles developer who gave one Sunset Strip manse a slick Pedini kitchen makeover before listing it for \$16.5 million (and selling it for an undisclosed amount last year). “Whoever sees this kitchen wants to start taking cooking classes.”

Developers of ultraluxury properties have taken note. Boffi, whose custom kitchens can cost between \$40,000 and \$300,000, collaborated with the late Zaha Hadid on the kitchens and bathrooms for 520 West 28th, her condominium development along New York’s High Line. Apartments, priced between \$4.9 million and \$50 million, are scheduled to be completed early next year. The 120 private residences at Miami’s Surf Club, designed by Richard Meier and scheduled for completion next spring, will feature Boffi kitchens as well. Scavolini kitchens designed by the architect and hospitality designer Jeffrey Beers are a prime attraction at One West End, a 42-story luxury tower near New York’s Columbus Circle, with 246 apartments priced between \$3 million and \$20 million that will open next spring.

“When it comes to detailing a kitchen, the Italians exceed everyone,” said Mr. Beers. “They understand the way a kitchen works.”

In One West End’s model kitchen, there is no trace of a refrigerator in the wall-to-wall expanse of stained walnut cabinetry. The only way to find it is by looking for the handles—one of the few pieces of visible hardware in the kitchen, where the cabinets and drawers have recessed finger pulls for an uncluttered aesthetic. Some apartments there will have a nook-like baking station with a pull-out stainless steel work surface for kneading dough; pocket doors of ribbed glass hide the entire station when company comes.

As Italian kitchen-furniture companies gain traction in the luxury market, they are supersizing traditional European proportions to satisfy American tastes. “In Italy, we don’t have a 36-inch refrigerator—here, appliances come first,” said Nikola Negri, a designer for Scavolini’s flagship showroom in New York’s Soho.

Mr. Negri’s American clients like cabinets that extend to the ceiling for maximum storage—some with touch-operated electric doors for hard-to-reach units—and pantries that have retractable countertops and pocket doors for hiding juicers, standing mixers and other gizmos.

Bigger garbage bins are crucial. “European cabinetry has always had these great trash systems, with lots of little cans under the sink unit for recycling,”

said Brian Pignanelli, whose Rifugio Modern represents Arclinea kitchens in Denver. “As an American, you would open the door and say, ‘Where’s the real trash can?’ ”

The pieces are made-to-order in Italian factories and shipped by container, with a wait-time of three to four months. In New York, Scavolini Soho sells, on average, two to four containers of its kitchens, as well as bathrooms and other furnishings, to its retail clients every month; about seven kitchens can fit in a single container. (Those shipments don’t include sales by the network of retailers around the U.S. that carry the Scavolini line.) Two teams trained in Italy handle installations. When a lacquered panel was gouged during the installation of a Scavolini LiberaMente kitchen at the New York City home of Chris Brill-Edwards, 40, and Brandi Bailey, 41, they waited 12 weeks to have it replaced.

“We had to go back and order a new piece from Italy,” said Mr. Brill-Edwards, the executive vice president of development at Macklowe Properties.

The couple’s glossy white modernist kitchen is a dramatic counterpoint to the rough wooden beams and exposed brick of their 3,500-square-foot apartment in a converted Tribeca industrial building. The kitchen is a showpiece fit for a celebrity cooking demonstration, with a gleaming island topped in Calacatta gold marble, a smooth band of lacquered cabinetry and a marble backsplash that glows under LED strip-lighting. The couple can cook while entertaining. The island, which seats eight, functions as a bar, with two refrigerated drawers for beverages and a hidden microwave. The kitchen’s less glamorous elements are tucked offstage in a butler’s pantry, outfitted with a refrigerator/freezer, a wine fridge, a sink, a second dishwasher and an under-counter ice-maker.

“It’s something we can close off if it’s actually messy,” said Mr. Brill-Edwards, who estimates the total cost of the kitchen at about \$215,000, including appliances like a deep blue Lacanche range.

Inspired by her stint at the Natural Gourmet Institute culinary school, Jennifer O’Reilly created a chef’s kitchen with wall-to-wall custom-built Pedini cabinets and shelving in her Hillsdale, N.J., home. Kuche Cucina, Pedini’s N.J. dealer, designed the kitchen around Ms. O’Reilly’s many appliances—which include a 48-inch Sub-Zero refrigerator/freezer, five ovens, two cooktops, two dishwashers, and an ice-maker for shocking vegetables. Accessorized drawers free up valuable counter space for cooking. Ms. O’Reilly keeps her chef’s knives in a built-in butcher block insert in a deep utensil drawer, and slides

baking trays and cutting boards into a cabinet with built-in slots. A suspended stainless-steel shelf over the steel counter holds potted herbs.

“If I’m throwing a party, I take everything off the shelves and put glassware there, so it’s almost like a bar, and very pretty,” said Ms. O’Reilly, 47, who spent \$88,000 on her Italian cabinetry—and about \$200,000 on the kitchen overall. (A 2014 stove fire damaged the original kitchen, and insurance covered some of the cost.)

Ms. O’Reilly, who is considering putting her home on the market next year, is unlikely to recoup the full cost of her couture kitchen, according to Pat DeMilia, broker manager for Terrie O’Connor Realtors in Upper Saddle River, N.J.

“No matter what you do, you don’t get 100% back—about 80% to 85% is average—but it’s a beautiful kitchen and it’s got a great vibe for people from Manhattan who want to move to the suburbs,” Ms. DeMilia said.

Maintaining that modernist vibe can be a headache. “The edging of the countertop is so specialized that if it gets chipped it has to be overseen by a special stone mason,” said Joshua Larson, the architect who designed Ms. Lam’s Boffi kitchen. Ms. Lam, who has an Italian craftsman on speed-dial to repair every nick and chip—“I can’t tolerate that”—must also contend with the inevitable fingerprints and smears on her gleaming cabinets and stainless-steel counters.

“Really, you just have to clean more frequently,” said Ms. Lam. “Fortunately, I have a good housekeeper.”

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