



Neat Freak Press

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If You Can't Stand the Clutter, Get It Out of the Kitchen!

By PERRI KERSH

Kitchens have evolved over the last 30 or so years. Once the spot where Mom made and served wholesome family meals, kitchens now function as mail-sorting stations, homework hubs, makeshift mudrooms, home office havens and, occasionally, as places to prepare food.

If you're ready to reclaim your kitchen, here are a few organizing essentials so you too, can de-clutter, establish organizational systems and get back to cooking ... or at least enjoying take-out in peace.

Appliances Big and Small

Every kitchen includes the usual suspects — the fridge, oven and stove, perhaps a dishwasher. Beyond that, the sky's the limit. You can now purchase your own bread maker, a "professional" stand mixer, a coffee machine worthy of a trained barista, even a panini press for those who have the time and inclination. These amazing kitchen gadgets are all well and good if you use them, but if you don't, they're just clutter.

First, determine the appliances you use weekly, and keep those within arms' reach. Anything else should be stored away for special occasions. If you have space in your kitchen, consider a slide-out shelf that fits in a cabinet and stores several appliances, allowing you to easily remove individual appliances as needed. If, after a year, you haven't pressed any panini, it's time to say goodbye to that appliance and give it to someone else.

Your Morning Cup o' Joe

Gather your coffee-making supplies (filters, coffee bean grinder, measuring tools and mugs) and store them all together directly above or below your coffee maker. This simplifies your morning routine and gets that first hot steaming sip in your mouth a little faster.

So Many Recipes, So Little Time

I enjoy cookbooks as much as the next gal, but if you haven't cooked out of a particular book in over a year, it's time to let it go. And if you love to clip recipes from magazines but can never quite find that culinary masterpiece when you need it, it's time to sort what you have, purge what you'll never cook and organize those that remain.

An inexpensive photo album with magnetic pages is a simple storage solution for clipped recipes. You can sort into appetizers, salads, pasta dishes, etc., so you'll know where to go the next time you're ready to create the perfect feast.

Kids in the Kitchen

Your kitchen should be a safe and fun place for your crawler or toddler to play in while you cook. Dedicate one low kitchen drawer to your little one so he stays entertained. Stock this drawer with pots, pans, wooden spoons, stacking cups, crayons and paper. Make sure to baby proof the rest of your kitchen (cover outlets, lock cabinets with potentially dangerous contents, place a latch on your stove) so your child is always safe.

Once kids are older, allow them to have some independence in the kitchen by storing healthy snacks in a low cabinet that they can access themselves. Store a few plastic cups down low, as well, and allow them to get their own water from the refrigerator as soon as they're able. You want to make the kitchen a welcoming place for them to be so they learn to share in the fun of preparing and enjoying meals together.

Unload the Load

Unloading the dishwasher can be simplified by storing frequently washed items (e.g. glasses and plates) in cabinets right next to the dishwasher. You'll also save yourself time if you load like items together in the dishwasher so they can be put away together more quickly when clean. And as soon as your kids are old enough, pass this chore on to them!

Food Storage

Start by pulling everything out of your pantry. Check expiration dates and get rid of anything expired (or unrecognizable!). Also assess whether you'll really use an item. Maybe that inspiration to start cooking traditional Ethiopian food passed — so it's time to let go of the ingredients taking up valuable real estate in your kitchen.

For those items that remain, sort them into categories (all pastas and dried goods together, all canned fruits and veggies together, all snack items together — you get the picture). Then return items to the pantry with their pals so you can easily find them in the future. Consider using tools such as can stackers or Lazy Susans to provide easier access to the food you store. Or group smaller items together in a basket or plastic bin so it doesn't get knocked over or lost in the pantry.

Repeat this same exercise in your refrigerator. Note expiration dates and usage and group like items together for easy access. This exercise helps reduce waste when you throw out uneaten food or purchase duplicates of things you already have.

Finally, set aside a time once or twice a year to go through each cabinet in your kitchen and assess the contents. Have you used it in the past year? Do you need it? Has it expired? Do you still have the matching lid? Is it cracked, broken or unusable? Clear out the clutter and make space for the stuff you truly need, use, eat and love. Bon appetit!

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