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The kitchen remains the go-to-gathering spot of the house, and probably always will be one of the most important rooms of the house in buyers' eyes.

That's one reason why home owners spend a whopping national average of \$54,200 on major kitchen remodeling projects that include state-of-the-art appliances, cabinetry, countertops, flooring, and lighting, according to the [2006 Cost vs. Value Report](#), published by *Remodeling* magazine.

Your role as a real estate professional is to help buyers recognize the value of kitchens they view in homes and to help sellers show off their kitchen to its fullest — whether touting an efficient layout or the remodeling potential of an outdated space.

"I have clients who care how many burners a range has and who the manufacturer is," says Karen Siegel, a practitioner with Laura McCarthy residential real estate company in St. Louis.

To help you stay on the cutting edge, here's some insight from industry insiders into this year's kitchen remodeling trends and hot products.

Kitchen Investments Pay Off

Even with slowing home sales and greater inventory in many U.S. markets, kitchen remodeling projects continue to provide hefty returns at the time of a home sale. The 2006 Cost vs. Value report shows that home owners recoup 80.4 percent of the average \$54,200 they spend on major kitchen projects, and get back 85.2 percent of the average \$17,928 spent on minor projects.

Experts say a successful redo depends on making choices that reflect the kitchen's enhanced role in today's families — serving as a place to demonstrate culinary skills and entertain; a room where families gather to watch TV, do homework, or veg out. The kitchen can also be a place to display personal style or themes, such as Tuscan trattoria or an environmentally-friendly green cocoon. Because everyone's busy, the best designs also are highly efficient.

Not every remodeling project has to be a total gut to be effective, says Sean Ruck, manager of public relations and editorial services at the National Kitchen & Bath Association (NKBA), Hackettstown, N.J. New cabinet fronts, countertops, or just one new piece of equipment add freshness and increase a home's resale value. "It's important for

home owners to stay within the budget they set,” Ruck, says.

10 Attention-Getting Trends

The kitchen remodeling industry recently gathered at the annual Kitchen Industry Show and Convention in Las Vegas, where many new trends were highlighted and new products unveiled. Here’s a sampling of 10 hot trends in kitchen layout, design, and construction:

- **Kitchen zones.** The traditional work arrangement with a range, refrigerator, and sink placed at the points of a triangle has been rethought. Now the hottest kitchens are organized for different work functions in decentralized zones, says Kit Selzer, kitchen and bath group editor for *Better Homes and Gardens* Special Interest Media. A cooking zone may contain a range, multiple ovens, warming drawer, and counter space to rest a hot pot or pie; a clean-up zone may have a sink and one or two dishwashers set into a two-level island; a coffee center may have a built-in machine and an undercounter icemaker and small refrigerator, Selzer says.
- **Center of activity.** Kitchens are no longer just about cooking. “The kitchen has become the center of activity, so we’re creating bigger spaces with fireplaces, bookshelves, seating, and flat-screen TVs where everyone can linger, read the paper, or go through mail,” says Chicago kitchen designer Mick De Giulio. Rooms also are designed to open to other spaces such as a great room or terrace, the latter often with its own kitchen.
- **Mix-and-match materials.** Products from more than one manufacturer and with more than one material add greater visual appeal and make kitchen equipment seem more like furniture, says De Giulio. A European-style kitchen that *Better Homes and Garden* designed for the industry show reflected many home owners’ increased interest in travel, with varied cabinet styles and materials imitating a collection of antiques acquired over time, says Selzer. A mix-and-match approach also contributes to a timeless look that won’t look outdated, says designer Andrew Carrs of Kitchens by Deane in Stamford, Conn. When blending materials and colors, Carrs urges restraint, akin to not adding too many spices in a recipe.
- **Easier to maintain.** Materials such as manmade quartz are becoming more popular. It comes in many colors, withstands heat from hot pots and pans, and doesn’t need to be sealed. It also looks different from granite, which has lost some cachet due to the proliferation of inexpensive variations.
- **Hidden storage.** Fewer upper cabinets allow in more light and views and help make spaces look larger. Ample storage can be placed under countertops and with specialized interior fittings such as baking sheet slots that improve efficiency, says designer Caryn Burstein of CLB Interiors in suburban St. Louis, Mo.
- **Professional equipment.** Professional or “pro” ranges, ovens, and refrigerators land high on many buyers’ wish lists, says Jimi Yui, principal of YuiDesign in Tacoma Park, Md. Other items generating buzz: Steamers for healthier eating, induction cooktops that keep pots and pans hot but without burning fingers when touched,

high-speed ovens that combine forced air and microwave technology to cook the Thanksgiving Day bird in under an hour, and wood stone ovens for pizza. Down the road, Yui expects more products will incorporate chip technology. "A refrigerator will know not to defrost at the wrong time and spoil food," he says.

- **Made for small homes.** As a nod toward home owners downsizing, manufacturers are debuting high-quality, small appliances such as 24-inch ranges.
- **Lighting innovations.** With so much going on in the kitchen, good illumination is critical. New designs balance general, ambient, and task lighting with bulbs on dimmers for flexibility. More states are expected to follow California's lead and require a certain percentage of energy-efficient compact fluorescents, says designer Carrie Dreith, CKD, Home Improvements Group, Woodland, Calif.
- **Sustainable choices.** Bamboo and wheatboard floors, countertops, and cabinetry, VOC paints, and Energy Star-rated appliances have gained in popularity as more heed the green message. Other ways to go green: Choose products from sources closer to home to pare transportation costs, says Jeanne Cabral, an architect in Columbus, Ohio; or choose products from companies that recycle packaging.
- **Universal Design.** Senior citizens aren't the only ones concerned about kitchen safety. With the first baby boomers turning 60, and younger home owners knowing that serious accidents and illnesses can occur at any age, a host of noninstitutional looking designs are grabbing attention. Among those Chicago designer Leslie Markman-Stern suggests are: Levers rather than harder-to-turn knobs; lower counters and wider aisles for wheelchairs; lifts that allow heavy equipment such as a standing mixer to rise from beneath a countertop; and lighting in a baseboard's toe kick to prevent falls.

Stay tuned: Next month we'll be exploring the top trends in bathrooms, covering both master suites and powder rooms, and everywhere in between.

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