

# kitchen

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**TRENDS:** How American and European kitchen standards meet and compete

**PRODUCTS:** Steely, sleek, and still so sensitive to your cooking needs

**MATERIALS:** Latest composite materials for counter, floors, and more

## Culture Clash?



STYLING: JEFFREY M. HARRIS  
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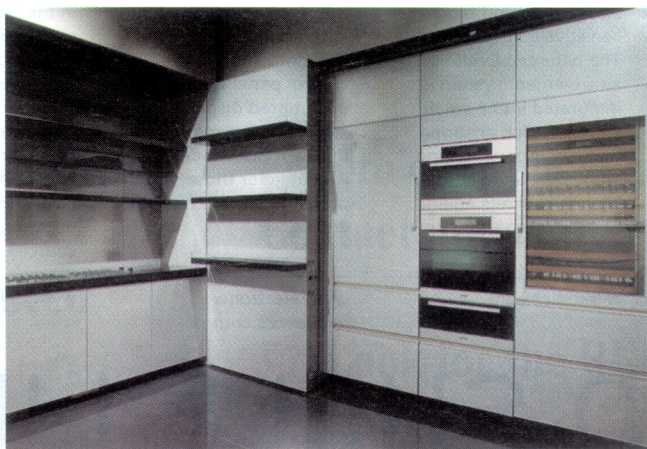
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Kevin Henry spent much of his 25-year career bringing European cabinetry to the United States, but now his job is promoting one of this country's youngest cabinetry manufacturers, Bazzè. The Secaucus, N.J., company bills itself as the first eco-centric U.S. manufacturer of contemporary cabinetry, producing kitchens with wood from managed and sustainable forests and non-toxic paints, lacquers, and veneers.

For Henry, Bazzè's executive vice president, the biggest difference between American kitchen companies and their European counterparts is a matter of range: fewer styles but complete customization. "Since World War II, factories in Europe have been working off of the production model," he said. "American manufacturing comes from the shop-built model, where the factory is based on the individual order and not the production order."

To old-guard European kitchen manufacturers, flexibility lies in the broad range of designs. "The necessity of always having in production not only traditional but also contemporary allows Europeans to be more flexible in manufacturing," said Francesco Farina, CEO of Scavolini USA. Scavolini, which began as a small workshop in 1962, has been Italy's largest kitchen manufacturer since 1982. While Americans focus on upgrading existing designs, usually with a traditional bent, "the Italian designer never ceases to consider experimenting," according to Farina. Italian designs maintain their reputation for pushing boundaries with colors, materials, and shapes, resulting in almost laboratory-like settings that Americans tend to think of as exclusively modern.

Except in cities like New York. Stacey Jattuso, a project manager and interior designer at New York-based BKSK Architects, said that American kitchen programs don't get much of a reaction from her clients when presented next to European models. She said her New York clientele wants adventurous designs, and American companies are not known to be risk-takers. "It's not that the demand isn't there, it's that the desire isn't being

met with the products. The European kitchen companies typically have nicer designs, in terms of aesthetics, not necessarily in terms of craft." Jattuso added that big European manufacturers' reluctance to change the size of their modules does make U.S. fabricators more appealing to her, as does the environmental sustainability of buying regionally. She said that Henrybuilt, founded in 2001 on the premise of bridging a gap between inflexible European designs and the lack of contemporary American kitchens, is one U.S. company that holds its own against Europeans. One of the largest misconceptions about this country's manufacturers is that they lag behind Europe in the area of craftsmanship, but from handmade cabinets to hinges available at Home Depot, domestic products have a reputation in the design community for equal or better quality, if not for high design.

Contemporary American kitchen manufacturers are less focused on replicating Europe's styles and more concerned with finding their own niche. Outside of urban centers, manufacturers are still trying to evaluate the market for contemporary kitchens. Though nearly 90 percent of manufacturers still produce traditional designs, more and more are introducing clean lines for a changing audience more attuned to modern styling through the surfeit of shelter magazines and Ikeas over the last decade. American manufacturers know something else about the American buyer: They love gadgets. Bazzè is currently talking with Microsoft and an iPod docking company about integrating more non-cooking technology into their programs, and the American appliance market is offering more high-tech cookers, washers, and vent hoods that were previously available only in Europe.

Unexpectedly, the current economic downturn may help some American manufacturers to mature and succeed more quickly. Architects and developers have been especially focused on U.S. companies recently as they try to stimulate the economy at home while looking for ways to reduce shipping costs and waiting times.

The national industry's recognition of a demand for contemporary design is only about 50 years overdue. As an architect recently pointed out to Henry at this year's ICFF, Europe's kitchen designs grew out of the Case Study Houses of the 1950s and '60s in California, while kitchens here took a turn for the traditional. "He said to me, 'I look at these kitchens and it's like reclaiming our birthright.' It's so great to recapture that system. More than once I've had Italians and Germans asking where our product is available."

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