

What's not to like?

Architect designs kosher kitchens for neighboring families

When Robbie Fretzin, a Skokie mother of five school-aged children, made plans for the kitchen in her new home, she knew she needed to turn to professionals who understood her family's lifestyle — and faith.

Fretzin, who is Jewish, needed a kosher kitchen — one that allowed the separation of meat and dairy throughout the entire cooking process, from food storage, to preparation, to consumption and even cleanup.

She turned to David Wytmar, an architect and partner in Groundwork, Ltd. of Buffalo Grove, who has extensive experience in designing kosher kitchens. Wytmar worked with contractor Joe Vargo of Joe Vargo Construction in Glenview, to build the Fretzin kitchen. The duo also built a kosher kitchen for Fretzin's neighbor, Debbie Well.

"Since our home and kitchen are new, it was imperative for our architect and contractor to fully understand our needs and bring them to fruition," Fretzin said. "I highly recommend retaining professionals that fully understand kosher kitchen design."

Jewish dietary laws, dating back several centuries, have a defined set of rules for keeping food and food preparation equipment kosher, or pure for consumption. The layout of the kitchen is a top priority when planning a new or remodeled kosher kitchen. While most modern kitchens are designed using the classic "work triangle" method of one sink, one refrigerator and one stove installed in a specific pattern, a kosher kitchen has two overlapping triangles and double sinks, refrigerators and stoves. That



Robbie Fretzin hired architect David Wytmar, partner in Groundwork Ltd. of Buffalo Grove, to build her kosher kitchen, which includes two islands and an abundance of cabinet space that help the family keep meat and dairy separated, as well as other requirements of the family's Jewish faith.

means double the amount of electrical and plumbing work needed.

"The major challenges are the layout of the space, maintaining proper clearances for the appliances and installing enough ventilation to pull the cooking fumes and extra moisture out of the room," Vargo said. "It's also important to know the number of people living in the home and if the cook is right- or left-handed."

Fretzin spends a lot of her time in the kitchen, and wanted the high-use workstations to be within easy reach.

"Our kitchen is in constant use for daily meals, Friday night Shabbat dinners and holiday gatherings of family and friends," she said.

Her favorite meal to cook is Friday night dinners "because of the traditional foods and the variety of flavors and textures," she said. Her kitchen opens

to the family room and dining room, which encourages conversation and allows family and guests to congregate near the kitchen without being underfoot of the cook.

Function is a top priority in a kosher kitchen, according to architect Wytmar.

"Kosher kitchens serve both a large family and an extended family," Wytmar said. "The kitchen's design must be tailored to how it is used and how the family functions, and that means fully understanding the family's dynamics."

Each family may have different needs, depending on whether the "chief cook" wants other people in the kitchen and whether they are helping or not.

"This determines if there is a seating area in the kitchen for people who are not cooking, and how close they should

be to the action,” he said. “An island can serve as a buffer between the cook and everyone else. In simple terms, form follows kitchen.”

Fretzin’s spacious kitchen features two individual islands, custom Heartland Alder wood cabinets with painted finishes and glazes and granite countertops.

In Well’s case, she eliminated the kitchen table entirely and replaced it with a larger island that does double duty as a dining area and a place for the kids to do homework and projects.

“The kitchen is the hub of our home. All of our family meals are prepared and served in the kitchen,” Well said.

Well enjoys hosting and on most weekends, prepares meals for 15 to 20 people. Her kitchen includes Wood-Mode maple cabinets, granite countertops and Sub-Zero refrigerator-freezers.

Because the counter must be cleaned completely between preparation of meat and dairy, it’s easier if the countertop material is one that resists cracks and crevices and has no seams. Quartz and granite are considered ideal, and wood is acceptable if it has a smooth surface. Stainless steel is a top choice for sinks in kosher kitchens. If space does not allow double sinks, then one sink that



Architect David Wytmar, partner in Groundwork Ltd. of Buffalo Grove, recently designed kosher kitchens for neighbors in Skokie.

has been divided for use is acceptable. Cabinet space is also a big consideration because there are duplicates of almost everything — dishes, bowls, pots and pans, flatware and glassware.

For appliances, many manufacturers offer a Sabbath mode that allows the homeowners to turn off the appliance from Friday sundown to Saturday night, eliminating power usage during the Sabbath when such activity is not allowed.

Vargo recommends the installation of

can lighting in the ceiling, undercabinet lighting and task lighting. Wood floors remain the most popular flooring material and Vargo prefers the floors be installed and sanded on site. “I use a commercial-grade sealer on freshly sanded wood floors because it stands up to heavy use and is waterproof. It’s old school but it really works,” he said.

Many of the design features of a traditional kosher kitchen are used in today’s typical modern kitchens. Depending on the size of the room, it is common to see new and remodeled kitchens equipped with two individual sinks and double appliances. For most homeowners, the additional expense is a worthwhile investment and is appreciated over time.

Contributed by David Lewis, Levinson Communications International. Photos by Steve Lasker and George LeClaire



The Well family, who hired architect David Wytmar, partner in Groundwork Ltd. of Buffalo Grove to design their kosher kitchen, keeps busy on the weekends preparing food for 15 to 20 people, putting the spacious kitchen with multiple preparation areas to good use.



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Robbie Fretzin hired architect David Wytmar, partner in Groundwork Ltd. of Buffalo Grove, to build her kosher kitchen, including design details that allow her family to observe the dietary restrictions required by her faith.



Robbie Fretzin enjoys her new kitchen with her children Estar, center, and Eli, right, with their friend, Judah Will, far left, all age 5, at her home in Skokie.



Robbie Fretzin home in Skokie.



Sinks on opposite sides of the kitchen help the Fretzin family maintain a kosher kitchen.



In the Well family home, a second island does double duty as a preparation surface as well as a dining area or for children's homework and projects.



The Fretzin family kitchen includes a Thermador professional oven and range with a pot-filler faucet over the stove.