



A designing couple create a kitchen space that speaks to both their talents and tastes.

# Make It Personal

Article by Jessica Brilliant Keener



When Thomas Buckborough and Cynthia First set out to remodel the kitchen in their 1760s post-and-beam house in Reading, they wanted to blend old with new and create an individual style rather than mold it to present-day trends.

Their backgrounds certainly fitted them for the challenge. He founded his design/build firm, Thomas Buckborough & Associates, in Acton in 1988. She opened First Oriental Rugs in Danvers 10 years ago and frequently works with interior designers.

The house barely escaped the wrecking ball some 30 years ago, when it was rescued by the previous owners, who bought the abandoned structure from the town and moved it to its current site. The kitchen, an 1880s addition, underwent what First calls a “1970s quick-fix makeover.” But, despite some updated cabinets, the room Buckborough and First encountered was a series of small, dark spaces with 6 1/2-foot ceilings.

The couple wanted to honor the antiquity of the house while incorporating contemporary elements such as cable lights, radiant-heat flooring, automated windows, and custom-designed tiles and counter surfaces. The result, says First, “is what a friend called ‘modern Colonial.’”

The 14-month remodeling began with a vision of creating a two-story space. They lowered the floor several inches and opened the ceiling to the rafters. That created wall space for windows on two levels, so now daylight pours in from morning until night. The half-dozen windows on the upper level are operated from an electronic keypad. Adding 30 square feet, for a total footprint of 476 square feet, made for enough space to accommodate a small dining booth, a pantry, and a powder room. A new stairway leads to an office balcony with a bird’s-eye view of the kitchen.

First and Buckborough’s love of cooking is reflected in their selection of hardy materials for a kitchen they intend to use. The 14-foot-long butcher-block island, for example, alternates end-grain pieces with straight cuts, which makes the surface more resistant to cuts and dings. Beech flooring from a mill in New Bedford (supplied by Longleaf Lumber in Cambridge) “can take a lot of abuse,”

says Buckborough. “We like the scarred look of the planks and the fact that the floor is totally low-maintenance.”

Elsewhere, countertops are concrete, and there are three concrete sinks, including a small one inset into the island. “Concrete is tough as granite yet has a warm patina like soapstone that is going to change over time,” says Buckborough. Custom-colored by concrete artist Dan Gobillot of Stone Soup Concrete in Florence, the lichen green has already darkened from heavy use in spots next to the main sink. “It gives a sense of the kitchen breathing,” says Buckborough, “a give-and-take between materials and homeowners.”

First and Buckborough incorporated the work of artisans into the room. Birch cupboards by Lissa Coolidge of Acton have the weight and depth of built-in furniture. Christopher Audley of Painting by Design in Concord helped with the color schemes. The cabinets are burnt orange and green with underlayers of gold paint. The intentionally rough walls and ceiling are colored in what First calls antique sienna. The effect is rustic and embracing. “We did talk about colors and their meanings,” says Buckborough. “We didn’t want this to be too Tuscan or Southwestern.” *continued*

## Creative team

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**FLOORING** Longleaf Lumber, Cambridge, 617-871-6611 or 866-653-3566, [longleaflumber.com](http://longleaflumber.com)

**CABINETS** Lissa Coolidge Woodworking, Acton, 978-263-2661,

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**COUNTERTOPS** Stone Soup Concrete, Florence, 800-819-3456, [stone-soupconcrete.com](http://stone-soupconcrete.com)



In a nod to the house's Colonial origins, cabinet hardware is made from wrought iron, its design influenced by fittings the couple saw in New Mexico. Decorative stools from New Mexico surround the island and add whimsical fl air. The two ceiling fans, with blades in the shape of palm leaves, are by Fanimation.

The hand-painted wall tiles by Catherine Winship of Waterstone Studio in Belfast, Maine - installed behind the stove and main sink area - form rural landscapes reminiscent of the work of 19th-century New England muralist Rufus Porter.

Lighting pulls the many hues and styles together. Three simple white-glass halogen pendant lights, which the couple spotted at a restaurant, hang above the island and give off a candlelike glow. Suspended across the room, high above beams, are halogen cable lights by Tech Lighting. "They are low-key visually," says Buckborough, "unobtrusive yet interesting and sculptural at the same time."

In designing the kitchen, the couple found a good balance between their strengths and focus. Buckborough says he looks at things with an eye to how they all tie together. First focuses on individual elements. She chose an open rack system to store plates, because "it's handy and lets us display artful dishes," then opted for a Bosch dishwasher because it accommodates the oversize plates.

The kitchen "wouldn't be the same if we had done it individually," says Buckborough. "The finished product is a blending of both of our tastes, interests, and attitudes.

"So many people are afraid of exploring their interests," Buckborough says, "or get attached to what others think is reasonable for resale value. But coming home to a space that is so much ours is personally gratifying."



### Return of the pantry

It's an old-fashioned notion that works better for some of us than overhead cabinets. Today, there are pantry-style cupboards available from most cabinet manufacturers. Better yet, design a separate walk-in space, as homeowners Thomas Buckborough and Cynthia First did. Often a part of so-called universal designs, which accommodate users with disabilities, a pantry keeps food, dishes, utensils, and pots and pans within easy reach. Shelves should be no more than 14 inches deep and adjustable. Another space-saving trick is to put shelves on the back of the pantry doors. They can be as much as 6 inches deep and be made with a lip to hold items in place.

