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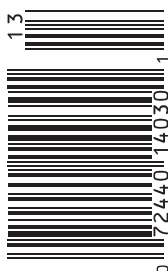
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# Custom Kitchens: A Team Sport

Design professionals weigh in on how talented teams create the best custom kitchens.



ILLUSTRATION: MARK MARTURELLO



Gorgeous. Functional. Personal. These words apply to that beautiful new kitchen you've been visualizing. But you need a design dream team to bring your vision to life. What should you expect from such a team? We asked several professionals who often work together on kitchen projects to show us the ins and outs of kitchen collaboration. Turn the page to see their credentials.

## EXPECT THE TEAM TO DELIVER A TRULY CUSTOM KITCHEN.

For our pros, the definition of "custom" is straightforward. You're the client. You're paying the bills. You deserve to get a kitchen that showcases who you are and what you value. Or as interior designer Michael Shewan says on behalf of his clients: "It should be uniquely them." You also should expect to see your vision brought to life, not someone else's. After all, no one knows you, your family, and your lifestyle better than you. "When bringing in pros, you should get close to 100 percent of what you wanted," says kitchen designer Beth Merrell. "Everything should be completely thought through so you're getting all the best possible options."

## VET POTENTIAL TEAM MEMBERS.

Don't reinvent the wheel, our experts say. Start with a recommendation from a friend with a similar style to yours or the pro you already trust from a previous project. That pro likely collaborates with other professionals at the same level of expertise and commitment to client satisfaction, says contractor James Meadors. If you're considering someone new, ask for a client list. Then ask those clients questions similar to the ones listed below. If any of the questions elicits a "no," move on to the next name on your list.

- Was he responsive?
- Did she follow through with appointments and promised work?
- Did he give you what you asked for?
- Did she make you feel like you were being heard?
- Did you feel like the job was important to him?
- Did her project run smoothly and on time?

## RECOGNIZE THE ARCHITECT'S ROLE.

So you're getting ready to work with an architect. Expect this person to lead the team and to document the team decisions. As architect Becky Fenno says: "We're the big-picture coordinator. We bring our knowledge of structure and systems to the table." Plus, architects can help you visualize changes being discussed—in real time. "There's something magical about drawing something by hand for a client," says architect Allard Jansen. "That's important for us to be able to do."

## UNDERSTAND THE KITCHEN DESIGNER'S ROLE.

Kitchen designers spend 100 percent of their time steeped in work zones, cabinets, and other key components. So expect yours to be the person who fine-tunes the basic blueprint with you in mind. "We're acutely aware of the nuances of each element and how specific areas function," says kitchen designer Lance Stratton. Kitchen designer Linda McLain agrees, adding: "My goal is for clients to get what they want, but it's also my professional responsibility to make sure clients understand what they're asking for."

## VALUE THE CONTRACTOR'S ROLE.

No one else will know more about the day-to-day reality of your project than the contractor, who will look at the set of plans, determine what needs to happen next, and help the team (including you) better understand costs and time. "I figure out the implications of transformation," Meadors says. "Do we have to move a wall? Get water to a point where it's not? I surround myself with people who can answer those questions." Or as Jansen says: "It's the contractor who can best address how you move from paper to the real world."

## APPRECIATE THE INTERIOR DESIGNER'S ROLE.

Look to the interior designer to make sure the kitchen reflects your personal style and blends with the rest of the house. "We're all working together to create this comprehensive design," says interior designer Barbara Jordan. "As the interior designer, I finish off the kitchen at the level we would all like." Your interior designer also will make sure you can live with the choices you make. "Today's clients love exploring what's out there," Shewan says. "They pick what excites them. But different things can't always be married in the same room. Your job as an interior designer is to keep clients focused without saying 'no' too many times."

## EXPECT PROS TO RESPECT EACH OTHER'S EXPERTISE.

To focus on creating the best product possible, team members need to check their egos at the door and embrace the power of their differences. That may be hard for design experts who are capable of creating kitchens on their own. "But when everybody's present, the whole level is taken up a few notches because everyone focuses on his or her area of expertise to the very best of their abilities," Stratton says. "And you need to have the humility to accept that someone else's ideas may be better than your own," says interior designer Pamela Plowden. "That comes with maturity and being professional."



“It is necessary that you are completely comfortable with your primary contact on the design team. If you are completely comfortable with the entire team, that’s a home run.” **James Meadors**  
Contractor

#### GREEN LIGHT OR RED?

### Be Aware of Rough Spots

Here’s how you know when things are going well: Everyone feels a sense of ownership. Meetings involve frank discussions of budget, schedule, and problems. Team members respond promptly to action items. And there’s a vibe, Fenno says, because everyone is excited by the ideas being discussed.

But sometimes things don’t go so smoothly. Our panel of experts identified some red flags that let you know an intervention might be needed.

- The team gives you a plan without asking for your input.
- You’re surprised by construction details.
- Contractors don’t have the information they need to move forward.
- You make a phone call and it doesn’t get returned.
- Team members aren’t communicating with you or each other.
- You feel clueless or don’t understand the conversations going on around you.
- Every other week you ask, “Why haven’t we gotten this done yet?”

#### COUNT ON INFO BEING SHARED.

With something as complex as a kitchen, errors can happen. But the number of mistakes can be reduced with direct lines of communication. Face-to-face conversations and on-site meetings help make sure everyone is on the same page. “We try to do the lion’s share of design and refinement with everyone in the room at the same time,” says architect Bill Prestwood. “That way we make sure everyone is in agreement.”

When time is of the essence, however, e-mail and smartphones often make everyone’s lives easier. “Send everybody the sketch, get a quick response from every team member, and by the next day, we’ve solved it,” Plowden says. But be careful, Prestwood warns: With e-mail, the opportunity for misinterpretation grows.

#### MAINTAIN A DIALOGUE WITH A TRUSTED TEAM MEMBER.

Your chief point of contact may be the team leader or the pro you know the best. In either scenario, you need to trust this person to keep you fully informed. “He or she needs to show you how the team is meeting your expectation of selections and show you that everything is on

schedule,” Meadors says. “He or she needs to reinforce your confidence in the team.”

#### PARTICIPATE IN THE PROCESS.

As Merrell explains: “The best kitchens are the ones where clients fully participate in the design process.” So never assume you are a silent member of the team, Prestwood says. “You need to understand the implications of the decisions you’re making,” he says. “Your duty is NOT to make our lives easier or to speed the process along.”

#### ANTICIPATE LOVING YOUR KITCHEN.

The process will be long, rigorous, joyful at times, frustrating at others. Some decisions will be no-brainers, others will be agonizing. But in the end, you’ll have a kitchen that suits your personal style in a way that no spec kitchen ever could.

Meadors explains it best: “Success? That’s when the client says, ‘We’re completely in love with the kitchen. We feel like we thought of all this.’ And as for the team, you can’t remember all the hours you put into searching for the best answers because you feel so good about the final results.”



PHOTOGRAPHER: THIS PAGE, JOHN BESSLER

## meet the designers



#### PROFILE

### Beth Merrell

Owner of Donlon & Merrell Designs in Charlotte, Merrell’s focus is on satisfying the unique cabinetry needs of clients.



#### PROFILE

### Barbara Jordan

In Charlotte, Jordan has run her own firm, Barbara Jordan Interiors, for over 20 years, creating timeless designs that reflect her clients’ tastes.



#### PROFILE

### Lance Stratton

Owner of his own La Jolla, California, design firm, Studio Stratton, this seasoned pro specializes in custom residential kitchen design.



#### PROFILE

### Allard Jansen

Founding principal of Allard Jansen Architects, Inc., in San Diego, Jansen, AIA, has designed custom homes for more than 25 years.



#### PROFILE

### Bill Prestwood

An architect with Don Duffy Architecture in Charlotte, Prestwood, AIA, is experienced in classical residential architecture.



#### PROFILE

### Michael Shewan

Co-owner of Michael David & Associates in Charleston, South Carolina, Shewan has designed interiors in fine homes across the nation.



#### PROFILE

### Pamela Plowden

Plowden, ASID, is a partner with Pulliam-Morris Interiors in Columbia, South Carolina. Her work includes new construction and renovations.



#### PROFILE

### James Meadors

Owner of Meadors Construction in Charleston, South Carolina, Meadors has built a stellar reputation for fine craftsmanship and attention to detail.



#### PROFILE

### Becky Fenno

Lead architect at Meadors Construction, Fenno, AIA, LEED AP, believes in the collaborative mix of architecture and construction.



#### PROFILE

### Linda McLain

McLain, CKD, co-owns Signature Kitchens and Baths in Charleston, South Carolina. She has designed more than 10,000 kitchens in her 35-year career.

“Many hands touch something before it is finished. How we handle the process has everything to do with keeping the homeowner calm—and satisfied.”

**Pamela Plowden**  
Interior Designer