The High-Tech Kitchen

Soon you may find yourself installing a restaurant-style setup.

But do you really want to cook like a pro? By Penny Moser

About noon every Saturday my husband, Don, walks into the kitchen, opens the refrigerator door, stands left, right up and down and then asks—whether anyone is there or not—"Where's the mayonnaise?" This has been going on for twenty-five years.

There has to be some Mars-Venus, right-brain/left-brain reason men can't find things in the fridge. A friend of mine—a real man's man—once suggested that someone invent the Peg-Board refrigerator. You'd open the door and the hanger would just be hanging there, like a hammer.

Maybe the answer for my family, though, comes directly from restaurant kitchens: a Hobart O Series refrigerator, with "mobile food files," shelves that roll out and slide onto a little dolly with casters. My husband could just open the fridge door, transfer its entire contents, and roll the cart over to me so I could point to the mayonnaise.

I'm learning about things like this because I'm trying with expanding my tiny townhouse kitchen. My wonder-kitchen ambitions find me flipping through magazines, doodling on the Net and calling manufacturers. "IHey," I think, "I could have a real kitchen. Almost a restaurant kitchen." And I really mean that, because so much of what will be coming into our homes in the near future is taken from restaurant equipment. This is nothing new—consumers have been buying professional gear, like Viking ranges and Sub-Zero refrigerators, for some time. But these days the number of serious-looking appliances angling for spots in our kitchens is greater than ever before.

For instance, Seattle chef Kathy Casey, owner of a smart consulting firm with its own demo restaurant kitchen
where chefs can play with all the latest technology, thinks I could be a more efficient cook if I had a refrigerated work table. It would help me with my mise-en-place, she says. "Huh?" I reply.

"Mise-en-place means everything in its place. It's how restaurants throw together dishes so quickly on the line," Casey explains. These work tables (made by Traulsen or Randell, and sold for $1,000 and up) have refrigerated drawers or doors with stainless steel pans that drop in and lift out. "So you just open the door and there are all the goodies—arugula in one pan, vinaigrette in the next. Why these are not already in more kitchens I don't know," Casey says, adding that the place to put one is "right next to the stove."

Which brings up my stove fantasies. I could buy a restaurant stove for my home. Not only would it cook like a demon, but it would probably outlive me.

Frankly, as exciting as the brute force of all this restaurant equipment may be, I find myself looking forward to a kitchen that can hold up its end of the conversation. I await what might turn out to be my favorite toy from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab: the talking oven mitt.

Yes, through the miracle of microchips, you'll soon be able to put on your oven mitt, sit back and watch Seinfeld while you wait for a sensor in your stove to radio the mitt, which will then speak up and announce that your beef Wellington's ready.

"We'll be seeing lots of chip-implanted appliances in the future. I was dazzled to learn that Frigidaire now has, somewhere in prototype-land, an online refrigerator. With a built-in bar code scanner (like at the grocery checkout!), this fridge would let me scan that almost-empty jar of mayonnaise onto a shopping list that gets automatically modded to the store. Then I could just wait for mayonnaise to be delivered to my door.

This, however, puts one scary cloud upon my horizon. My husband would never need me to find the mayonnaise again. Secure in the knowledge that we had a full supply, he would search with confidence.

That is, of course, until our big, smart, talking fridge weighs in: "Don, what you've just found is a mayonnaise jar. I've been scanning all night and now conclude that this jar contains either Cool Whip or creamed herring. Have a nice day."

How sweet. He'd still need me.

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