

# ELLE DECORATION

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## SURREAL WORLD

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ELLE DECORATION N°395 APRIL 2026

HOW TO BE BOLD

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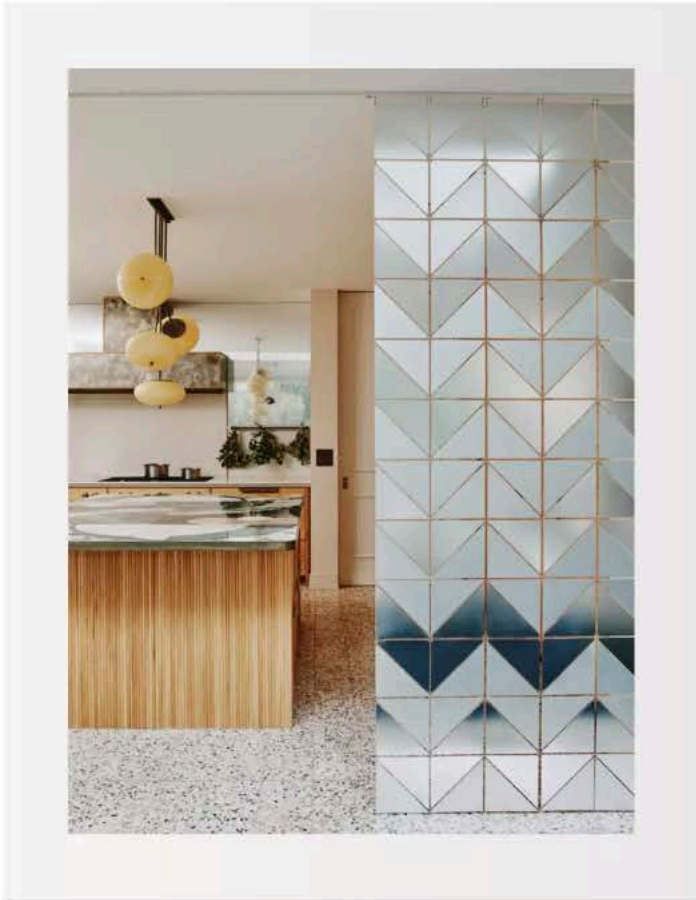
# HOW TO BE BOLD



## The secret ingredient is you

*A truly tailored kitchen is one that suits your needs, however unconventional.*

*We spoke to brands specialising in bespoke design to uncover their quirkiest ever requests* **WORDS CLARE SARTIN**



**F**lick through the cookbooks that line the shelves in your kitchen. They are full of chef-approved dishes, but how often do you really stick to the methods and ingredients they prescribe? There is usually a twist, whether through necessity (what's in the fridge) or personal taste. The same principle applies to kitchen design: it's the sprinkling of personality that transforms a kitchen into the heart of the home. Bespoke designers and makers can help you find that magic.

'Often, the most interesting ideas come directly from the clients themselves – a detail they're emotionally attached to or something they've always wanted to incorporate can spark an entirely new material or design direction,' says Charlie Smallbone, founder of Ledbury Studio. He recalls a project in Cheshire where a beloved collection of pewter mugs, which the homeowner had long wanted to display, became the catalyst for crafting solid sheets of patinated pewter into bespoke pieces of kitchen furniture: the kernel of an idea was extrapolated into something special. It was similar in a recent Camden kitchen – the client had found a 1970s disco-style screen in an antiques shop, and that discovery became

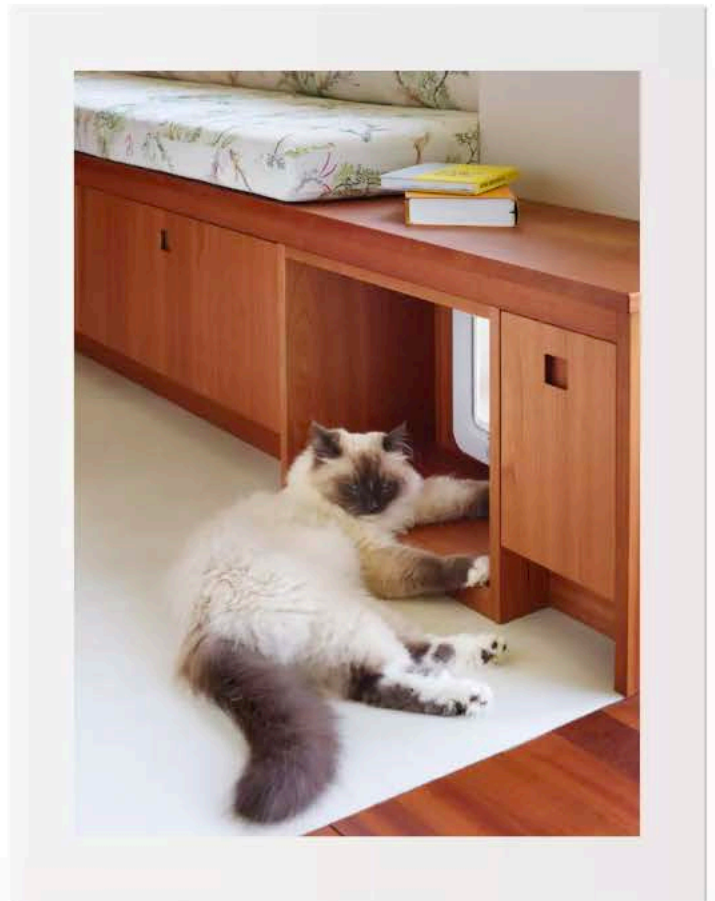
the starting point for a one-of-a-kind brushed and polished stainless-steel screen that now acts as a divider in the open-plan space.

These ideas all stem from insights into a client's style, unlocked during conversations. These chats are fertile ground, and discussing how life is actually lived in a kitchen is the key. 'Don't ever get a kitchen that you aspire to have. That's unreachable. It has to be practical,' advises Pluck co-founder Leila Touwen. She suggests talking through the nuts and bolts of how you interact with your kitchen: 'You know, those moments where you have a jolt, where you're using a space and you think, "This is really irritating because it hasn't been done properly." You should never experience that.'

One such irritation was the starting point for a concept by Naked Kitchens. It reads like the start of a nursery rhyme, but the brand's design team were approached by two homeowners: one who was very tall, while the other was short. Both wanted to be able to use the same kitchen with ease (and without back pain!). The solution was worktops and an island that would elevate at the press of a button, like a standing desk. 'It became complex but also great fun,' recalls co-founder Jayne Everett.

**Above, from left** The bespoke brushed and polished stainless-steel screen was inspired by a 1970s design found by a client and reimaged by Ledbury Studio for the kitchen in its Camden project; a contemporary marble take on the lazy Susan, that icon of sociable dining, created by Roundhouse for a family's London apartment; Naked Kitchens' custom-designed feline retreat in the cabinetry of one of its kitchens has a distinct *Tom and Jerry* feel; catflaps are rarely aesthetically pleasing, but this one is disguised beneath a custom-made banquette in the corner of a kitchen by Pluck





Practicalities such as what happens to the plumbing and the appliances when you are shifting the height of the cabinetry by six to eight inches became an interesting engineering challenge to overcome. ‘That’s our whole thing though,’ adds Everett. ‘If a client comes to us with a wild idea, our first thought is always, “Wow, that’s an exciting challenge. How can we make it happen?”’

Sometimes you are working out smaller annoyances, such as where best to keep pans and whether you need the knives within reach, but occasionally it’s important to think more abstractly about what you love doing in your kitchen. That could mean adding a tiny seating area for kids to keep you company while you cook or a larder that caters to your passions – one dedicated to baking, or a love of pickling or wine. For the London-based family that approached Roundhouse’s senior designer Ben Hawkswell, it meant realising that, for them, the kitchen was first and foremost a place for gathering and socialising. To suit their dining style, Hawkswell came up with a contemporary interpretation of a lazy Susan, crafted from the same stone as the kitchen island and countertops. After finding a reliable manufacturer of bearings to allow for the smooth spinning movement, he collaborated with Stone Company on the final piece. At first glance, it may not

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instantly jump out as a quirky addition, but it’s a moment of true delight that’s appreciated at every mealtime.

Speaking of delight: pets. ‘British people and their animals, right?’ says Pluck’s Touwen with a laugh. ‘If you’re doing a new kitchen, you’ll need to incorporate a spot for them. She and co-founder

George Glasier (more of a cat man) have created tucked-away dog beds that allow four-legged friends to watch the action without getting underfoot. Roundhouse’s Hawkswell has engineered an elegant solution for that same problem for one family and their ‘boisterous spaniel’: magnetic rails that extend from either side of the island, attaching to the walls to make a nifty dog gate. The ingenuity isn’t reserved for dogs, though. Both Pluck and Naked have turned their attention to felines, adding bespoke exits to the garden through the kitchen cabinetry. ‘Do you remember *Tom and Jerry*?’ asks Everett, who notes that the cut-out in a recent project looks like the mousehole from the cartoon. It’s not just pets of the four-legged kind, either. Toby Inglis Hall and Tim Flux of Inglis Hall once hand-built an aviary for a parrot and a tortoise house (all in keeping with a crafted kitchen) for one client. You would be forgiven for thinking that this was their most unusual brief, but you would be wrong. ►





'I've put removable false backs in carcasses that hid a secondary cupboard, placed false bottoms in drawers to make a void where clients could keep instruction manuals for appliances or their family jewellery safe,' says Inglis Hall, explaining the skill set in 'applied imagination' that made his company the natural choice for creating a kitchen strictly in keeping with the style of a moated Elizabethan manor. That meant no screws at all, just traditional woodworking. It was a request that catapulted his modern workshop back 300 years or more – think wall cabinets with doors that glide on simple oak runners, faithfully replicated fine French joinery, delicate mortice-and-tenon or bird's-mouth mitre joints. To craft one of the kitchen's standout features, the pair turned to an expert decorative carver who whittled what looks like a woven grille from a 20mm-thick piece of solid timber. It's moments like this one-off design that delighted Inglis Hall and Flux, but amazed their client even more.

Remaining true to original architecture was also central to the brief handed to Chamber Furniture's director Scott Nicholson by interior designer and homeowner Lyn Goddard of HSI Designs. Fitting the kitchen in her Georgian rectory was a collaboration

that included sourcing aged-oak flooring from France, adapting 17th-century lights and extending Fior di Bosco-marble worktops to create a butler sink reminiscent of some horse troughs that Goddard had spotted on her travels. 'Every client is completely different, and it's very much about creating a space to honour what they love and the way they live,' says Nicholson.

How do you balance the creative elements that make a kitchen sing with the practical stuff, though? Inglis Hall and Flux have a formula: 'We put 20 per cent of our effort into the 80 per cent of what makes a kitchen a kitchen so that we can put 80 per cent of our time into the 20 per cent that makes it really special.' It's their own version of the hierarchy of needs, making sure that the functionality of their design and the materiality, finely honed over years of experience, is reliably accomplished so they can focus on that sprinkling of stardust. It's an approach that resonates across every bespoke brand.

'Kitchens hold routines and memories,' says Ledbury Studio's Smallbone. 'When a design reflects a client's personality, it creates an emotional connection. That's when a kitchen really lasts, not just in terms of quality, but in the way people continue to enjoy it.' **ED**

**Above, from left** A Fior di Bosco splashback and worktop have been extended to create a bespoke marble butler sink in this kitchen that was a customised collaboration between Chamber Furniture and interior designer Lyn Goddard of HSI Designs; Inglis Hall prides itself on creating secret hidden-storage elements, but this disguised pantry in its historically accurate kitchen for an Elizabethan manor was a more exciting challenge than most