

A little less drama: Kitchen backsplashes get sleeker

By **Melissa Rayworth** | AP June 7

The kitchen backsplash — that surface behind the stovetop or sink that protects the wall from damage during cooking and dishwashing — has long been used to add color and beauty to an otherwise utilitarian space.

But dramatic, ornately patterned backsplashes, once popular, are being replaced by sleeker, simpler designs, says interior designer Jenny Kirschner. Many designers are using monochromatic tiles arranged in simple patterns to create beautiful backsplashes that won't quickly go out of style.

We've asked New York-based Kirschner and two other interior designers — Florida-based Andrew Howard and California-based Sayre Ziskin — for advice on creating a kitchen backsplash that is as timeless as it is gorgeous.

QUALITY AND HANDCRAFTING

"I make it a point in every kitchen to do a standout backsplash," Howard says. But that doesn't mean the project has to be expensive. Because a backsplash covers a relatively small area, he says, it's possible to use high-end and even custom-made tiles while keeping costs down.

There is usually a space of just 18 inches between upper and lower cabinets, so it doesn't take a lot of tile to fill that area if you wish to extend the backsplash beyond the sink or stovetop.

All three designers suggest hunting for high-quality porcelain or ceramic tiles, or commissioning them in custom colors and finishes. For ceramic tiles in custom colors, Kirschner recommends Fireclay Tile, a California company that ships nationally. Ziskin is a fan of the handmade tiles by Anne Sacks, which she says offer the beautiful flaws and uniqueness that machine-made tiles don't have.

COORDINATING, NOT CONTRASTING

It's tempting to add a burst of color in your backsplash. But by keeping the backsplash neutral and adding brighter colors through more easily replaceable things like curtains and upholstery, you're less likely to get bored. And if you'll be selling your home within a few years, a neutral backsplash in classic white subway tile or a pale gray glass tile is a much easier sell than a distinctive color.

Kirschner likes designing backsplashes that are coordinated with the countertop material. By matching the materials instead of contrasting them, she says, "you don't run the risk of saying, 'What was I thinking?'"

One way to do this is to use faux-marble porcelain slab countertops in a neutral color, and then use tiles or a solid slab in the same material for your backsplash. You can also choose a tile in a slightly different material than your countertops but exactly match the color.

CREATIVE PLACEMENT

One way to make tiles in a neutral shade like white or gray look more striking is to get "playful with shape, rather than color," Kirschner says.

If you like subway tiles but feel they're overused, choose an oversize version or a very elongated one. To make classic tiles look fresh and surprising, try arranging long, narrow tiles vertically instead of horizontally.

Another fresh twist: Ziskin likes lining up edges of tiles so that they are stacked neatly, rather than offsetting them in a traditional brick pattern.

Also popular right now are hexagonal tiles arranged with the top edge left uneven. It's traditional to cut a few hexagonal tiles in half to create a solid top line straight across. But designers are now using only whole tiles, creating a playful, uneven line across the top.

SLABS AND STEEL

Some homeowners rarely cook, Howard says, so they can choose a backsplash that's purely about beauty. But the rest of us do give our stoves and sinks a workout, so we need to be more practical.

"If you're in your kitchen a lot and it's getting heavy use, I would shy away from marble or a grouted backsplash," Howard says. "Because you don't want to spend all your time scrubbing down your backsplash."

Ziskin agrees: Lots of thick grout lines can be "a cleaning nightmare."

One solution is using a faux-marble slab backsplash (real marble may pick up stains you can't remove) rather than tiles. That way there's no grout to clean.

Another option is using tiles but keeping grout to a minimum. Kirschner has used stainless steel tiles with no visible grout lines to create a sleek backsplash in kitchens that also have stainless steel appliances. It's a unique look and easy to clean.

Any design that you love can be beautiful, Ziskin says, "as long as the surface is wipeable and it doesn't stain."

Online:

www.andrewjhoward.com

www.jdkinteriors.com

www.svzinteriordesign.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: Melissa Rayworth writes about lifestyles topics for The Associated Press. Follow her on Twitter @mrayworth.

Copyright 2017 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.