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WEST

BRIT LOT-LOVE

Ye Olde Okanagan but with modern fills.
PH6

RENO

HOLIDAY DUST-UP

So that's why the Christmas goose tastes like varnish.
PH8

BUY

UPTOWN PICK-UP

Angled lot, full of art: \$2.5-million.
PH13



Croma Express will design the cooking hub of your dreams, such as the one above, based on a modular kitchen from a big box store. CROMA DESIGN

THE (almost custom) KITCHEN

They'll never know the cabinets were bought at the check-out line *By Tanya Linton*

Liz Aikenhead has a to-die-for kitchen. It's the type of kitchen that makes visitors wish they had a stockbroker's salary so they could rip out their last-renovated-in-the-'70s room and replicate her stylish space.

She has all the wants: Sleek teak lower cabinets, drawers and doors that close so silently her two 20-year-old daughters and their friends can comb for food at midnight and you'd barely hear them, Carrera marble countertops, a bathtub-sized stainless sink, stainless steel shelving, two built-in double-door pantries and restaurant-style appliances.

Now this woman loves to cook and will whip up Batali-esque meals for anyone who happens to just "pop in" for a visit. So, after years of entertaining in a tiny, outdated mish-mashed kitchen, if anyone deserved to splurge on high style and go for a fancy kitchen, it was she. But wait. Her new kitchen isn't custom. It's Ikea.

It may be hard to believe you can find designer style for your kitchen at the checkout line, but it's true. Buying a kitchen at a big box store is increasing in popularity, and, when installed with a few extra made-to-order accessories, it's

hard to tell the difference between the kitchen you painstakingly put together with an Allen key and the one your Prada-clad interior designer convinced you was worth boosting your never-ending mortgage for.

"The trick is mixing and matching the stock items with a few custom pieces that you just can't live without," Ms. Aikenhead says. "For me, it was choosing simple, modern cabinetry that was extremely affordable and splurging on the honed-marble countertop. I wanted it to be sleek and modern with a touch of the Old World. The end result is

a gorgeous kitchen that didn't break the bank."

Amy Kent and Ryan Martin of Croma Design in Toronto have been designing clean-lined contemporary kitchens for years, but recently they started noticing a trend among their clients. More and more, people were requesting ways to keep the cost of the cabinetry down while still splurging on certain finishes. So, after piecing together a handful of kitchens with Ikea cabinetry topped with CaesarStone and stainless tub sinks, the duo launched Croma Express.

KITCHEN continued on PH6



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We're fickle when it comes to buying stoves, and we rely on savvy salespeople

SURVEY SAYS

Sure, Canadians love nifty appliances, but that doesn't mean they like them to be expensive. A survey by the NPD Group reports that seven out of 10 Canadians purchase appliances under the sticker price and there is a surprising lack of brand loyalty: Only one in four consumers report purchasing the same brand they previously owned. The study identifies three additional key purchasing influ-

ences, including product features, persuasive sales staff and online research. Nearly six out of 10 Canadians cite features as an important reason for selecting an appliance and consumers were twice as likely (44%) to rely on knowledgeable sales staff than any other information source when select-

ing an appliance. Furthermore, four in 10 consumers reported consulting at least one online source prior to shopping for appliances (retailer websites: 21%; manufacturer websites: 18%). *National Post*



Best friends: frugal cabinetry and fancy faucets

KITCHEN

Continued from PH1

The outfit is a sidearm of their interior design business, that, for the cost of a consultation or two, will design the kitchen of your dreams based on a modular kitchen from a big-box store such as Ikea, Kona or Home Depot.

"Basically, we are giving our design services at a reduced rate and the easiest way to do that is by starting with a basic but very stylish kitchen that you can buy off the shelf," says Ms. Keat. "We give you the full layout of your kitchen and a list of the cabinets that you need to buy, plus a recommendation of the other items that will kick your kitchen up a notch — like marble countertops or interesting flooring."

Essentially, they distill the design process down to a few approved big-box cabinet choices (meaning they have a handful of favourites; not all make the cut), throw in a choice of handles and knobs from various suppliers, and always recommend a high-end tile backsplash (think of it as your investment piece) and then top off the design package with a couple of killer options for countertops — so that by the time it's all installed, you have a kitchen that bears little resemblance to Page 9 of Ikea's or Home Depot's catalogue.

Jeanette Hlinka, a Toronto-based interior designer, is also a big believer in big-box kitchen

ens. In fact, her latest project displays Ikea cabinetry in different colours for the tops and bottoms, with supercool handles, flooring and countertops that a seasoned designer would know where to source from. "If you are fearless and prepared to do some work, then this is a great affordable way to renovate," she says. "It can actually be quite a creative process because you can use the standard pieces like

The trick is mixing the stock items with custom pieces

Lego — just mix and match the pieces to make it work."

The best part is, if the off-the-rack cabinets don't come in the size to fit the awkward, narrow space left after all the regular cabinetry is placed, you can simply slice a standard cabinet down to fit, to create the perfect storage space for cutting boards and cookie sheets. And should your two-year-old happen to draw on your brand-new white lacquered doors — you can always make a pit stop on the weekend and replace the door for less than \$100 instead of special ordering a new door from the custom cabinet maker.

But it's not just reconfiguring the cabinetry that makes for a personalized statement,

it's everything else that goes with it. Croma's Ryan Martin has a few tricks that he uses to turn mass-market kitchens into something magazine-worthy. "First, we always believe in upgrading your backsplash so that it can become the focal point of your kitchen. A really fabulous tile or sheet of stainless steel will add high style to your kitchen," he says. "We also often choose to forgo the upper cabinets and install open shelving for a more sleek and sophisticated look."

The Croma team also suggests upgrading hardware and plumbing fixtures. These accessories are the jewels of your kitchen, so you may as well splurge a little and let the bling get noticed. And when it comes to the actual layout of a kitchen, they always recommend knocking out a wall or two to open the kitchen up to the rest of the house — to enable you to create an island (where doable), with the rest of the kitchen wrapping around it.

"Cabinets are only a part of the room," adds Ms. Hlinka. "Lighting and accessories go a really long way in making it you. And sometimes those things take time to find. But don't worry about it — building the personality of your kitchen is something that should take months of playing around and experimenting with different items. But once it's done, I guarantee no one will be able to tell your kitchen from a high-end custom job."

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Don't order out — that's a five-burner Bertazzoni gas range, but most importantly there's