Hey, I’m Georgina...

How to buy a KITCHEN

Whether you’re about to have a new design as part of an extension, or you’ve had the same cabinetry for decades and it’s time for a refresh – acting editor Georgina Townshend finds out how to get the process started, no matter your budget or style.
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ver the years of working for KBB magazine, I have, in many different ways, written about how to buy a kitchen. Which is why, back in late 2022 during our planning meeting for this issue – when we were discussing ideas of how to tackle the question of how to buy a kitchen – I decided instead of including advice from others, I would go out, visit a variety of showrooms myself, and share my findings. Pre-loaded with my knowledge and years of experience in the industry, I wasn’t sure if I would discover anything new. However, it was certainly an eye-opening journey…

THE BEGINNING

My “how to buy a kitchen” adventure began at home, researching the types of showrooms I wanted to visit – and that’s exactly where you should start, too. There is an immense amount of kitchen companies out there, but they are not all the same. They vary drastically, depending on budget and style. For instance, some starting prices may be between £10,000 and £20,000, or as high as £30,000 or £50,000. It’s even featered a company before with a starting price of £250,000. Which means, before anything else, you need to nail both of these elements down. Look at your finances and see what you can afford, or what you’d be happy to spend, and be honest with yourself. If you’re reckoning what the average cost of a kitchen is, I’m afraid I can’t answer you there. However, as a very rough guide your new kitchen should cost no more than 2-3% of the value of your home, with installation being around 15-20% of the overall price of your project. You’ll also need to allow for a contingency budget of at least 10%. Once you have a decent idea of what you can – or want – to spend, start your research on style. Do you like traditional or modern looks? Colour or no colour? And do you want in-frame cabinetry, also known as Shaker style, or disc, handleless fronts?

Once you have your budget and style in mind, you can start the hunt for companies that will be your perfect match. Look in magazines, online, on sites such as Pinterest, or on social media, and see if an image by a particular company draws your attention more than others. Plus, don’t forget your local high street – is there a showroom you walk or drive past that always catches your eye? If your answer is yes, look more into them on their website and see if they resonate with you and your criteria. Most companies should have their starting prices easy to find, but if not, getting them a ring or walk-in will allow you to find out if they can work within your budget. As a bare minimum, pick three showrooms to visit. Some may be happy to accept walk-ins, while others are appointment only – so find that out before you go.

THE SHOWROOM VISITS

It was important to me that I visited showrooms that represented the enormous spectrum of companies that are out there. From ones that have so-called in-stock or off-the-shelf cabinetry (units that are built en masse and stored in warehouses) to custom-made designs, which offer many more options but are still slightly limited in what they can do, to the fully bespoke specialists. Before you visit your chosen showrooms, there are a few key things you should bring with you. Most importantly, don’t forget your floor plans – whether they are architects’ plans for your in-progress kitchen extension or a hand-drawn birds’ eye view of your current space which you’ve prepared after meticulously measuring up. Either will give the designer something to work with. Remember to include structural elements such as windows, doors or chimneybreasts, too, as they will affect what’s possible in your design. If you have any moodboards, be they physical collage or screenshots on your phone, be sure to bring them along too.

The company I visited first was in the most unusual of places, and it wasn’t even a showroom – it was a workshop on a farm. But don’t let first impressions deceive you. While it may seem rustic on the outside (and inside, too), Shere Kitchens cabinets are handmade by a small, specialist team. Their designs are fully bespoke and start from £35,000. As I weaved my way through the country lanes leading to their dedicated unit, I had no idea of what was awaiting me: a couple of rooms housing work benches, a large collection of tools and machinery, plus shelves filled to the brim with different types and sizes of wood. It was an eye-opener journey…
Warmed by a cup of tea and an industrial-style fireplace, I spoke with co-founders Andy Driscoll and Mike Hill about the process they go through.

Anyone looking for a kitchen with them will have an initial phone consultation, to learn more about the technical things such as budget, ideas and timelines — a process you will find most companies undertake in one form or another. The team will either then visit the homeowners to progress the design and measure up, or invite them to the workshop. Of course, unlike a regular showroom, you won’t be able to touch, feel, and visualise your space — and you can’t point to worktops, appliances or cabinetry you like the look of. However, this can be made up for by the fact that Shere Kitchens can work with tricky-shaped ceilings, create any size of cabinetry, match cornice, engrave names on drawers — nothing is impossible. Andy and Mike will dedicate hours to the small details to make these kitchens perfect. In fact, Mike told me he wants his clients to be “brutal” in their feedback when going back and forth with designs — as there’s no point spending all that money if they aren’t 100% happy. And this is important advice for any budget or design. I’m pretty blown away at how these beautiful kitchens come from such humble origins — and I can see the appeal of being able to watch your cabinetry being made. However, if you are going for a bespoke kitchen company, or a joiner, with no showroom, I would recommend trying to visit or at least talk to homeowners who have finished a project with the company for reassurance. I was invited to a home down the road from the workshop to see a kitchen they had completed two years ago — and it still looked perfect.

While the process of buying bespoke is fairly similar to others, the level of detail, options, and customer service you are presented with sets it apart — but it also makes it that much pricier. The designers will work with you to overcome any logistical problems, advise on all parts of the kitchen, from materials to appliances, and be with you from the beginning right through to the final fix — and after, too. Of course, you can still have a similar service and a highly personalised, unique space by choosing a kitchen company that offers custom-made (also known as made-to-order) cabinetry. Often, these retailers will use two to three different furniture manufacturers and have a range of appliance partners. You’ll find the crème de la crème of these lining Wigmore Street in London — known by some in the industry as the epicentre of kitchen design. I decided to visit one showroom to see how this differed from my first experience.

A kitchen should be something that lasts for years, so don’t rush the decision. This large open-plan scheme, from Piqu, features a beautiful range of materials and features. Prices for a Piqu kitchen start from £35,000.
Halcyon Interiors specialise in luxury minimalist kitchens, with the average price of their designs typically being around the £55,000 mark. Designer Graham Robinson gave me the tour as if I was a potential client and talked me through the early stages of buying a kitchen. It felt very relaxed and informal, with no pressure or sales pitch whatsoever. This is probably because he describes the first meeting as more of an initial chat with you — from finding out how you live and how you cook to seeing if you like to do a lot of online shopping (so get lots of cardboard) and how big your wine glasses are. Expect these meetings to last for around two hours. From there, he’ll get designing and invite you back in for a second visit to go through the plans and start finessing the layout. Graham’s top tip is to take the time to think about what you really want, as your kitchen is a big investment you will use for years to come. There is no limit on how many alterations to the designs that can be done or how long it can take. Graham tells me plans can be signed off in as little as a couple of weeks — or take as long as more than a year to finalise, in some extreme cases.

However, you don’t have to trek all the way into central London to get a similar experience. A few days later I visited Day True on Wimbledon high street, who describe themselves as kitchen, bathroom and home retailers with a difference. They offer a mix of bespoke and made-to-order furniture, and take an approach to design that is driven by the belief that good design has the potential to improve happiness and wellbeing. Over a coffee I spoke with co-founder Hayley Robson, who tells me initial meetings will include discussing timescales, budget and stages of readiness, while looking at drawings, clippings, or an iPad full of the homeowner’s ideas. During this meeting they’ll explore some musts and likes and, just like Halcyon Interiors, discover more about how you live.
This helps them put together an initial proposal that includes their first design thoughts, suggestions and budgets.

With both companies I was impressed at the experience and knowledge of the designers and how focused they were on creating a kitchen that was absolutely right for the homeowner. The priority isn’t what it looks like, but how it functions and works with your lifestyle. No matter your budget, I think this is an important ethos to carry with you.

What sets made-to-order kitchens apart from in-stock or off-the-shelf brands is the detail, from how edges are finished to how the veins match on a worktop. It’s worth noting that high-end companies such as these may require design fees after those first initial plans, so be sure to check what will be required of you and when.

However, don’t think that all retailers that offer custom-made cabinetry come with the same price tag. There are plenty on high streets up and down the country that can compete with in-stock companies – in terms of budget – but with more options and potentially higher-quality materials as well.

IN-STOCK OR OFF-THE-SHELF KITCHENS

My last visit was with Magnet – a well-known national chain which has been selling kitchens for more than 100 years. Depending on the range, their prices can start from around £3000, with several finance options and regular sales on furniture or appliances. I went to their new concept store in South Wimbledon and was impressed at the variety of kitchens on display – the look of them was very similar to those independents I had visited a few days before. My design appointment started with a look around the showroom to see the type of styles that I liked. We then went over to the samples area where I could create a physical moodboard of flooring, tiles, cabinetry, and handles – I could have been there playing for hours. Then, it was straight to designing, which I could watch unfold before my eyes on a screen behind the designer. I was able to request styles and changes, which were done at the click of a button. However, while being able to swap and switch elements easily is great, I feel like it could become overwhelming. Plus, during the process, the limitations of their in-stock furniture became apparent. For example, certain doors can only come in one or two sizes, and can only go in certain places. Of course, this is one of the main reasons why their kitchens are more affordable than the rest. I like that you can have a real say in the design, and you can create a very high-end look – you will just have to work within the constraints of the options presented to you.

This was way too much fun.
MY FINDINGS

Whether it’s a personalised bespoke kitchen you’re after or a more budget-friendly in-stock scheme, the process of buying a kitchen is actually quite similar. Set your budget, do your research, and have your plans and measurements ready so you can get designing. Have an open mind to designers’ suggestions, but equally be confident enough to say when you’re not happy with something. Make sure you’re getting the design that will be right for you and your lifestyle, for now and in the future. I also think the connection you have with your designer is important – you will be working closely with them, so ensure they share your vision. A kitchen should be something that lasts years, so don’t rush the decision. Go out and visit multiple showrooms, choosing (at least) three of your favourites to come up with some initial designs. If there’s one you like the most, pursue with that company, going back with changes until you’re happy with the final design. With all of the above in place, you’re well on your way to buying your dream kitchen.

*This design, by online kitchen company Smile Kitchens, includes clean minimalist edges and a bold blue colour. Smile Kitchens prices start from £1873.*

OTHER WAYS of buying a kitchen

While visiting showrooms and working with their designers is the most common way of buying a kitchen, there are other ways to do so. For instance, you could buy a second-hand or ex-display kitchen from companies such as The Used Kitchen Exchange, or try online-only companies such as Smile Kitchens. You could also find companies such as Sheffield Sustainable Kitchens who will work with your current cabinetry to completely transform it. Some interior designers also can create their own bespoke solutions and employ joiners to build the cabinetry from scratch. Whatever way you go, ensure you are happy with the final design before signing on the dotted line.