

HIGH Style

What recession? High-quality products and steady prices have made it more and more tempting to invest in luxury kitchen, bath and entertainment options.

By Dawn Klingensmith

Special to @home.

Lew Bednarczuk, whose job is to stay on top of what's going on in luxury home design, recently talked about the merits of owning a "double-wide" vs. a "single-wide."

Is the economy so bad that the president and CEO of HomePortfolio.com, an online directory of high-end home design products, has put some serious thought into trailer home widths?

Far from it.

Bednarczuk was talking about single-wide or double-wide indoor kitchen grills built into the range top.

Despite the recession, "higher-end appliances are kind of becoming the norm," Bednarczuk said. In fact, professional-grade kitchen appliances are starting to look like a good buy.

"Prices on this stuff have not gone up much over the years," he said. "I think that's the reason people are switching over."

For folks who can't afford or justify professional grade brands like Sub-Zero and Viking, midrange manufacturers like Jenn-Air have come out with luxury lines, Bednarczuk said.

"They are entering this arena because they see a demand and an opportunity," he said.

This enables middle-class consumers to get the look of a designer kitchen without the designer labels. If they are opting to do so despite the economy, perhaps that's because interior design shows and magazines have a way of making luxuries — which are expensive and inessential by definition — seem like necessities, entitlements or good investments. Wherever it snows every winter, it's easy to persuade people a bathroom towel warmer is a "must have." And when shopping around, it's hard to look at a Wesauard hydronic

warmer custom-made in Great Britain, which costs as much as \$7,000, and then settle for a Mr. Steam.

Setting aside style and prestige, are luxury items worth the extra cost? Below, we walk through three rooms where many people can't resist the splurge.

Chef's kitchen

There is, in fact, a big difference between an economy brand and Sub-Zero refrigerator, said certified kitchen designer Peggy Deras of Kitchen Artworks in South San Francisco, Calif.

Separate compressors for the freezer and fridge compartments keep food fresher. With no air exchange between the two compartments, temperatures and humidity levels remain constant so lettuce won't go limp, frozen bagels won't get freezer-burned and "you won't get odors migrating from fridge to freezer," Deras said.

The interior finishes in pro-grade fridges tend to be more durable, too.

"The only sacrifice is there's no ice and water through the door," Deras said, "But, if you can afford a Sub-Zero, then you can afford a dedicated icemaker."

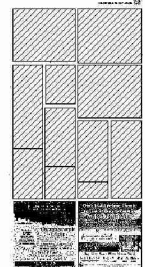
However, if you are comparing top-of-the-line non-designer brands like KitchenAid or GE with the designer lines, the appliances start to look and act more alike. In this case, "Honestly, there's probably not that big a difference with performance and durability," said New York-based real estate broker Linie Chang Rand, a branch manager with Better Homes and Gardens Rand Realty.

A so-called "chef's kitchen" with professional-grade appliances costs at least twice as much, and though such kitchens are highly marketable and desirable, it's unlikely those costs will be recouped at resale, Rand said.

One luxury kitchen item Bednarczuk said everybody should have is a built-in, one-button brewing system such as the \$3,000 offering from Miele that connects directly to the plumbing and dispenses coffee and espresso drinks on demand.

He also likes combined steam and convection ovens like Gaggenau's, which costs around \$7,000, because the cooking technology locks in nutrients for healthier eating.

"Induction burners are also pretty unique in that they heat the pot and its contents instead of the coil," Bednarczuk said. "The cooktop doesn't get hot, and it



brings things to a boil really fast.”

For the budget-conscious, “There are stand-alone countertop versions that plug in for as little as \$100, if you’re not redoing the whole kitchen but like that technology,” Bednarczuk said.

If money is no object and an appliance’s provenance is of interest, a Chateau La Cornue oven range might be just the thing. They are all assembled by hand by one man in France, and “even if you happen to be the Queen of England, you will have to wait at least two months” to get one, according to the company’s website. Each costs around \$50,000.

Ironically, “They look best in a log home in the mountains,” said interior designer Haleh Alemzadeh Niroo, principal of Haleh Design Inc., Potomac, Md.

Deras said, “My favorite product for clients who can afford to splurge and want an incredibly beautiful focal point in their kitchens is an Abbaka range hood,” handcrafted out of copper, stainless steel, aged bronze or brass. She added, “I always warn people not even to look at one if they’re not prepared to pay the steep price, because they’ll never be satisfied with anything less.”

Sometimes, utilitarian items from commercial spaces cross over as luxury amenities for home interiors. For example, for faucet controls, “I am currently using hands-free foot pedals in all my kitchen renovations, typically found only in hospitals and restaurants, but proving to be an eco-friendly convenience,” said Elaine Williamson of Elaine Williamson Designs in Dallas.

Bathing in style

Moving on to the bathroom, “Full-service toilets are becoming popular,” Bednarczuk said, including TOTO’s Neorest with a remote control automatic lid, an adjustable sprayer with “precision positioning” for personal cleansing and an integrated warm-air dryer. At a cost of nearly \$2,000, “It’s the carwash of toilets,” he said, jokingly.

For folks who enjoy long, luxurious soaks in the tub, there are models like

BainUltra’s that offer heated headrests, programmable massage and color, aroma and sound therapies.

One of the latest advances in tub technology is the ceiling-mounted filler, which shoots a stream of water into the tub that looks almost as solid as it is straight, like a pole.

“They look extremely impressive,” Williamson said. “However, if mounted too high, the temperature fails to impress by the time the water reaches the basin.”

Niroo recommends knob-and-basin sets from Sherle Wagner with hand-painted floral and fruit patterns.

“They’re the most beautiful sinks you’ve ever seen,” Niroo said. “The faucets, too. The craftsmanship, the design, is amazing. They almost look too beautiful to be used.”

Media room marvels

The media room is another space besides the kitchen where the cost of luxury has stayed steady or come down over the years. Nowadays, “you can put in a home theater with a 200-inch screen for not a lot of money,” Bednarczuk said. “Five thousand dollars will get you the screen and projector, and it’s an extra couple of thousand for theater seating.”

For traditional homes, Niroo favors American-made Habersham furnishings, particularly media cabinets, which combine Old World stateliness with today’s technology.

“They make fabulous entertainment units with remote controls, so you can lower a beautiful mural over the TV,” she said. There’s ample hidden storage for CDs, DVDs, game consoles and accessories.

Although the Internet is largely responsible for bringing luxury home products to the average consumer’s attention, Niroo advises against ordering such items online, even at a discount. “Buy from a reputable local vendor just in case problems arise. If you’re going to spend \$50,000 on kitchen appliances, it pays to spend a little more for personalized customer service and peace of mind.”

CTW Features

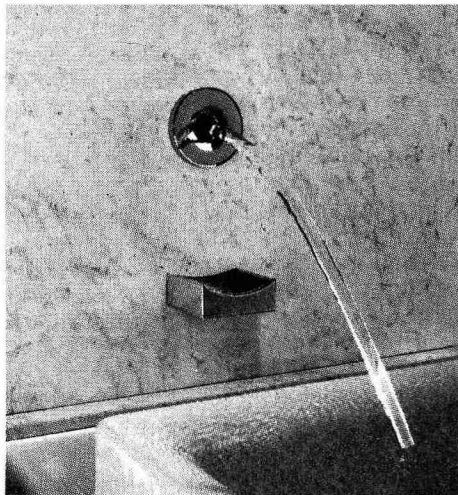


Photos special to @home

The kitchen can be the most expensive room in a house, which makes it worth dressing up a bit. Here, a Japanese print tile backsplash and chandeliers add finishing touches to a luxurious kitchen design.



For serious coffee lovers, Miele's coffee system offers a plumbed-in water connection, whole-bean grinding, milk-frothing system and warming tray.



Kohler's laminar wall- or ceiling-mounted bath filler produces an elegant, clear stream of water to fill a tub.