



# KELLY'S KITCHEN SYNC





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*Insider kitchen design  
and remodeling tips  
from an award-winning  
kitchen expert*



**Kelly Morisseau**

Certified Master Kitchen Designer



Kelly's Kitchen Sync

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*For my mom, who always held the other end  
of the tape measure so it didn't snap back,  
and my dad, who always laughed when it did.*

— PART 1 —  
EVERYONE NEEDS  
A LITTLE DESIGN HELP—  
THE EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY





## — CHAPTER 1 —

# EVERYONE NEEDS A LITTLE DESIGN HELP



### **Ready to remodel your kitchen?**

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Great! It sounds so easy — buy a few cabinets, some appliances, and perhaps even replace a worn counter. Then you discover the dishwasher handle blocks a drawer, the refrigerator door hits the cabinets, and the dishwasher won't fit under the new counter.

Some of you may think you'll never run into this — after all, your kitchen is pretty simple without a lot of changes, right?

Here's the reality: designing the kitchen of today is like stacking dominoes. Every choice, every product, and every finish you add to your kitchen impacts the design, simple or not. One piece can send the rest tumbling if not thought out — and there are a lot of pieces!

I'm not trying to scare you, but rather provide a bit of hope — with the help of this book, you'll sail past all this. You'll learn how to spot those errors — and many others — long before you ever get to the installation stage.

### **This isn't a typical kitchen design book**

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*I wrote this book for two reasons:*

1. Most kitchen design books don't go beyond basic. By basic, I mean, you'll learn all about 'L'-shaped islands and the difference between gas or electric ranges. They don't mention how if you design two appliances at right angles into the corner of said 'L'-shaped kitchen, you won't ever be

able to open the corner cabinet. Or, if you have children under 5, purchasing the ultra-high-heat power of professional gas ranges might not be the safest idea for your family. That's what I wanted to tackle with this book.

2. Both my clients and my blog readers mentioned tales of woe by neighbors and on internet consumer forums, but it took all of them a bit of time to convince me. (What do I know? I don't get out of the showroom much!)

Although those of us in the design profession think there are thousands of us who specialize in kitchen design, my readers were letting me know by email that they couldn't find anyone.

So, here you go. If you're looking for insider information because you want to avoid the most common and expensive mistakes in kitchen design, this could be the book for you.

*This is the second stage of design, the insider companion book that answers:*

- 1) Who's out there and when do you need to hire them?
- 2) How to avoid the most common installation errors.
- 3) How French door refrigerators require different design techniques versus single-door refrigerators.
- 4) And more.

I'm a professional kitchen designer. The expertise in this book comes from over two decades of kitchen design experience, training, and yes, mistakes.

### **Meet your behind-the-scenes designer**

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My name is Kelly Morisseau, and I'm a Certified Master Kitchen and Bath Designer (CMKBD) and a Certified Interior Design (CID) in California. A CMKBD is a designer with substantial experience and training in both kitchen and bath design as it relates to construction, ergonomics, and safety. The "master" part of the designation is for designers who have held both the kitchen and bath designer certification for a minimum of 10 years.

I've been a professional kitchen designer for over 25 years and a second-generation designer as well. In the late 1970s, my father worked with my uncle running a custom cabinet shop. My mother started a kitchen design business at the same time. They were kitchen designers long before

people even understood the term and when the first kitchen design course became available, they took it.

They operated a successful award-winning showroom for over 20 years in Canada, which was a large part of my life. I learned on the job and took every class on kitchen and bath design I could. In 1999, the economy forced us to close our showroom. My design mother and I were lured by the promise of sunshine and palm trees to Silicon Valley and eventually to an award-winning design/build firm in the East Bay just outside of San Francisco.

Over the years, I've designed kitchens for both new and existing homes, and in a variety of fascinating locations — beautiful log homes on the West Coast, a miniscule kitchen in a 200-year-old home blocks from the Bastille in Paris, an Australian kitchen near the Great Barrier Reef, as well as hundreds of kitchens of all types and descriptions in both Canada and the U.S. I've also been a judge for Canadian and U.S. national design competitions, as well as a 2-time judge for regional competitions.

In my spare time (between midnight and six), I write a blog on my website, *Kelly's Kitchen Sync*, where I discuss remodeling and design tips. In fact, that's where the idea for this book came from. If you've already visited my blog and recognize some of the tips, great and welcome! I hope you'll find many more to help you here.

### **The most important fact you'll ever learn about kitchen design**

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If you can take away anything from this book, paste these two sentences in big red letters somewhere you'll see them every day, and repeat them with every purchase you make:

*Not all products work well in every kitchen.  
Not all products are compatible with each other.*

Almost every mistake, every “I-wish-I'd-known-before-I-bought” originates from those two facts. Whether it's flooring, a handle, or a ceiling light, every item has some quirk that eventually needs some attention to make your project run smoothly. Appliances change models every year, cabinetry lines vary, and some materials come and go.

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“...not all repairs or remodeling projects went smoothly for DIY respondents, with over one third (34%) having at least one regret stemming from trying to fix a broken appliance, installing tile, floors or cabinets...”

— **Consumer Reports study of 1,000 Consumers.**

[Used with permission by Consumer Reports]

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If you're thinking, “Boy, this isn't something the home improvement shows ever mention”, you're right. In this day and age of sunshine-y advertising, everything is perfect, isn't it? When a show only has 24 minutes plus commercials, time's short. No one wants to say, “Look, this is going to be a bit tricky. Let's be careful here.”

Not that I'm here to be the Voice o' Doom. My clients have heard me chirp, “Kitchen design should be fun!” for years, and it is. If you understand the properties of all your kitchen products and how they interact with other products, you'll own the world (or at least your kitchen!)

## **Test Your Knowledge**

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*Before we get started, let's get a sense of where you're at with the following questionnaire:*

### **Read the question and circle the answer you think fits best**

1. **What goodies are you planning for your new kitchen?**
  - a) The basics. My counter is falling apart and I need to fix it now. I don't want to think about anything else for now.
  - b) Some paint, a few knobs, maybe change light fixtures? Nothing huge.
  - c) We're updating the cabinets, counters, appliances, floors, but not changing the walls...I don't think. I'm still figuring out the details.
  - d) I want everything — and do I really need other rooms in the house?
  
2. **What grade of products are you planning to purchase?**
  - a) Whatever I find at the local big store and/or the best deal.

- 
- b) Something decent that won't fall apart in the first 3 years.
  - c) Brand names I recognize.
  - d) As high-end and luxurious as I can get — integrated (built-in) appliances, custom counters and splashes. Not that I have an unlimited budget, but this is BIG!
3. **If you're planning on doing some of it yourself, what tools do you have?**
- a) I have a hammer, I hammer in the morning, I hammer...wait. That's all I have.
  - b) A slick toolkit, a cordless drill and a couple other toys. I don't do too badly.
  - c) Some people call it the garage, but why keep cars, when you can have compound miter saws, air nailers, and enough tools to make *This Old House* crew weep.
  - d) The world is a safer place if I never touch a tool in my lifetime.
4. **How much of the design work do you want to be involved in?**
- a) Not my interest. That's what other people are for.
  - b) I like looking at the magazines and I'm interested in knowing enough details to educate myself.
  - c) I'm fascinated about everything related to my kitchen. I know every TV show, participate in forums, and dream of the day my kitchen will be a reality.
  - d) I'm excited and involved, but my real goal is to be informed enough about all the terminology and processes to understand what my designer, contractor, and trade professionals are talking about.
5. **How much of the work are you planning to do yourself?**
- a) Whatever's easy. Perhaps demolition, maybe painting. I've done that before.
  - b) I've done some work around the house, replacing light fixtures and I once tiled my vanity backsplash. It was okay.
  - c) I've got killer wood-working skills and the knowledge to install my own cabinets. Go me!
  - d) Ha ha ha! That's what professionals are for. I'm here to learn what they're doing and why.

## How'd you do?

### **3 or more As: The Reluctant Remodeler**

While it might have been something you planned, most likely something failed in your kitchen (dishwasher leaked, or the range died) and forced your hand. You don't want to do the work, but you need to know the best options, who to hire, even what questions to ask, so it can be fast, easy, and the value you need. Any help would be good.

### **3 or more Bs: The Cautious Planner**

You've got some basic skills, and are willing to learn what you need, and maybe even a bit more. Will you DIY or not? You don't know yet, but you know enough that you want to research what's out there and avoid the most common mistakes.

### **3 or more Cs: The Enthusiastic DIY-er**

You may not even be a DIY-er when it comes to the physical work, but you sure are when it comes to putting the design together. You're skilled enough to gut the kitchen (and stay away from structural changes.) You're keen to get going on the physical work, but you know that there's a bit more to the design and planning stages for a kitchen than almost anything else in the home.

### **3 or more Ds: The Informed Consumer**

Unless you're a general contractor, or an architect, it's doubtful you'll tackle structural changes or additions on your own. However, even if someone else is tackling the work, you still want to make the selections and communicate with the crew in a reasonable manner. Like the Bs, you're an overseer — any insider tips which help smooth out the design phase will certainly pay off during construction.

### **Wait, I have a bit of everything!**

Of course you do. You're my typical client. You may or may not have remodeled or built a kitchen before, hired folks successfully (or, ouch, not so successfully), and read a million books and websites. You know there's more out there.

— PART 2 —

GETTING STARTED:  
COSTS, WHERE TO GO,  
AND WHO YOU NEED



— CHAPTER 10 —

## WE'VE GOT YOUR BACK (SPLASH)



It's no secret that backsplashes are one of the more important decorative elements of today's kitchens. Whether the backsplash material is tile or stone or stainless steel or even wood, there are a myriad of design details that must be considered in order to achieve the look you want.

*What's not stressed enough in design books or magazines:*

- How much outlets and switches, light rail, lighting and trim are affected by the backsplash material and vice-versa.
- How badly crooked walls affect today's complex tile designs.
- How much one needs to understand the installation properties of a product. For example, an un-grouted glass tile in the store can appear radically different grouted.

The way I look at backsplashes has nothing to do with color or texture, and more to do with thickness, size, installation methods, and cleaning properties. In this chapter, I'll help you with why we should look for those details, and what to watch for as you create your personal style.

### **Backsplash thicknesses — granite, tile, glass, and more**

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One of the biggest mistakes a beginner makes is assuming that all backsplashes are the same thickness, and they're not.

If your backsplash is thicker than a standard  $\frac{3}{8}$ " thick tile — say a custom tile with a thickset installation (see definition on next page), then this is something that your electrician needs to know; otherwise, it'll be tough



installing the switch plates for outlets because the boxes will be set too far back. This is a complete pain after the tile is installed. It takes far more fiddling after the tile is installed to use longer screws, add a box extender, or, in some cases, remove and re-install the boxes so they sit flush with the tile. It may also result in some tile breakage, which can further delay the project.

Save yourself the time and aggravation — let the electrician know so that he or she can install adjustable boxes and enough wire, and the rest of the installation can run from there.

A quick note: you can't leave flammable materials exposed to the electrical box. If you're planning on a nice thick wood wainscot as a backsplash and the electrical boxes are recessed, the boxes must fit the inside depth from front to back to prevent any electrical problems from burning the wood. Using longer screws to bridge the gap between the wood thickness and a recessed standard electrical box won't pass code. The boxes will require box extenders (found at an electrical supply store or your local hardware store). That way the wood is protected.

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**Insider Definition: *Thin-set vs. Thick-set tile installation***

*Both of these refer to tile installation methods and the thickness of the mortar bed behind the tile.*

With thick-set (also called mud-set), the tile-setter builds a water-proof and steel reinforced backing, before applying a thick level of mortar, or mud. The tile is then applied to this.

The overall thickness is 1".

With thin-set, the tile is adhered directly onto a backer board using a much thinner layer of mortar. The overall thickness

with a standard tile is ½".

Of the two, the thick-set is the older method and more labor-intensive; many areas use the newer thin-set. I've seen both and prefer the thin-set because I can use thinner borders.

I might ask for thick-set if I'm working in an older character home where the thick-set is in period.

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### Partial-height backsplashes

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First, let's consider what a backsplash is for — to protect your walls from water, and other moisture, whether it's orange juice spills or pancake batter. This is most important at the junction where the countertop and the wall meet. The rest of the wall, or backsplash, from the counter to the underside of the wall cabinets, is the area most subjected to splashing of liquids during cooking or mixing.

For years, the most reasonable way to trim the budget was to select a countertop with an integrated 3"-4" splash. There was no seam between counter and backsplash, which meant no issues from water damage; however, one of the challenges was that it was straight. If your walls were extremely uneven, there was no way of hiding the gap between the backsplash and the waviness of the walls.

As time went on, this backsplash morphed into a stronger design element — a separate band of material in the form of laminate, wood, or a single row of tile.



*A single row of backsplash with the full splash only behind the range top.*

In some ways, this design was — and still is — the fastest and easiest to install. There is no need to consider the exact placement of electrical switches and outlets (other than to make sure they're above the backsplash, which most outlets are.) I've designed some very beautiful tile elements using a single row of tile and a bull-nosed tile edge. It's a sensible way to cut back on the budget and allows some flexibility to add paint colors in this space.

## Full-height backsplashes

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When someone asks whether you're going to have a full-height back splash, they're really asking if you're planning on having tile installed on the wall between the counter and the underside of the cabinets. For most standard kitchens, this means an 18" high backsplash in most areas, with a 30"-36" space behind the range or cook top. *With this type of design, the items to be concerned with are:*

- a) The outlet and switch placements — will they affect any design details?
- b) How the exposed edges of the backsplash material will be finished.
- c) How the windows and trims will affect the backsplash — will a tile be installed to the edges of a window, or installed into the sides or window jambs?

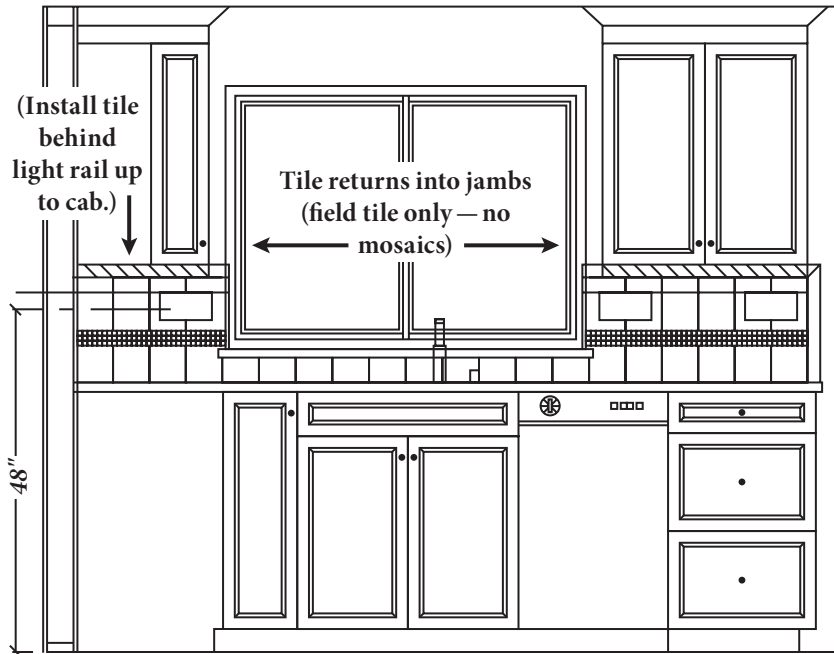
*Let's take these in order...*

### 1. Designing your tile backsplash

The correct way to design a backsplash is to not let the outlet, switches or any obstacles overlapping the décor part of the tile design. To do so means detailing and laying out your pattern on paper long before you start the project.

Most tile is a nominal size, which means a 4"×4" tile isn't 4"×4"; chances are it's actual measurement might be 3¾" or 3⅞" (the manufacturers are assuming grout will take care of the difference in size).

If you can, order samples of your tile. (The pieces can be used in the actual design for later.) Lay it out on the table or a flat surface. Tile setters sometimes refer to this as a “dry lay”.



*Providing a center height of outlets informs both the electrician and tile installer.*

*Do you have:*

- 1) **Any protruding tiles or tile trim?** Some thicker are thicker than the rest of the tile. Others have a beveled edge or an uneven texture. These are the pieces you don't want your outlet to overlap.
- 2) **A decorative band or tile piece that is centered in the design?** Most outlets are centered on the backsplash between 6"–12" above the counter height. If your tile design has a protruding tile or a special detail, then your drawing of the plan will point out early whether or not to raise or lower either the electrical or the design.
- 3) **A tile that doesn't have any end pieces?** Most tiles are rough or unfinished on the edges. A really inexpensive tile only has the standard sizes without any end or finishing pieces "called "bullnose edge" or quarter round" or simply "trim pieces", — extra pieces of tile that are rounded or glazed on one or more edges — which are used in the design.

- 4) **Order more of hand-made tiles.** Expect color variations and order extra tile. What many people don't know is that the trim pieces might be made and painted in a different batch on an entirely different day from the rest of the backsplash tiles. In addition, the person who painted the trim isn't likely to be the same person who painted the subway tile. Ordering pieces later might only compound this issue, as you might be ordering yet another batch entirely.

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**Tile & Window detail:** If you're planning on wrapping the tile into the sides of the window (some home plans only specified sheetrock instead of jambs and casing), be aware that the tile will create a smaller opening—and your existing blinds won't fit.

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## 2. Stop your outlets from hogging the limelight

Let's say your backsplash is one that would do much better without a bank of switches by the window. In fact, they mar your nice deco design, your bull nose trims, and just about everything. They're the wrong color, the wrong shape, and you wish they weren't there.

- And let's face it, there's nothing more glaring than the incorrect (or bright color) outlet glaring at you.
- Fortunately, there's help. These aren't all standard solutions—some ideas are easy to implement, while others take a bit of work, and if your installer isn't up to higher-end design, you might run into some difficulty without prior research.
- There are angled outlet strip plugs, thin boxes with multiple outlets that can be mounted underneath the cabinet, or even added to the underside of an island counter.
- There are also outlets that can be installed in the counter, but check both the outlets for kitchen use and your local building department to see if they allow their use.

- If your countertop is granite, there are granite switch plates and outlet plates available. Check with your local granite fabricator or check online for a matching “granite switch plates.”
- Paint the outlet and switch covers with a faux finish to match the backsplash (if your painting skills aren’t up to the challenge, look to your local specialty painters who deal with faux finishes.)

### 3. Or make them the stars

You know the old saying, “if you can’t beat them, join them.” There are times when a kitchen will only be partially remodeled, and the outlets and switches are there to stay. We don’t have the luxury (or can bear the extra cost) of minimizing our outlets and switches.

So what do you do?

If you can’t hide them, show them off. The actual switch and outlets themselves can’t be changed easily, but their covers can. Decorative plate covers are designed in a variety of materials and colors, ranging from metals to bold ceramics.

First of all, know that there are two styles of switches and outlets — one is the older toggle switch (the plate has a small rectangular hole the size of your thumb joint) and the dual outlets are separate; the other is a newer style called Decora, where the switch is a fat rocker (the hole is the size of a small fist) and the dual outlets have a single rectangular plate joining them together.

While the actual toggle and rocker switch has to remain in the basic colors, there are other options for the plate covers. Look for “decorative switch plates” online. And the best part is that anyone with a screwdriver can change them very easily.

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**Under cabinet switch?** I’ve heard of people mounting their switches on the underside of a wall cabinet, but that solution may not fly with the local building inspector or pass local codes. Check first.

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#### 4. Avoid backsplash “teeter-totters”

In this case, we’re talking tiles — these are the cover plates installed on tiles that are uneven or have some embossed detail on them which prevents a cover plate from being installed correctly. *Here’s what to watch for:*

- a) **Tiles with beveled edges or ornate textures.** How will you fill in the bevel gap behind the outlet plate? *A solution might be to add a section of square tiles at each outlet or switch plate, just at those areas.*



*A perfect example of a tile that’d make an electrician weep. For this tile, I’d suggest a flat tile cut in for the outlets, or an alternate method of outlets that aren’t installed on a backsplash.*

- b) **Uneven, handmade tiles.** If your walls are out, the unevenness might show up more. *Lay out the tiles on the floor and select the straighter ones for the outlet and switch plate areas.*
- c) **Embossed tiles.** Some tiles have raised design patterns on them, making them a challenge to mount outlets on. *Position them above or below the outlet, or design one square, flat tile to install the switch plate or outlet on.*

#### 5. Let’s talk grout

Yes, there’s a skill in laying tile, but there’s even a greater skill in mixing and setting grout. Surprising, isn’t it? Yet, the type of water you have, how much humidity is in the room, and how the grout is mixed all contribute to the durability and final color rendering of the grout.

*Here's what to watch for if you've never selected grout before or you want to do-it-yourself:*

- 1) **You'll be lucky if the color matches the sample stick:** Really, the small sample sticks sit in dusty showrooms, someone's car, out to jobsites — the works. That the final color bears any resemblance to the sticks is a feat of skill by your tile-setters. When I'm selecting the grout color, I tend to go a shade darker than the true grout stick match — grout in a warm climate dries faster and turns out lighter than the stick.
  
- 2) **Make sure the bag is sifted and/or mixed before adding water:** Sometimes in shipping, the minerals/color can separate. If the color's either on the top or the bottom, and you use the rest of the bag later for the same project, you'll be wondering who switched the color when you weren't looking! If you have two bags, dry mix them together before starting. That way, if one bag is slightly different (it can happen), you've evened out the color.
  
- 3) **Follow the directions:** Almost every newbie with their first grout job thinks, "What's so hard about this? You mix grout powder with water — big deal" and ends up with crumbly grout popping out of the tile within a year.
  
- 4) **Watch your room temperature/humidity:** Just like in baking, how much water you add depends on room temperature, high humidity and/or altitude. Too little water and you end up with overly crumbly grout; too much water and it's runny. Grout that dries too quickly dries several shades lighter. In warmer/drier climates, re-wetting the grout by wet towels slows down the curing process.
  
- 5) **Is your water hard or soft?** Both hard water (water with high mineral content) and excessive chlorine can also cause color variations. If you know your water is less than stellar, consider purchasing purified water or at least invest in a good water softener.



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**Sanded vs. un-sanded grout:** If the grout line is less than  $\frac{1}{8}$ " thick, use un-sanded. I might avoid sand for anything that can scratch—glass, marble, and metals like stainless steel. Check the tile manufacturer's specifications if you're unsure.

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### 6. How does the splash thickness affect your appliances and plumbing?

If you're planning a thick backsplash — perhaps a  $\frac{3}{4}$ " stone or thicker type of tile installation that makes the total tile depth 1" thick — pay attention to what that creates behind a cook top or faucet.

Thickness like this will affect how far you can slide in a range, and with some models, leave a gap between the back of the range and the splash. It also takes away depth which might affect your cook top cut-out or cause your faucet difficulty. This is one of the reasons I ask my clients to select their tile, plumbing fixtures, and appliances early so I can spot tight fits before they happen.

Which leads us to our next topic, plumbing.