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Kitchens

12 ways to modernize an outdated kitchen without totally replacing it

How do you update a kitchen without changing everything in one go? Designers share some budget-friendly quick fixes

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(Image credit: Cortney Bishop)



BY KAREN DARLOW
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If you're looking for ways to modernize an outdated kitchen without totally replacing it, you'll be delighted to know there are numerous options for updates, large and small, for this most important room in the home.

Updating just one or two aspects of the kitchen can transform the space, and will save the inconvenience, cost, and time of having a full refit. However, picking the right kitchen ideas to bring new life to an existing room can be overwhelming. That's why we asked interior designers for their advice.

The experts came up with a wide range of inspiring updates to help modernize a dated kitchen. Any of their suggestions will make a difference to the kitchen and help to bring it up to date, without the need to replace everything all at once. They'll also help you decide where to start, what to keep, and what to change.

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How Can You Modernize An Outdated Kitchen Without Totally Replacing It?

First things first, take a close look at your existing kitchen set-up to decide what you want to change. Is there one particular niggle that irritates you every time you walk into the room? Or is the whole kitchen tired and dated and in need of a dramatic transformation?

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It can be hard to pinpoint what's not working well in an outdated kitchen, but the suggestions from our interior design experts provide plenty of inspiration for creating a new look. There are ideas for more

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comprehensive makeovers, such as [painting the cabinetry](#) or replacing the [kitchen countertops](#), backsplash or flooring, but also some simpler style resets, such as adding a new table lamp, rug or artwork.

Finding ways to modernize an outdated kitchen without totally replacing it is a much more sustainable approach to renovating, and whatever you choose to update, small detail or major transformation, the results can be dramatic and rewarding.

1. PAINT EXISTING CABINETS TO GIVE A FRESH LOOK

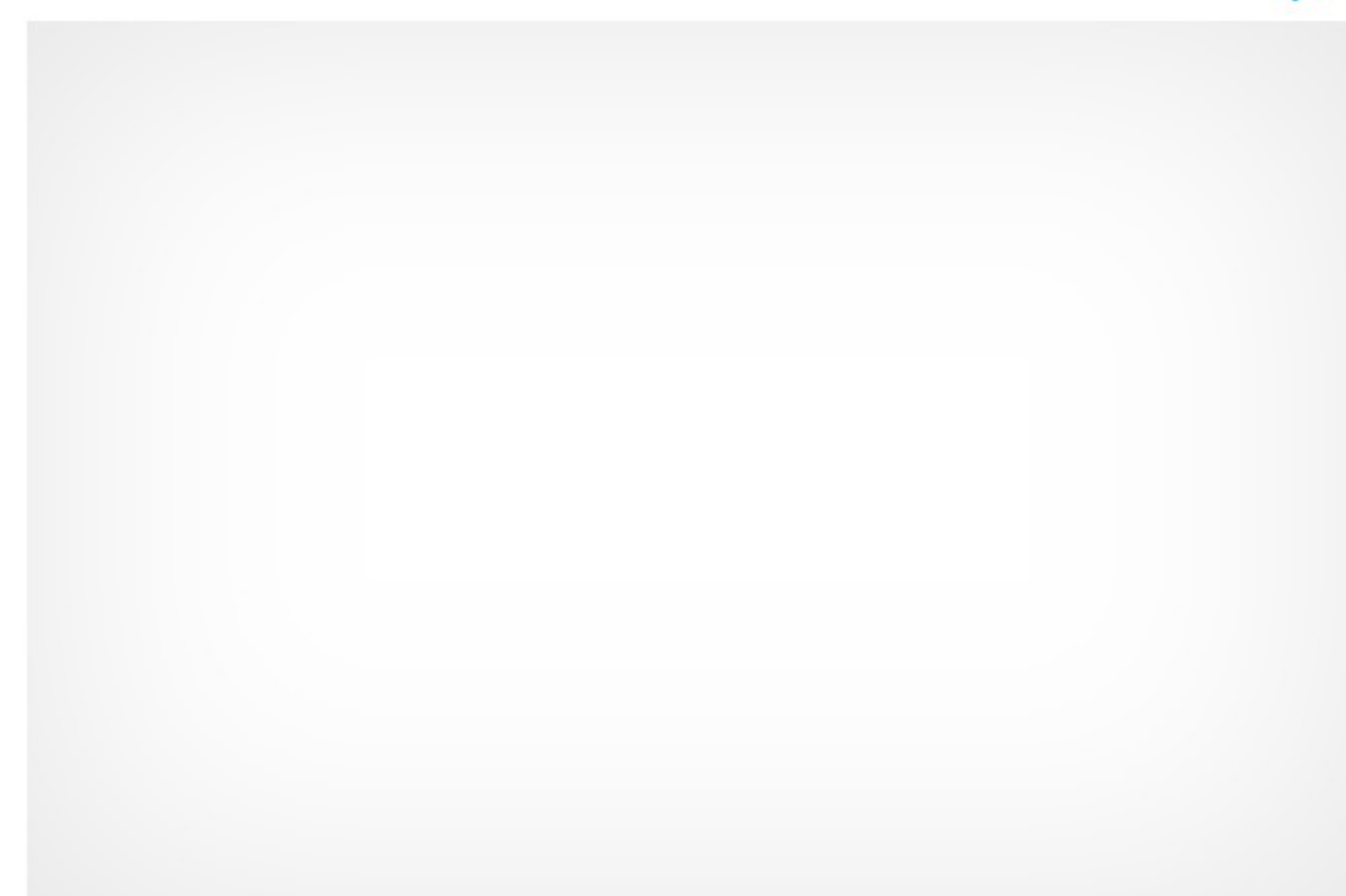


(Image credit: Pure Design)

One sure way to modernize an outdated kitchen is to focus on updating the [kitchen cabinet ideas](#). The style and color of cabinets really can date a kitchen and while it's neither possible nor desirable to keep up with all the latest [kitchen trends](#), it is possible to [update kitchen cabinets without replacing them](#).

Designer Lisa Tornello, founder of [Millroad Studio](#), says: 'Many outdated kitchens have a good thing going for them – real wood cabinets. Real wood isn't always used today and it means that you have a better opportunity to paint them and for the paint to actually last. Prep is important, though. They should be sanded, primed and then painted and holes should be filled if you choose to use new hardware.'

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Andi Morse of [Morse Design](#) is a fan of upcycling existing cabinetry in this way. 'I call them a mini reno job because you use what you have but just make it better,' says the Atlanta, Georgia-based designer. 'Painting the existing cabinets and replacing the hardware is a game changer. If you have a larger kitchen it's great to paint the island a different color than the surrounding cabinets.'

2. SELECT A TIMELESS COLOR THAT WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE



(Image credit: Farrow & Ball)

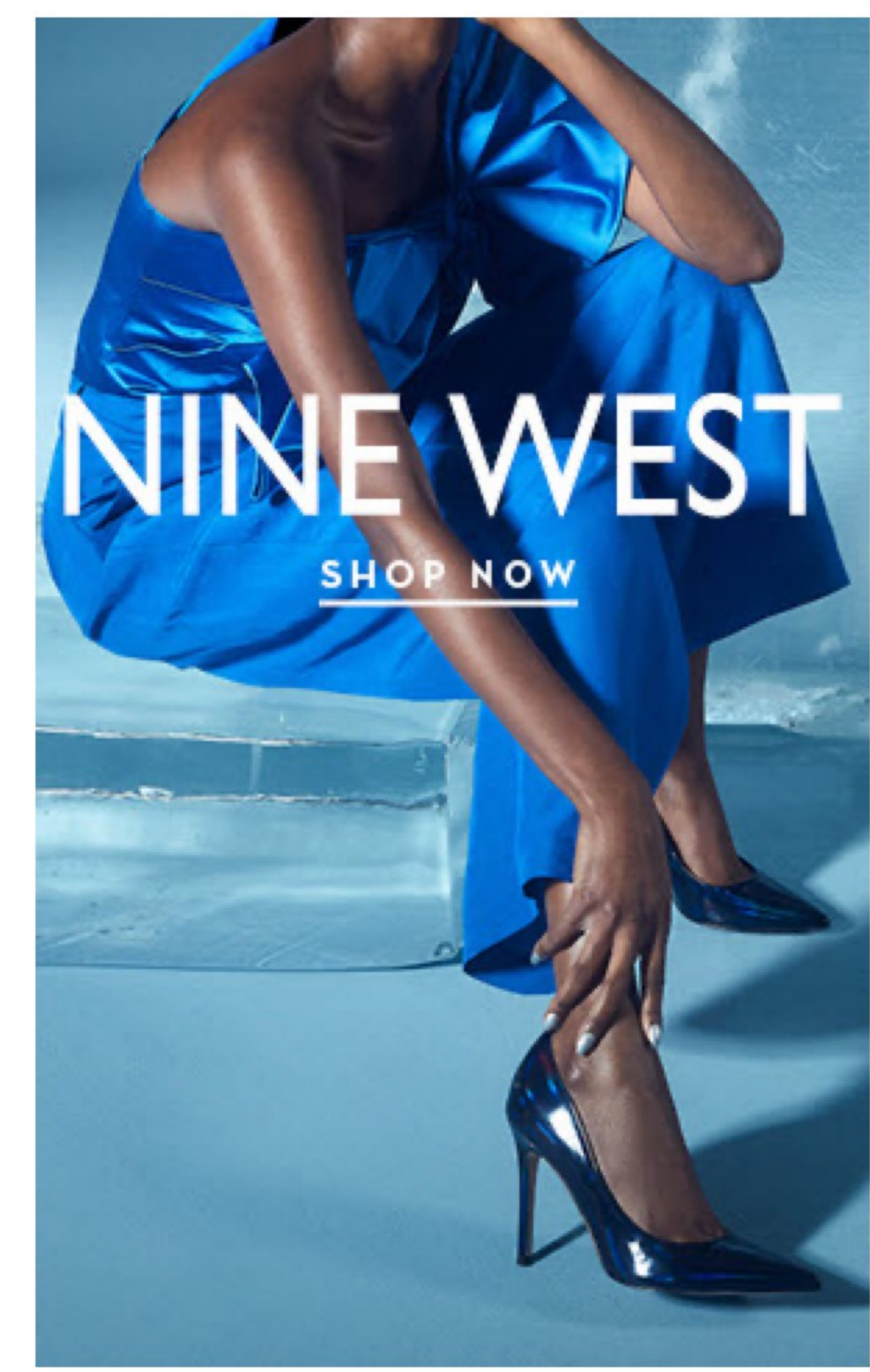
What of your color choices? There are as many [painted kitchen cabinet ideas](#) as there are paint colors, test a few [kitchen cabinet colors](#) in situ and consider them in both daylight and artificial light before making your final decision.

'If your plain white cabinets are looking dated, take them to the ceiling and paint them a much moodier color,' says Kristin Harrison, from the Virginia-based interior designer firm [Bungalow 10 Interiors](#), 'It will completely transform the look.'

If all this talk about [how to refinish kitchen cabinets](#) makes you feel a little nervous, why not have them painted professionally? Cathleen Gruver, of [Gruver Cooley](#) in Northern Virginia, says: 'It costs a little more, but can help give it more of a factory finish. Opt for colors that are light and timeless. Lighter colors will give it a fresh and bright feel and picking something timeless will help make your spending count! If you have some extra cash and your cabinet boxes are still in good shape, you can always replace the door and drawer fronts too.'

There's a word of caution from Liz Potarazu, CEO and principal designer of Maryland-based [LP&Co](#), who says: 'Painted cabinetry can chip, especially since the wear-and-tear is constant. Make sure your contractor has experience painting cabinetry and is using the proper paint and primer. Opt for paint spraying cabinets versus hand-painting, as it will get you the most durable and professional finish.'

3. REPLACE WALL CABINETS WITH OPEN SHELVING





(Image credit: deVOL)

We've all become used to seeing more unfitted and freestanding styles of kitchens as current trends favor a more open look. As a result, layouts packed with wall cabinets can sometimes look a little old-fashioned.

'If the upper cabinets are a weird shape or are making the room feel too heavy, consider replacing them with open shelving,' suggests Lisa Tornello.

Interior designer [Lichelle Silvestry](#), agrees that this will modernize the look of the kitchen 'Open shelves or glass-fronted display cabinets instead of solid wall cabinets, will make a difference and double up for storage and display.'

[Kitchen shelving ideas](#) work best if they are tailored to the individual layout. In some cases it might work better to keep some wall cabinets, and add in open shelves in a smaller section of the kitchen. Thomas Morbitzer, of NYC-based [AMMOR Architecture](#), has a neat solution for open shelves: 'Fixing shelves on decorative brackets above kitchen windows is a great way to display plates and other collected items and the shelves can also be used to position task lighting, too.'

4. CHANGE THE WALL COLOR



(Image credit: Little Greene)

One quick fix for a tired kitchen is to paint the walls. It may not be so transformational as painting the cabinets but nor is it as complicated, and if your existing color is one of the [kitchen paint colors going out of style](#) you will soon see positive results with fresh paint on the walls. To get the most dramatic sense of change look for a different shade or choose a color from another area of the [color wheel](#).

5. REPLACE THE COUNTERTOPS



(Image credit: James Merrell)

Replacing the countertops in an average-size kitchen isn't as expensive as you might think. It's certainly far easier and much quicker to update the surfaces than to change the cabinetry. Changing the countertops can give an outdated kitchen some of its sparkle back; combine them with freshly painted cabinets and it will feel like a newly fitted kitchen.

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Lichelle Silvestry favors a look that's very now, with natural wood finishes. 'If you're looking to add warmth and texture to your kitchen, white oak and walnut are excellent materials to consider,' says the designer. 'These materials are incredibly versatile and can be used in most kitchens as countertops, mixed in with the existing cabinets, used for on open shelving, or as panels to hide appliances.'

Replacing kitchen counters without altering the layout doesn't have to be prohibitively expensive, says designer Catherine Fowlkes of [Fowlkes Studio](#) in Washington, D.C., 'If you can get access to slab remnants from a stone supplier or fabricator there are great savings to be had,' she says.

6. GO BIG ON STYLE FOR THE BACKSPLASH



(Image credit: Celine Interior Design)

Replacing the backsplash gives you the opportunity to inject more design personality into the kitchen. Even though the backsplash is usually limited to the practical areas of the kitchen, behind cookers and sinks, it can still pack a big style punch.

There are ever more options for materials and finishes that will give the room a more modern edge. Marble continues to be one of the most sought-after materials for a backsplash, and zellige tiles, metal, and mirrored finishes are all having their backsplash moments. The unusual arch design marble backsplash in the kitchen from [Celine Interior Design](#), pictured above, gives an extra luxurious twist to the space.

As you consider the best [kitchen backsplash ideas](#) for your space, think about how your choice will complement existing cabinets and countertops. Lichelle Silvestry suggests replacing the countertop and backsplash with the same material, which she says gives a modern and elegant look.

7. UPDATE FLOORING OR THROW DOWN A RUG



(Image credit: Jared Kuzia)

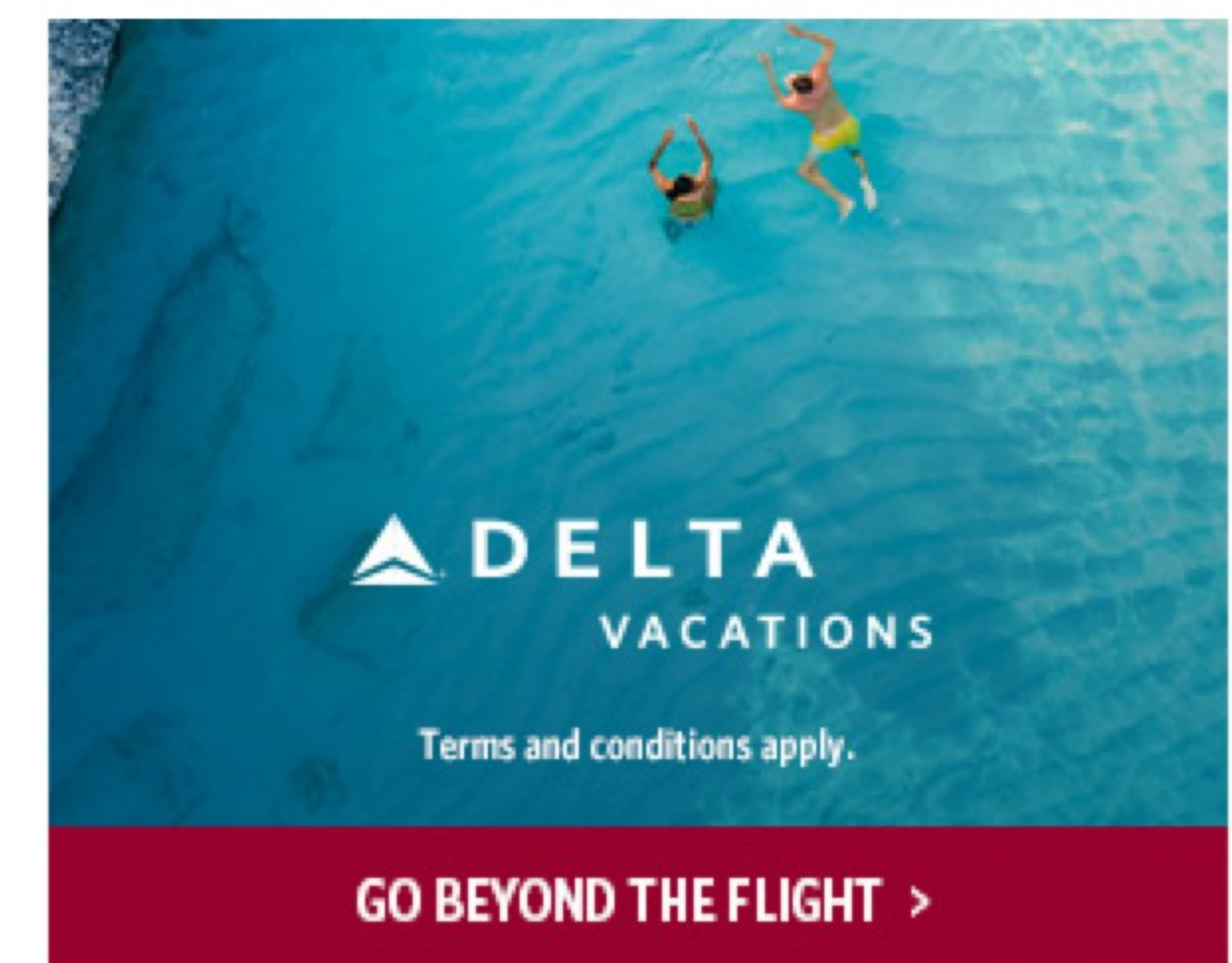
Kitchen floors get a lot of heavy use. Wear and tear, water damage and staining will all take their toll and replacing damaged or dated flooring will lift the room.

We're seeing more wood and wood-effect flooring in kitchens, with the trend heading for darker shades to provide a smart contrast with lighter cabinetry. Porcelain, terracotta and marble tiles also remain popular and are practical [kitchen flooring ideas](#), worthy of serious consideration when updating a space.

And don't underestimate the power of a humble rug to bring a kitchen floor up to date. 'Rugs are such an easy way to give a new feel to a space,' says designer Cathleen Gruver. 'Make sure to use colors that are complementary to the rest of your home to help create continuity and give it the designed feel.'

Kristin Harrison agrees, adding: 'I love a good area rug in the kitchen. It's a chance to add color, pattern, and even something vintage with character.'

8. INVEST IN SLEEK, MODERN APPLIANCES





(Image credit: Anna Stathaki)

Appliances almost past their sell-by date and looking past their best? 'Consider replacing old appliances with sleek and modern models to give your kitchen a more elevated style,' says Lichelle Silvestry. 'They are easily accommodated in an existing kitchen and give a polished and elegant look.'

In addition to fitting with a more modern setting, new appliances incorporate additional features and functionality not on offer in older models. Research the options and make sure you're choosing the best kitchen appliances to suit your needs and usage, as well as your aesthetic.

'Covering exposed appliances can be a great solution too,' adds Lichelle Silvestry. Adding cabinet fronts is a good way to disguise older appliances in an updated kitchen if they don't need to be replaced. Integrating appliances in this way is the best option for a minimalist kitchen, where a more streamlined and uniform look is called for.

Don't forget about the hood when updating kitchen appliances. 'A bad hood can throw off the entire kitchen design. While a stainless steel hood might be the best choice in a contemporary setting, a beautiful plaster hood will work better in a farmhouse style kitchen, where it can be painted to match the cabinet color,' says designer Kristin Harrison.

9. SET THE SCENE WITH LIGHTING



(Image credit: Chris Mottalini / Victoria Sass)

Ask any designer about lighting and they'll tell you that it can make or break a room. When you're looking for ways to modernize an outdated kitchen, rethinking the [kitchen lighting ideas](#) should be part of the process.

'Updating your kitchen lighting is clutch for transforming the space,' says Kristen Harrison. 'You can have the best design in the world, but if the lighting isn't the right style or scale, it will ruin things rather quickly.'

'Update pendants, change chandeliers. It makes a big difference and can completely change the look and feel of your existing kitchen,' says Andi Morse

'If you want to give your home a more transitional appeal, opt for simple lighting that may have a more contemporary shape,' advises Cathleen Gruver. 'And be sure to have the temperature of your light bulbs match what you have throughout the rest of your home.'

10. FOCUS ON HARDWARE



(Image credit: St Charles New York)

If you are keeping existing kitchen cabinets, treat them to some new hardware, including adding a sleek new faucet if needed, which can instantly give a more high-end finish to the kitchen.

'Changing hardware is probably the easiest update to do and it doesn't have to be expensive,' says Cathleen Gruver. 'If you have pulls be sure to open your drawer and measure the distance between the center of the pulls to find out what size you need so that you do not have to do any repair work.'

Most of the designers we asked suggested using the same matching handles or pulls across all kitchen cabinetry for a uniform look, designer Kristin Harrison, however, thinks it's good to mix things up a bit. 'Not every cabinet needs to have the same pull or knob. Try to add in a few latches, or unexpected twists. It will give you a much more custom look,' she says.

11. PULL UP SOME NEW COUNTER STOOLS



(Image credit: Aimée Mazzenga)

You could say counter stools are now part of the furniture in modern kitchens, an essential element where almost every kitchen features an island. They have the potential to make a real style statement, just as much as the backsplash, countertops, and cabinetry.

'Don't underestimate the value of beautiful seating,' says Kristin Harrison. 'I love to find counter stools that can bring an additional texture or color into the mix. Don't worry about mixing wood tones or colors, pick something you love.'


Cathleen Gruver rates comfort and usability highly in [kitchen island seating ideas](#) when selecting counter stools. 'If you want to help make your kitchen more inviting, opt for stools with arms,' she says. 'Swivel stools can be great if you have a more open kitchen that allows for communication between rooms. And stools that have slipcovers on them can be a great choice that allows you to change with seasons, or with your décor over time.'

12. SOFTEN THE LOOK WITH TEXTILES AND DECORATIVE TOUCHES



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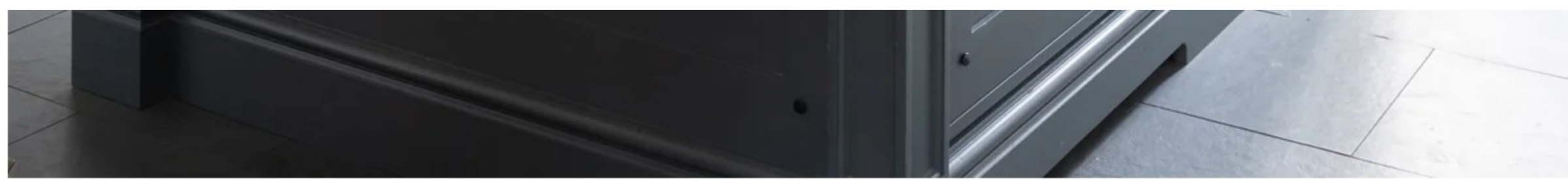


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(Image credit: Drew Forsyth)

Unless the aim is to create an ultra-minimalist stark kitchen, most kitchens benefit from the introduction of some softer, decorative touches to update the look and bring personality to the space.

'Add textiles,' says Liz Potarazu. 'If you have a window in your kitchen, consider a window treatment versus blinds or roller shades. Adding a Roman shade or valance can provide warmth and color to a space that can often feel sterile. Using rug runners in the aisle between your perimeter cabinetry and island is another great way to bring some life into your kitchen. If you have open shelving in your kitchen, consider updating your display items. An open wall? Take down that "EAT" sign and replace it with a beautiful, modern piece of art.'

Catherine Fowlkes agrees that it's important to include decorative items in a kitchen. 'Table lamps and framed art soften kitchens and help them feel more cohesive with the rest of the home,' she says.

It's amazing what can be achieved in an old kitchen with a little inspiration, ingenuity, and a few new additions. 'Dream It up and go for the drama!' says designer Lisa Tornello. 'It can be exciting to freshen up a new kitchen without the expense of a full-blown renovation. And because you aren't putting in the full investment of a renovation, you can go a bit bolder. The richer the hues, the better.'



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Karen is the houses editor for homesandgardens.com and homes editor for the brand's sister titles, Period Living and Country Homes & Interiors, and an experienced writer on interiors and gardens. She loves visiting historic houses for Period Living and writing about rural properties for Country Homes & Interiors, and working with photographers to capture all shapes and sizes of properties. Karen began her career as a sub editor at Hi-Fi News and Record Review magazine. Her move to women's magazines came soon after, in the shape of Living magazine, which covered cookery, fashion, beauty, homes and gardening. From Living Karen moved to Ideal Home magazine, where as deputy chief sub, then chief sub, she started to really take an interest in properties, architecture, interior design and gardening.