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Chef Scott Howell transformed his garage into the kind of kitchen chefs dream about.



chef's *kitchen*

Scott Howell, chef and owner of Nana's in Durham, creates a gourmet-worthy kitchen with the help of CKS Kitchens and Designs. Written by: Britta Waller

The home kitchen of Scott Howell, one of the best chefs in the state, used to be a garage. Forget glamour, forget glitz, Howell was looking for as much square footage as possible when he moved into his Durham home in 2005 and began revamping the space that would become his culinary showplace. The owner of Nana's tore the room down to the bare studs, leveled the floor, and

started anew. "I've done this at every house I've ever lived in," Howell says.

Now complete, Howell's kitchen is uniquely his own, mixing restaurant-grade appliances and fixtures with dark granite countertops and red faux-finished cabinetry inspired by an Asian chest of drawers that sits in the adjoining living room.



Batman has the Batcave; Scott Howell has his kitchen.

"This really was his creation," says Zack Simmons, the kitchen designer at CKS Kitchens and Design in Durham who helped him. "Well, I told him what I wanted," Howell explains.

Island envy

Howell felt the extensive work he had to do on the kitchen was well worth it, given the home's other attributes. Located in the Hope Valley Country Club area of Durham, Howell's home sits on three-and-a-quarter sloping, wooded acres, with the back line of the property a peaceful marsh. The dining room runs lengthwise across the rear of the house, offering attractive, natural views out its picture windows.

Howell's first goal, then, was to connect the kitchen with the dining space, and to the entry at the front of the house to a foyer and outdoor patio. "I love to have parties," Howell explained. Connecting these three spaces allows a large and open area for entertaining. Built-in speakers add an extra touch of ambience.

The centerpiece of the kitchen is a four-foot-by-12-foot butcher block island — a veritable aircraft carrier of a kitchen island — running almost the entire length of the space. Walk on the left of the island, you reach the patio. Walk on the right, you reach the dining room. "The reason why it runs this way is you can walk right through the room," Howell explains, motioning imaginary guests away from the door and into the heart of house.

"a veritable aircraft carrier of a kitchen island"

The island does multiple duty — as a bar for guests sitting on the far side of the stove; as a gigantic table for family-style dining on occasions like Thanksgiving; as a workspace, of course (there's a smaller but still gargantuan butcher block island in the kitchen at Nana's); and as a place for multiple cooks to work, as Howell often mixes cooking instruction with business events at his home or parties.

Seven-man job

The island has china and stemware storage on the dining room side, displayed behind glass-paned cabinet doors. On the "working" side (with the sink and stove), the cabinetry houses the Viking dishwasher, trash, and several deep drawers. Howell uses these to store plates, bowls, and cookware other cooks might stash in overhead cabinetry. He has little of that in the kitchen because it would interrupt the open space above the island and because he prefers the drawers — clean dishes head out of the dishwasher just one drawer over to be put away.

The butcher block is unstained or colored, melding well with the buff Travertine marble tiles of the floor. It isn't even held in place with glue. After seven men, Howell included, moved the block into place, it was clear none was needed.

Howell's kitchen has a few other features you're not apt to find in a common home kitchen. The first is its climate-controlled, 2,500-bottle wine storage cabinet. Housing both drinkable and collectible bottles, as well as a few choice cigars, the cabinet is roughly the size of two commercial refrigerators. Again, the need for the square footage of the garage becomes clear.

Howell's refrigerator is also large, but he admits that he also relies on the cold storage at his restaurant for keeping foods cool. The faucet over the deep double sink is a commercial sprayer, which he admits confounds some guests with its multiple levers. It makes cleaning up easier, however.

Ready to entertain

For cooking, Howell has a Viking range with two convection-heating ovens, four gas burners, and a center griddle — ideal for breakfast fry-ups, Howell notes. The



What makes a kitchen chef-worthy? Designer Zack Simmons, of CKS Kitchens and Design, reveals his top three must-haves for gourmet style. To learn what they are, log on to www.ncsignature.com.



Oh, to be a rutabaga in such a pristine kitchen.

Still Going Strong

From one point of view, Scott Howell is a restless restaurateur. The owner of Nana's in Durham has cooked and worked from coast to coast — in New York under superstar chef Daniel Bouley, in Italy at Michelin-rated San Domenico, in Los Angeles at Campanile, and at North Carolina's own Magnolia Grill with Ben Barker.

He's been a partner in barbecue restaurants and steak houses. And he's planning to get into pizza with a new venture, The Rockwood Fillin' Station, specializing in Neapolitan-style, wood-fired pies.

But from another point of view, Howell has been going steady with one enterprise since 1992: Nana's. The 16-year-old restaurant keeps Durham in fine food night after night, whether through its dinners — roast duck, grilled flank steak, rack of lamb, or the tasting menus — a steal at \$50 a person, or \$80 with wine pairings.

"I think Durham's a really good food town," he asserts. No matter where his fancy takes him in the restaurant business, with Nana's, Howell is rooted firmly in North Carolina.



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PHOTOGRAPH BY BRONN BEGAN

knobs are dark red, tying back into the red cabinetry and inspiration Asian chest. Coming soon will be red tiling as a backsplash behind the stove, sink, and their cabinetry.

Would every home chef love this kitchen as much as Howell does? They can certainly find good ideas here. "What I love about this kitchen is that it's a galley style, which is one of the most efficient uses of space," explains CKS' Simmons.

Its other strengths include putting the tall, deep storage pieces (the wine cabinet and the refrigerator) on their own wall at the far end of the room and keeping the walkways between counter spaces wide. It doesn't scrimp on the storage, even down to a narrow cabinet next to the stove for sheet pans and other flat cookware.

Simmons also commends Howell for the choices he's made that keep the space clean and open: recessed, not pendant lighting; no hanging cabinetry; just an island, not an island and other furniture. "It's so conducive to conversation and entertaining," Simmons concludes.

That's an attribute both professional chefs and home cooks want in their kitchens: to bring people together. □

In addition to features including a 2,500-bottle wine storage cabinet (left), the design of Howell's kitchen is based on an Asian chest of drawers (center), including the cabinets and the range (right).

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Your Kitchen Awaits

Country or Asian, chic or comfortable, CKS Kitchens and Design in Durham creates kitchens that suit all the varied tastes of Tar Heel homeowners.

Founded in 1988 by Craig Mallani, the firm was initially a one-man custom closet and cabinetry operation. It has since grown to more than 30 employees, pleasing customers and winning design industry attention, including coverage in national shelter magazines.

"I love the process of design and the creative outlet it provides," says Zack Simmons, a kitchen designer who has been with the firm for six years. "I also like seeing people happy when their kitchen is finished, and it is even better than they expected."

Simmons notes that with the advent of cable networks such as HGTV and the trend toward home renovation overall, clients are much better informed and engaged with the process of achieving specific looks in their home. "With the change in consumer attitudes toward design, we have evolved as well, with a strong focus on aesthetics and space planning," Simmons says. He explains that the arrangement fits in perfectly with what the firm was already committed to doing — keeping their clients connected to all the professionals working together to build their kitchen. "They like the process," Simmons says, "and, more importantly, the end result." □

Just another one of the beautiful kitchens designed by CKS Kitchens in Durham.

for more information

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