

The rise and rise of the supersize island

Dining tables and cupboards are dead. The new hearth of the home is now a huge slab of marble up to 18ft long, finds Hugh Graham



Chris Scott's 4.8m by 1.5m island, built by Blakes London at his home in Wandsworth in southwest London
VICKI COUCHMAN

First there was Ed Miliband and his two kitchens. Then came the four-oven kitchen, introduced to the nation by our housing secretary at the time, James Brokenshire. The next trend in kitchen excess is the rise of the supersize island — vast oil tanker-like pieces of furniture that are up to 5.5m (18ft) long — and a preference for multiple islands (the three-island kitchen is now a thing). If Carrie

Johnson is tempted to measure up the Downing Street kitchen, forget it — it's far too small for any of these culinary behemoths.

The standard industry size for an island is a modest 2m by 1m, according to Phil Cole, the global head of sales for Clive Christian Furniture. Yet more and more homeowners are injecting steroids into their kitchen islands: Clive Christian

routinely does structures that are 4-5.5m by 2m and is increasingly being asked to build kitchens with two islands (a recent project in Surrey had three). In the future, when historians look back at the fall of the West, super-islands may signify the pinnacle of our decadence. And yet families swear by them: they are the modern-day hearth of the home.





A Clive Christian kitchen at Sydenhurst House in Surrey
BAGSHAW & HARDY LTD

Chris Scott, a company director, 42, recently had a whopper of an island (4.8m by 1.5m) built by Blakes London at his home in Wandsworth in southwest London. “Our kitchen island gets the most use out of any part of the house,” he says. “Even though we have a dining table in the kitchen, we have 95 per cent of our meals on the island. We sit down together for breakfast every morning and dinner every night there. The kids use it for homework, we play board games, the kids use their iPads there, my wife and daughter do a lot of baking and cake decorating, and at dinner parties



The Opus 1, kitchen by Clive Christian, has a champagne bubble pattern cut into the timber
ALESSANDRO DE BESI

we’ll set up a bar at one end.” Why so big, though? “The kitchen is quite a long room and we thought it would look strange if we had a smaller island, like it would be lost in space,” Scott says. “It is divided into three zones. There is a dining area at one end, a functional zone in the middle with a large sink, two dishwashers and a boiling-water tap, and at the baking end there is a Miele steam oven.” Other island kit includes an undercounter freezer. “Our fridge is big. It’s a 90cm-wide Miele, American-style fridge, but it has no freezer. My wife is a keen cook and uses lots of



fresh food — we don't really have frozen. So the freezer is mainly for ice cubes.”

Big islands give good storage. This one includes a drawer stack and three double cabinets where the family store the good plates, board games and vases. “We don't even have enough stuff to put in it.”

The super-island is a game-changer for daily life. “It sounds like a first-world problem, but having two dishwashers is brilliant,” Scott says. “It's almost life-changing. When you are loading one, the other one is on, so you never have to leave all your crap on the worktop.”

It is only natural that islands are getting bigger because the way we entertain is changing, says Karen Howes, an interior designer with Taylor Howes whose new kitchen island at her Hampshire home is 3.8m by 1.2m. “When I designed it, my husband was, like, ‘Whoa, that is big,’ ” she says. “But it allows you more work surface, and it's a more relaxed way to eat with friends. No more stuffy dinner parties. We lay food out in a buffet style and people help themselves. That thing of being formally served at the table is over. People don't have the time to do that any more, and also you have to cater to everyone these days: our daughter is vegetarian, we are flexitarian. You can't serve one thing for everybody.”

The rise of the super-island mirrors the trend for open-plan kitchen/living spaces and long extensions, according to Magnus Nillson, the lead



The island phenomenon is a social one. They act as magnets and are fast making dining tables obsolete

designer at Blakes London, where kitchens cost £80,000 to £150,000, of which about £50,000 would go on the island.

The vogue for glazed extensions also takes away storage space on walls. Islands

can pick up the slack with cupboards underneath. And the big island trend coincides with the transformation of the kitchen from cooking space to entertaining space.

“Before, islands were just



functional; now they are entertainment, glamour, glitz,” Cole says. “It is all about how you can dress your kitchen up.”

“It gives the cook a theatre,” adds Alex Saint, the design manager at Kitchen Architecture. “So many people have islands now, so our super-prime clients want to make even more of a statement.”

But some of these big islands are getting out of hand. Saint once had to talk a client out of building a 9m island. “The client wanted a ‘wow factor’ — something that would blow everyone’s socks off,” he says. “I said, ‘Do you want to have to walk around a 9m island every day for a cup of coffee?’ You can have too much of a good thing. It would have looked ridiculous. That is where you can split it in two.”

The two-island kitchen sounds excessive, but at least it is practical. If the room is small, instead of having one big island, you can build a couple of 3m islands turned at right angles, creating a mini galley kitchen between the pair. Three islands, by contrast, seems ludicrous. But Cole says that it is part of the rise of the zonal kitchen: one island is used for prepping, another for cooking, and the outer island for entertaining. Nobody gets in the way of one another.

Islands are immensely practical, Saint says, especially since the invention of downdraught extractor fans (at worktop level), which allow hobs to go on the island and there is no hood cluttering up

the ceiling. If the cooker, hob and sink are on the island, a cook can chat to his or her guests while facing them. Without an island, the chef turns their back, and guests subsequently come around to talk to them as they cook and invariably get in their way.

But more than anything the island phenomenon is a social one. They act as magnets and are fast making dining tables obsolete. “Whenever we have a dinner party, we have a starter and drink for 45 minutes around the island,” Saint says. “Whenever I say, ‘Shall we move to the table?’ guests often say, ‘I’m comfy here.’ That has happened several times.”

Patsy Blunt, an interior designer, has a 3.5m by 1.5m Clive Christian island at her home in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. “I have quite a big house, but whenever I have a party there will be 30 people standing around the island,” she says. “I don’t know what it is, but they have become the hub of the house.”

14 super-island must-haves

1. Boiling water taps or multifunction taps (one spout containing filtered water, boiling water, carbonated water, hot water and cold water).
2. A worktop overhang to allow room for your knees when sitting on a bar stool. Magnus Nillson, the lead designer at Blakes London, recommends 350mm to 450mm at least.
3. A herb garden in the middle.

4. A champagne trough (a long sink that you fill with ice to chill bottles) in the middle.

5. A butcher block built into the worktop with an integrated bin for meat scraps.

6. Downdraught extraction fans built into the cooker or worktop (Bora is state-of-the-art).

7. Two sinks (one for prepping, one for rinsing plates).

8. A wine fridge and/or a Kaelo integrated wine cooler built into the worktop so you can keep a chilled open bottle within arm’s reach.

9. A bench or banquette built with its back to the island, which allows you to put the dining table snug up against it, saving space in a narrow kitchen.

10. Sockets and USB charging points concealed under matching stone lids.

11. Multilevel islands (a high worktop for entertaining, a lower concealed prep space) and different shapes (oval, T-shape or L-shape).

12. Chandeliers overhead.

13. Book-matched marble or stone. Big islands are too long for one slab of marble or granite, so clients often book-match two pieces to avoid unsightly joins. Or they break up the two slabs with a butcher block or appliance.

14. The island as a work of art: sides and back made of marble so it resembles a stone monolith, or ribbed or patterned sides. The Opus 1, the newest Clive Christian kitchen, has a champagne bubble pattern cut into the timber. ■