THE GREAT OUTDOOR KITCHEN

The humble barbecue has morphed into something much more sophisticated, writes **Robyn Willis**

The sun is shining, the temperature is up and it's time to kick back for some serious summer rest and relaxation.

For most of us, enjoying the great Aussie backyard would not be complete without the chance to throw something on the barbie and knock back a cool beverage.

But while eating outdoors is practically part of Australia's national DNA, in recent years it has evolved into a full open-air kitchen experience.

GAME CHANGER

Matt Leacy, landscape designer and director of Landart Landscapes, says the outdoor kitchen is changing the way people live.

"Everyone that we have installed for has said that it is a complete lifestyle change," Matt says.

"It's not just the garden anymore, it has changed how they use their property and it gets people outside and involved in the garden."

Far from being a fad, Matt says up to 80 per cent of his clients want an outdoor kitchen that is integrated into an outdoor living and dining room that may include a pool and low-maintenance landscaping.

And while the traditional barbecue set-up has always involved one or two people, often blokes, standing with their backs turned to guests, outdoor kitchens have gone the way of their indoor counterparts where the cook is part of the action.

"One person is still controlling the barbecue but everyone is sitting around having a chat," Matt says.

"We are doing a lot of T-shaped benches where we have the barbecue at the end of the T and then there is a long bench so you can get a lot more people sitting around to eat."

Landscape designer and managing director of Rolling Stone Landscapes, Dean Herald, agrees that outdoor kitchens have evolved from isolating the cook to making the cook a central part of the action.

"I like to do island benches as much as possible because it makes the cooking experience more interactive," he says.

"If you can turn the chef around, you can put stools on the other side and it becomes a servery as well.

"I have one and it works really well."

CULTURE CLUB

Australia's multicultural heritage has also driven the popularity of outdoor kitchens, Dean says, with pizza ovens taking over as the next outdoor "must have".

"The electrical pizza ovens are handy because they can double as a warmer or you can put a whole leg in for roasting," he says.

"It adds a little variety to the outdoor space, especially for the kids to get involved in the cooking process."

Specialty companies such as Sydney Heaters & Pizza Ovens and Wildcat Industries offer ready-to-install electric and wood-fired ovens to extend outdoor cooking options considerably.

Rolling Stone Landscapes designs ensure the cook is part of the action. Pictures: Danny Kildare

Matt Leacy with client Cherelle Freeman in her new outdoor living room.

An alfresco advantage

Cherelle Freeman (pictured left with landscaper Matt Leacy) says it is no exaggeration to say that her new outdoor kitchen has changed her family's life.

When they bought their Mosman home more than five years ago, she says the backyard was non existent and ugly, so they put in a simple deck.

When that didn't work, they installed a beautiful in-ground pool complete with glass pool fence.

"But it still did not look right," she says.

Finally, she called in director of Landart Landscapes Matt Leacy to design an outdoor living room with cooking facilities.

"I can't tell you how it has transformed the space," Cherelle says.

"We never spent any time out there but since it was finished in September we are always using it.

"We cook breakfast out there all the time whereas before, we would just use the pool and come back inside."

Matt's company designed and installed an integrated barbecue with concrete benchtop and under bench storage to work with the streamlined deck that runs under the pool fencing, which hides the pool filter.

The roots of a mature ficus tree have been complemented by a simple low-maintenance planting scheme while timber steps lead up into the rest of the compact garden.

Cherelle says the new outdoor kitchen has made her home a popular destination with family members who live out of town.

"All our family live outside Sydney and they've all been down and we eat outside all the time," she says.

"My husband's parents were down a couple of weeks ago and we didn't eat a single meal inside.

"I think of it as part of the house now, another room."

In addition, Dean says the barbecue industry has responded to demand for sleek, easy-to-use designs suitable for outdoor use.

"The technology has improved and so there is a wider range of streamlined barbecues," he says.

"I started out installing teppanyaki plates which at $6000 were quite expensive and very thick because they were commercial units.

"But now companies like Electrolux are doing something small and very functional."

INSIDE OUT

Lyndon Craig, senior design manager of major appliances for Electrolux, says his company took what was happening indoors and applied the same design principles outdoors.

"We saw what was happening with design indoors with minimalist design and we compared that with the big barbecue with the big knobs and giant handle that was on the market," Lyndon says.

"We wanted something that looked more like what was available in the kitchen with clean lines that you could drop into a bench."

Increasingly, he says, home owners are cooking everything from roasts to stir fry meals outdoors.

"One of the big drivers for people who like to cook outside is that you don't have to worry so much about the mess or the smells (associated with cooking)," Lyndon says.

"Women also find it easier to get their husbands to cook once it goes outside."

Dean says some families have cultural traditions of cooking outdoors which can be incorporated into an outdoor kitchen set-up.

"I work with people from a lot of different cultures and they teach me a lot about how to cook outdoors," he says.

"With charcoal cooking, the components can be quite messy and they often want some of the cooking off to the side.

"That is not unusual with Indian, Turkish or European cooking traditions."

APPLIANCE CONTROL

Aside from cooking appliances, demand has also grown for facilities such as sinks, benchtops, fridges and even dishwashers.

Having worked on a variety of properties, from courtyard gardens through to acreages, Dean says the general rule of thumb is that the demand for extra facilities rises the further the outdoor kitchen is situated from the house.

"It can also be good to have a bit of storage for cutlery and plates out there (if it is a little further from the house) or a simple floating workbench," he says.

The best outdoor kitchens, he says, are designed to fit into their surroundings and are barely visible.

"A great design is often unseen because it just works," Dean says.

"You are designing something because you know how people will behave and move through the space if it is done that way." home

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Pictures Justin Lloyd, Danny Kildare

More information Electrolux; electrolux.com.au; Landart Landscapes, landart.com.au; Rolling Stone Landscapes, rollingstonelandscapes.com; Sydney Heaters & Pizza Ovens, sydneyheaters.com.au; Wildcat Industries, mypizzaoven.com.au

Electrolux has applied minimalist design to outdoor equipment.