

MAY DAY! MAY DAY! IT'S TACKLE THE KITCHEN MONTH!!!!

I think my kitchen is one of my favourite rooms in my home to spend time in. One reason is because of the way I've organized this space - its extremely functional and user-friendly, making food preparation and cooking so much easier. The other reason is because I LOVE cooking and baking.

So put on your apron (and by the way, if you don't wear an apron, either you're not a real cook, or you are a lot less messy in the kitchen than I am!!!!) and lets make your kitchen more organized and functional.

First of all, look at how and where you have everything stored and decide if indeed these places are the best for usability. (I don't even know if that is a word, but I'm still going to use it!!) For example, the cabinets above the dishwasher are the logical place to keep your everyday plates and glasses and will make unloading the dishwasher so much easier too. Always store glassware upside down to keep the insides dust free. You can install wire racks to optimize storage space in your cabinets if space is an issue.

Take everything out of each cabinet – one cabinet at a time, so you don't become overwhelmed or run out of space to put things. Clean out each cabinet – no point in organizing without doing the job properly by cleaning the surfaces. I love shelf protection of some kind and would recommend you line your shelves with either rubber backed shelving or the contact paper kind. I love the contact paper kind since it is so easy to take a damp cloth and wipe out the cupboard.

When organizing a kitchen I'm a big believer in creating zones – a food preparation zone, a baking zone, etc. Within each zone should be access to all that you need when working in that zone. For example, I have a Baking Zone – my Kitchen-Aid mixer sits on an area on my counter where I do everything involved with baking. In the immediate pull out drawer below my Kitchen Aid, I keep everything that is involved with baking (mixing bowls, measuring cups and spoons, rolling pin – you've got the picture.) Then, in the cabinet above the Kitchen Aid I keep frequently used baking ingredients such as vanilla, baking powder, soda and salt. When I am baking everything is no more than a step away. It's wonderful!

I think your food preparation zone or area should be close by the sink so you can easily wash veggies and do any chopping here too. A great place to keep your food prep chopping boards is right under the sink. I LOVE the flexible plastic ones that come in different colours. With these you can assign a different colour each for veggies, fish and meat, fruit, etc. I hang mine on the back of the cabinet door under the sink door.

Remember, when working in your kitchen, nothing should be more than just 2 or 3 steps away, so consider this when deciding where you are going to store things.

If you don't already have any, purchase some drawer organizers. They are cheap and so worth the money. Take out all your utensils and only put back those that you really truly use. Organize them by grouping like items together, e.g., wooden spoons, spatulas for easy finding, etc.

I have very strong feelings about Tupperware and plastic storage containers. First of all, you don't need like 500 of these containers. Take them all out and match them with their lids. When you finish this and have lids or bottoms left over that don't match up, **GET RID OF THEM!** I keep all my lids upright in a simple shoebox within my kitchen drawer. It works well and it cost me nothing! You also need to learn that you do not have to keep every single empty margarine or cool whip container. I am giving you permission to get rid of them! What you have left should have well fitting lids and be in great condition.

Where you can, devote a drawer to all your plastic wraps, foil and plastic food storage bags. If space is a concern, consider purchasing a specially designed organizer for these products and attaching it to the back of your pantry door.

Under the kitchen sink is a good place to have a cleaning caddy stocked with cleaning supplies you use in the kitchen. You can add a rack under here to double your usable space. Remember, if you store cleaning supplies under the sink to use kiddy safe hinges if there are little tackers in the house.

Store seldom used items (you know what they are!) in the least accessible areas. In fact, ask yourself "Do I really need this item? Is it worth the space it is taking up?"

Heavy casserole dishes should not be stored up high – unless you like to give your arms a workout!!

I suggest storing all your paper goods together and depending on how often you use them will determine how handy they need to be. I try not to use too many paper plates, cups, and the like, so I keep mine in an area that is a little less accessible.

Please take out all your coffee mugs right now and **PURGE**. You don't need all of them - trust me. Usually when I go into people's homes they have enough coffee mugs to serve a small army. You only need to keep 8 (harsh I know!!) and donate the rest to some worthy cause. A cup of coffee should be enjoyed in a really special mug – so go ahead and get rid of all those you are not head-over-heels crazy about!!!

If space is an issue – take advantage of the inside of your kitchen cabinet doors. You can hang utensils on them, tape frequently used recipes, install organizers to hold dishwashing supplies, etc. Make the most of all of the space you have in your kitchen. You can also purchase inexpensive additional plastic shelving to add to the usable space in your kitchen. This will not only create more space, but help eliminate excess stacking and make the space more usable overall.

Assign a drawer or cabinet for all your tea towels, washrags and kitchen hand towels, once again grouping like items together. I like to keep oven mitts and pads directly above my oven for easy access

Always, ALWAYS keep your kitchen countertop surfaces clean and clear of clutter. Your kitchen counter is not, and should not, be a dumping area for mail and other stuff, OK? A cleared counter top will give you a sense of calm, and don't we all want that!!!

Take all your spices out and do a thorough purging of them. Just because they are dried, does not mean that they will last forever. They do lose their flavour over time, so get rid of the old ones and add to your next grocery list which ones you need to purchase. I have a large drawer with a tiered organizer in it that I keep all my spices in – in ABC order for easy access – its great if you have the space to do this. If you keep your spices in a cupboard, you may want to purchase a spice rack of some kind or a tiered organizer or lazy susan to make the most of the space you have.

Try to assign an area close to your oven cook top to store fry pans and the like. If they are the nonstick kind and have to stack – separate them with a large paper plate. This works well.

Once again – if space is an issue – consider installing a hanging pot and pan rack over the oven, table, sink or island. This can also be a great decorating look.

There are all kinds of organizing products out there to help you make the most of the space you have. There are organizers for plastic ware, for saucepan lids and the list goes on and on!!!

OK – NOW ON TO FOOD STORAGE AND THE KITCHEN CABINETS

First of all, take all nonperishable items out of the cabinets and check their expiration date. I have been in homes and have found food that expired in 1983! Add items that you need to replace to your grocery list.

Items that any kiddies need access to (after school snacks, cereal, fruit drink boxes, sippy cups and their plastic ware) should be within easy reach for them. So consider this before assigning a home for non-perishables.

Try to group like items together – teas, coffee, cereals, spices. Using baskets to keep like items together is a great idea and very user friendly. I keep all my flavourings in a small tray, and all my food colourings in a separate tray.

Once again – take advantage of the inside of the kitchen cabinet doors – there are specially designed organizers that you can install to keep packets of gravy, dips etc.

OK – NEXT ITS ON TO THE PANTRY

Once again, this is one of my very favourite areas to organize. Remember that once you assign a home for everything, you will have a pantry that is very easy to maintain.

First of all take everything out of the pantry, checking expirations as you go. You know the rule – toss anything that is beyond its expiration date and add that item to your grocery list. If you find items that you know you will never use (and let's face it, we all have bought things on the spur of the moment because they were on super clearance, but still haven't used them and realistically never will) - give them to someone who will.

Use your counter space to line up everything you take out of the pantry and group like items together: cereals, crackers, canned meats, canned soups and broths, canned vegetables, canned fruits, baby foods, dry goods, rice, beans and pasta. Clean with a damp sponge all pantry surfaces before you return anything.

Just like in the kitchen cabinets, consider using baskets to store like items together, especially those that are difficult to contain. Different kinds of rice and pasta will all do well when containerized. Wherever possible, arrange tins, cans, bottles and boxes with labels facing out so you can see exactly what you have, and put everything back in categories.

Cans can get lost in a pantry due to their size, so think about 3-tiered staircase-like stacking devices for them. You will be able to easily identify what you have.

I strongly recommend storing staples such as flour, sugar (both brown, white and powdered sugar) in clear airtight storage containers. Square containers as opposed to rounded are more efficient of space, so remember this. The other advantage of clear containers is that you can see at a glance how much of any one item you have, and they also keep your staples fresher.

Again, take advantage of the back of the pantry door area. I have a multi-shelved unit on both doors of my pantry and you would be amazed at how much extra storage room that gives me. I love them!

Try hard to keep the pantry floor space clear (actually, this goes for most floor surfaces). The floor will be easier to clean and really, do you want to keep things on the floor? I don't think so!!!

I guess since we are in the kitchen area, I should say something about recipes! Now is a great time to look long and hard at all those recipe books that you have been collecting over the years. Chances are, I bet, that there are cookbooks you haven't even opened for years. I don't know about you, but I tend to go to the internet if I am searching for a particular recipe these days. Also, www.foodnetwork.com is a great recipe resource site. SO, consider reducing the number of cookbooks you have and donate some to your favorite charity.

Now, what is the best way to store all those 'pulled out of magazine recipes' that you want to try one day? I get asked this a lot, and the solution is easy. Purchase several 3 ring binders (I have one dedicated to cookies, desserts and breads, and then another one for salads, soups, and mains) and place the recipes in clear sleeves in these binders, using tabs to separate the different categories. This also protects them while you are cooking and is actually a better way of storing all recipes.

WOW- That was fun, wasn't it?!! Now, go reward yourself– get some chocolate or a bowl of mint chip ice cream, a soak in the bath - whatever gives you pleasure. You deserve it!

Of course, if you are overwhelmed at the thought of organizing your kitchen areas – as we Aussies say, “no worries mate!” I’m only a phone call away and would love to help you!

Stay tuned for next month!

Merri

The Organizing Aussie

TOP 10 KITCHEN /PANTRY TIPS

1. Create zones – food prep, cooking and baking, and store everything related in close proximity.
2. Group like items together – whether its plates, mugs, or different types of pasta & rice.
3. Containerize like items in storage baskets – seasoning packets, jello, sauces, etc.
4. Use cutlery organizers to group like utensils together.
5. Maximize all the space you have by installing additional shelving units on the back of pantry doors or on the inside of your kitchen cupboards.
6. Organize spices in ABC order.
7. Keep a well stocked cleaning caddy under the sink.
8. If you haven't used “it” in a year, chances are you never will – so get rid of it (donate!). “It” is taking up valuable space.
9. When you take an item out of the pantry to use, immediately write it on your grocery shopping list so you will have a replacement.
10. Only keep plastic storage containers that you have matching and well-fitting lids for.