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Cooking with class

More than ever, the kitchen has become the most important room in the home and **Elizabeth Mabin** meets a man who knows how to make it fabulous

Thanks to the success of *Masterchef* and the rise of the chef's celebrity to rival that of any movie star, it's no surprise people are choosing to eat in – cooking for others at home is no longer a chore, it's entertainment and the way to glory, even if it is only among your own friends or family. Home builders saw the trend coming a while back and kitchens have been designed to be the family hub of the modern home – and to be used, rather than a centrepiece just for show.

At just 30, Brisbane designer Darren James is an avid cook and, as the principal of Interiors by Darren James, he knows only too well how important a kitchen can be to the new cooking *cognoscente*. He has just won the title of Queensland Large Kitchen Designer of the Year at the recent 2009 Kitchen and Bathroom Design Awards. The design he entered for the award not only

impressed the judges with its chic look and capability but, more importantly, it was just what the clients ordered.

Owners Brian and Melissa McGeown wanted a kitchen with the 'wow' factor – something modern and sophisticated but one that would also be a functional work space. The couple and their two children are the new family model – they enjoy cooking and eating together and they entertain guests often so they wanted a kitchen that would suit their lifestyle – and they got it.

The result is a stunning but uncomplicated design created with the highest quality materials. The size of the kitchen (36m²) meant a strong and dominant design was required to suit the space. James drew his inspiration from the latest kitchen designs in Europe, a market he follows closely for emerging trends. "The European

designs at the moment are very sleek and minimalistic with handle-less drawers and cupboard doors," he said – a trend which has been incorporated into the McGeown's kitchen. However, a more recent innovation from Europe – electric-powered doors and drawers that open automatically at a touch – has only become available since the McGeown's kitchen was built.

The choice of materials was also influenced by Europe where natural stone, stainless steel and high gloss surfaces, such as painted glass, are popular. For example, James used painted black glass with aluminium frames for the overhead doors in the McGeown's kitchen. The bench tops are made from Calcutta marble and stainless steel, while travertine marble tiles line the floor and, in some places, the wall as well, right up to the ceiling.

"The kitchen's ultimate winning feature is its functionality"

But for both judges and designer the kitchen's ultimate winning feature is its functionality, which should be the focus of any kitchen, no matter what the budget, according to Darren James. Judges agreed his winning design "embraced all aspects of function and storage required for a young modern family". For the McGeown's that means separate zones for preparation of food, cooking and cleaning. A scullery allows the messy side of cooking to be hidden when entertaining so that the main kitchen stays clean and looks good for guests. Soft-close drawers that prevent slamming and internal organisers such as cutlery inserts, plate racks and spice racks are all must-haves, according to James, while the double ovens are a favourite of the owners, who both like to cook. Melissa says the design works in practice as well as it does in theory. "Everything about the kitchen works, I love the way it is laid out," she says, a testament to James' attention to detail.

James was initially a cabinet-maker by trade but his training has been quite different to most kitchen designers. He began his career working on the interiors of luxury boats worth millions of dollars – a start which proved valuable when he changed to residential design. "Working on the boats taught me to work with detail. The joinery on boats is very difficult and [my experience] enables me to incorporate things that are not used in ordinary kitchen construction."

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