

# SAVE OR SPLURGE?

Kitchen-industry experts share inside tips on the best ways to invest (and protect) your hard-earned cash.

“Buy the best and you only cry once,” says the old slogan. In other words, spending more for quality now may be painful, but over time that investment will pay dividends in performance, design, and durability. This is never as true as during a kitchen remodel, when the choices you make today must hold up to the use and abuse of many tomorrows.

Of course, few of us can afford to buy the very best of everything. So, staying on budget becomes a tightrope walk of saving and spending, prioritizing and compromising. One pro trick to get the balance just right: Begin at the end. Ask yourself how long you’ll live with this kitchen, and how you’ll really use it. Your answers will help you decide how important durability is (very important if you plan to live in your house forever; less so if you’re updating for resale) and which features are the most essential. Then, take the save-or-splurge advice from our panel of pros, whose experience has taught them where it’s best to invest, and which corners can be cut safely.



Save with a cabinet-depth fridge instead of a built-in.

Splurge by adding windows to usher in natural light.

Save with a moderately priced faucet.

Save by using a thrifty mix of countertop materials.

## Materials

### SAVE

**MIX IT UP.** Budget considerations can make stone counters seem out of reach, but it is possible to use the material you want without veering into the red. “Instead of spending thousands to outfit your entire kitchen in exotic granite, just do the island and use something less expensive on the perimeter counters. A small

slab of a basic granite costs about \$600, plus fabrication,” says kitchen designer Tatiana Machado-Rosas, Design Department Manager for Jackson Design & Remodeling in San Diego. Quartz surfacing costs about the same of granite, holds up better, and doesn’t require sealing. Or, use stone in heavy-use areas, but top a dining bar or desk with wood, which can cost far less.

### SPLURGE

**ADD WINDOWS.** Introducing natural light to a dark kitchen can make it seem larger—without an expensive addition—not to mention highlighting views and offering ventilation. If you’re replacing existing glazing with a larger size, remember to factor in the cost of the installation, says remodeler Carl Bruen of

Bruen Design Build in Morristown, New Jersey. “When you make a window taller and not wider, it might cost you \$250 for the carpentry,” says Bruen. “But if you do a wider window, it might cost closer to \$1,000.” Remember that windows take up wall space that can otherwise be used for cabinets, so be sure to allocate enough storage elsewhere.

## Appliances

### SAVE

**KEEP WHAT YOU HAVE.** If the existing appliances work well, keep them—for now. But, don’t forget to think ahead. “Consider each one and how your layout or cabinets may need to change to accommodate a future replacement,” says designer Genie Nowicki of Harrell Remodeling, Inc., in Mountain View, Calif. You can

shave about \$5,000 to \$20,000 off your budget if you eliminate appliance costs, but it’s a strategy that works best when you don’t plan to change the size of the appliance (for example, going from a 24 to 30-inch wide wall oven). A word of caution: Nowicki says gaskets in an existing dishwasher can dry up while the appliance sits during a renovation, which can lead to leaks.

### SPLURGE

**GET CABINET-DEPTH FRIDGE.** If a new refrigerator is on your shopping list, consider a cabinet-depth (also known as counter-depth) refrigerator, says kitchen designer Liz Murray, owner of Liz Murray Interior Space Planning & Design in Lake Oswego, Oregon. “A big, bulky refrigerator sticking out

into the room takes away from your kitchen and compromises traffic flow,” says Murray. Available in a range of sizes and styles, these 24”-deep models align with surrounding cabinetry, creating a built-in appearance for thousands less than a true built-in model costs. Of course, you do sacrifice storage: If you need more, consider recessing a standard fridge into the wall.



## Style

### SAVE

**UPDATE WITH PAINT.** Whether your budget is tight or you just want to freshen up your kitchen for resale, embrace the power of paint, says Lise Salmon, a residential broker associate with Decker Bullock Sotheby's International Realty in Mill Valley, Calif. When she worked with a client to give a 1970s kitchen a face-lift to prep the home for sale, they used paint to transform the space. "We decided to keep the cabinets and counters, but refinshed

the existing cabinets to a rich brown to match the ceiling beams and painted everything else a neutral creamy white," says Salmon. "This eliminated the visual chaos of the 1970s orange hues, dark yellows and odd wallpaper." The paint updated the kitchen, and the home sold with multiple offers. Painting walls is a simple project that even DIYers with no experience can execute well (see page 68 for our top-Rated paints and tips on getting the job done right), but refinishing cabinets is more difficult.

### SPLURGE

**CREATE A SPLASHY BACKSPLASH.** A beautiful backsplash lends personality, so it's a good place to spend a little extra. But you don't have spring for yards of imported tile. For one project, designer Paula Kennedy of Timeless Kitchen Design in Seattle, used a few pricey Moroccan-style tiles to create a picture-frame effect around basic \$1-per-square-foot subway tiles. "It was a cost-effective way to add a little 'wow' factor," she says.

### SAVE

**PICK A FRUGAL FAUCET** "You don't have to buy the luxury brands to get very good quality and functionality in a faucet," says kitchen designer Sarah Robertson of Studio Dearborn in Mamaroneck, New York. Instead of focusing on the label, consider the construction. All-brass faucets with a low-maintenance finish typically start at about \$150 to \$300; go lower than that and you'll find plastic internal components that wear easily.

## Cabinets

### SAVE

**BUY FACTORY-FINISHED CABINETS.** Designer kitchens often include custom-made cabinets, which do have their attractions: They fit the space perfectly, can include nearly any detail you can dream up, and give your kitchen a one-of-a-kind look. But, factory-made stock and semi-custom cabinets often have the advantage of durability, says Gianna Santoro, a kitchen designer with Deane, Inc., in Stamford, Conn. "If you've spent a bundle on new

cabinets, you don't want to see the finish chipping or peeling in a couple years," she says. "Factory-finished cabinets can save you money up front, and you won't have to refinish them down the road, so you save twice." Look for manufacturer that uses a catalyzed varnish (also known as conversion varnish), which creates a durable and uniform finish that will almost always outlast standard finishes applied at the job site, says Santoro. And, be sure the manufacturer offers a warranty on the product.

### SPLURGE

**MAKE THE ISLAND MULTIFUNCTIONAL.** "Prospective homebuyers love center islands," says Susan Silverman, a Licensed Associate Real Estate Broker with Warburg Realty in New York City. Especially when they come with extras like storage cabinets, seating, and a prep sink. If you're upgrading to a larger island, make sure to allow a 42- to 48-inch wide clearance on all four sides so the island won't impede move-

ment. Measure door swings of adjacent appliances to be sure they won't crash into the island when open. If you plan to add stools for seating, you'll need to allow for a generous countertop overhang and plenty room from side to side: According to the National Kitchen and Bath Association, island seating requires knee space that is 24 inches wide by 15 inches deep. For open-plan kitchens, consider a two-level design, with the taller counter facing out to hide cooking messes from view.