



Homeowner Vito Rizzuto, left, and kitchen designer Randy Albert show off the ample new black-marble countertop and storage space. As Mr. Albert is a former cook, he understood what the kitchen required.

## A chef-worthy kitchen remake

When a chef carves out a plan to create the ideal kitchen, it's a sure bet that functionality will invariably top the list of must-haves. So it was for Vito Rizzuto, owner and executive chef of Five Doors North on Yonge Street (south of Eglinton), when he and his wife, Sheila, decided to remodel the kitchen of their north Leaside home.

"Moving here in 2003, I knew this teeny kitchen, with its outdated and worn cabinetry, would have to be gutted," says Mr. Rizzuto. "With definite ideas about what we wanted in a modern home kitchen, the first challenge was finding a designer on our wavelength."

They searched for weeks to find someone to transform his rough sketches in a workable design strategy. "I was disappointed by most of what I saw and heard," he recalls. Then a friend referred him to Randy Albert, owner of the AyA Kitchens Gallery in Pickering, and a former cook at upscale Toronto hotels. "He understood our goals – plenty of countertop space and a logical flow to the kitchen work area. We are kindred spirits," Mr. Rizzuto says with a smile.

To start, a wish-list was developed. Besides the changes in cabinetry, countertops and sinks, the Rizzutos were advised to consider other important elements, including flooring, lighting and architectural features such as walls, windows and a kitchen island.

"The original 144-square-foot kitchen was visually choppy with a wall and doorway between it and the dining room, narrow windows and no access to the patio," Mr. Rizzuto says. To open the space and brighten the interior, that wall was removed, an adjacent window replaced with French doors leading to the backyard, three large windows were put in at eye level for a full view of the grounds, and pot lights installed to illuminate the food preparation zone.

The blueprint confirmed that the kitchen space was too restrictive for an island. "We opted for a bar, and by raising the bar to a height of 42 inches, we established a subtle defining point between the kitchen and dining room," Mr. Rizzuto says.

With that wall gone (along with its attendant cabinetry), storage became the next major design hurdle. "I wanted a simple, clean look without resorting to hanging pots, pans and cooking utensils on an overhead rack. It's OK for a restaurant kitchen, allowing the chef to have all the tools of the trade at hand, but I didn't want that for my home," Mr. Rizzuto says.

### *They chose extra cabinets rather than overhead racks*

Mr. Albert's solution focused on extra cupboard space positioned under the countertops. "Although the Rizzutos chose ceiling-high cabinetry, that arrangement didn't prove sufficient for the industrial-size pots, pans and skillets, as well as everyday dishes and cutlery they need," Mr. Albert says. "The only way to free up space was to add drawers and shelves below. Many ergonomically designed kitchens with base cabinets and pantry cabinets using adjustable shelving may look good, but can be frustrating if you have to get down on your knees to sort through 22 inches of cabinet depth. The key is managing storage area well," he says.

Solid cherry-wood cabinets, accented with brushed-steel hardware, glide along a mechanism called Blumotion, devised by Mississauga-based Blum Canada Ltd. "It doesn't matter whether the pullout is closed gently or slammed shut,

this system closes it effortlessly – and quietly," Mr. Albert says, explaining that inner springs and flexible discs on the shelving's underside regulate the speed of the drawer.

"That's what men want in their kitchen cabinetry – they like solid doors that shut easily and silently, like a luxury car," Mr. Albert says. One of the biggest home lifestyle trends that he sees is men migrating from their garage hangouts to spend time in the kitchen.

Where women used to design up to 98% of home kitchens, according to Mr. Albert, a growing number of men who enjoy cooking also want to have a say in the design process. "Men prefer 'beefy cabinets' that look substantial, and they love to spread out: large countertops to throw a slab of beef on; drawer dividers to allow a quick utensil grab. The kitchen is now just as much a man's domain," Mr. Albert says. In his family's case, now that their two-year-old son, Patrick, has an increasingly eclectic appetite, Mr. Rizzuto says cooking duties are assigned seamlessly. "Sheila makes the breakfasts; I do dinners."

To create a flow between the rooms, the homeowners stripped and stained the original oak flooring throughout the house, also laying new hardwood in the kitchen in the same rich hue. "Using ceramic tiles would have resulted in the kitchen/dining areas appearing unbalanced," Mr. Rizzuto states. "And because wood gives more bounce than stone, I find it's easier on the feet even after hours of standing while preparing food."

The menu at Five Doors North, Mr. Rizzuto points out, is based on simplicity and freshness. "I use the same philosophy for home-cooked meals. That same simplicity extends to our home-kitchen design. In my view, there's nothing more unsightly than clutter."

**By Jack Kohane**