

Future-tense kitchens

Taking the bore out of the chore



VICKY SANDERSON
AROUND THE
HOUSE

Once a year or so, I get invited to Whirlpool Corporation's Chicago showroom and training facility.

I always accept with enthusiasm because a) Chicago is a terrific city, and b) it's a chance to ask questions of some of the world's most successful designers of kitchen and laundry appliances.

In June, I spoke to Jason Tippetts, a global brands design manager for the corporation's stable, which includes Whirlpool, KitchenAid, Jenn-Air, Maytag, and Amana.

Tippetts says he is typically "working three to four years out... doing the upfront work on what the brand, and the home, will look like in the future. Right now we're at a boundary where technology, décor, furniture, and space start to blend."

His colleague Michael Seeley, also a Whirlpool global brand designer, agrees but adds that "removing the chore" from all things house and home related is as central to their design as aesthetics.

That's a principle well-executed in a new low-profile microwave/hood in the KitchenAid and Whirlpool line-ups. Elongating and emphasizing horizontal lines gives an effect of expanse, especially effective in smaller spaces.

As for function, 1.1 cubic foot capacity is more than adequate for most microwave chores, the easy-open interior cleans with a damp towel, a sensor can track and adjust cooking times, and the hood per-

formance is extremely respectable.

Another kitchen staple, the fridge, was for a long time simply a generic white box to keep food cold, says Tippetts. "Capacity was king. But if you can't see your food, you can't efficiently access your food."

That's especially important in North America, where the average fridge is opened upwards of 50 times a day. "It helps if you think of an open fridge as food being marketed," says Tippetts, whose team alleviated the "chore of looking" with the dark and dramatic shelving and brighter lighting used in higher-end grocery stores and cafés.

That vision led to the granite-like Obsidian finish in Jenn-Air fridges — inspired, says Tippetts, by still-life foods and florals by Dutch masters. "Dark interiors make colours pop," says Tippetts, "especially when they are well-lit" — a task easier than ever with new generations of LEDs.

Focusing on flexible, configurable capacity, Whirlpool's 36-inch French-door fridge also has "platter pockets" for wide, flat items like pans and pizza boxes. That makes it easier to store and see food, and possibly reduce waste.

A counter-depth model lets users create custom freezer zones. In both, more shelf space is carved out by putting the ice bin in the door.

The rise of pantry-inspired design allowed the team to "became aware of drawers and slides and soft-closes and all those other attenuations that make experiences delightful."

Exterior finishes have also changed significantly. Black stainless steel, which Whirlpool introduced a few years ago, is now a

marketplace staple.

Just launched is their new sunset bronze finish. Stainless with a rosy-gold tinted clear coat, it has a light-reflecting, satiny hue. So far, it's a hit.

"I just about fell off my chair when I heard interior designers and decorators say if they'd seen it before they might have picked something different for cabinets. You don't often hear an appliance finish as a starting point," says Tippetts.

Smart tech and home automation will only grow in influence, according to Seeley. Some ways Whirlpool delivers that is by offering service connections and product manuals online, designing smart ovens with three-temperature programs that can be named and stored and dishwashers with custom cycle settings, such as canning and brewing.

Handling a portfolio of brands is rewarding because the team can "influence each brand — and not just on price-point, but on experience," says Tippetts.

"Access to good design was once confined to those with the money for it. Premium features becoming available at a mass level proves the premise democratic design is good for people."

** Whirlpool Canada paid for travel and accommodation for this trip. They did not review this article prior to publication.*

— Vicky Sanderson is the editor of *Around the House* www.aroundthehouse.ca. Follow her on Instagram @athwithvicky, on Twitter @ATHwithVicky and on FB at www.facebook.com/ATHWithVicky



Jenn-Air's Obsidian interior and LED lighting create a still-life effect in the fridge.



A low profile microwave hood frees up much needed kitchen space.



Fingerprint-resistant sunset bronze pairs nicely with other golds, blacks, whites and stainless.



Black stainless steel may soon usurp white finishes.