



Every which way

Market experts' 2008 predictions all over the map

2 This Week



Woman of the year

Magazine chooses artificial heart designer for award

21 Marketing



Soft touch

Japanese diners developing taste for soft desserts

30 Trends

THE NIKKEI WEEKLY

BUSINESS NEWS FROM JAPAN TO THE WORLD

Newsstand Prices: ¥500 (Without Consumption Tax: ¥476)
US\$3.00 (U.S.) US\$5.00 (Outside U.S.) €3.20 £2.20 A\$6.00

December 31, 2007 and January 7, 2008

Volume 45, Number 2,318

Printed in Tokyo, New York and Los Angeles
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毎月曜日発行 昭和38年1月10日 第3種郵便物認可 9 770918 534003



A man's place is in the kitchen

Kitchens designed specifically for men exploit their rough-and-ready preferences

MIKI HOMMA

Men who enjoy cooking are growing in numbers, and they are proving very picky about their kitchens. They are not just selective about knives and other utensils, but also about what kitchen system to use. Domestic kitchen manufacturers have sniffed out this growing trend and are designing showrooms and new products with these male cooks in mind.

Targeting male customers, meuble is a kitchen showroom from leading system kitchen manufacturer Toyo Kitchen & Living Co. On a typical weekday evening, men visiting on their way home from work often ask typically male questions about, for instance, the materials from which the kitchen units are made. meuble opened in June inside a building of fashionable retail outlets in the Roppongi district of Tokyo. The showroom is dimly lit and masculine in design. Currently on show is a V-shaped kitchen unit with a titanium finish, and a box-like stainless steel kitchen unit decorated with arabesque patterns.

Living kitchen

The company has another showroom in Minami-Aoyama in Tokyo, designed to appeal to families and female customers with its bright and colorful interior. The showroom in Roppongi however showcases just a handful of kitchens, focusing instead on creating more of a "living kitchen" space. Kitchen prices here begin at around ¥2 million (\$17,544) and furniture from well-known brands is also on display.

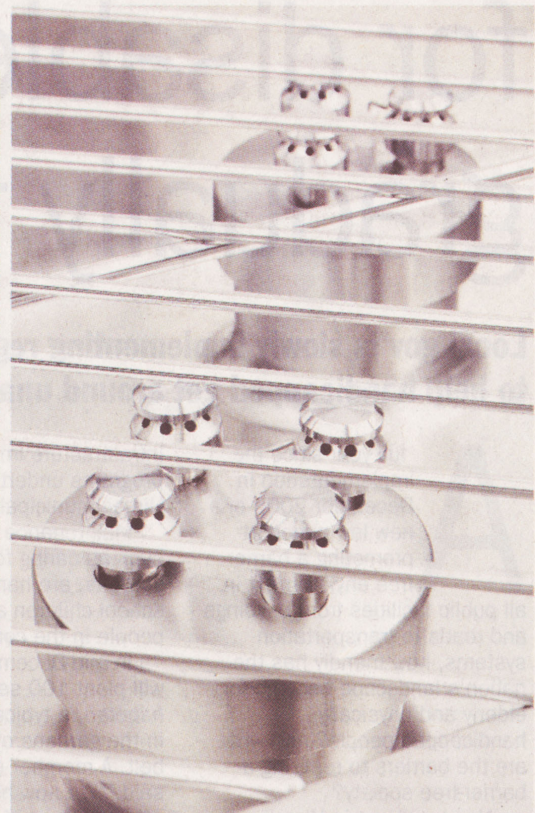
Takao Watanabe, the 59-year-old president of Toyo Kitchen, came up with the male-orientated concept. Two out of the three staff members are men because, so the idea goes, male customers have an easier time talking with male employees. meuble's store manager Kenya Kuroda, 35, said that "while women look mainly for functionality in a kitchen, men also visualize themselves standing in a kitchen — the way they might visualize themselves in a luxury car."

Of course, functionality is important to men too. One customer in his 40s had installed in his newly-built home meuble's commercial-grade gas hob against the objections of his wife who thought it would be difficult to use. He said he was totally won over by the functionality of this no-nonsense kitchen.

The kitchens at meuble are designed to appeal to that rough-around-the-edges male taste. The Lake Lotus, for example, is a stainless steel kitchen with exposed gas burners beneath wire grids. Toshihiko Sakai, the unit's



Toyo Kitchen & Living's V-shaped kitchen, above, has a titanium finish and was specifically designed to suit male tastes. The Lake Lotus, right top, is a stainless steel kitchen with exposed gas burners, inspired by a product designer's comment about making flames rise above water. The first batch of Zwilling J.A. Henckels Japan's Miyabi branded knives, right, sold out just two months after release.



43-year-old designer, developed the kitchen jointly with Tanico Corp., a kitchen manufacturer. Prices start at ¥1.9 million.

Fire and water

The design was inspired by one of the men on the company's product development team who once asked, "What about a kitchen where a faint blue flame rises above the water?" The end product virtually combines the sink and hob so they can be easily washed at the same time.

Those at meuble plan to win custom by stressing the ability of commercial-grade manufacturers to customize kitchens for domestic use and provide after-sales service. Even before this, the company has sold several units and from next year will begin selling the kitchen in earnest through home improvement stores.

Japan is not the only country designing kitchens specif-

ically for a male clientele. Released in Germany in September at prices starting in the region of ¥8-10 million, Kitchen for Men was jointly developed by German firm Poggenpohl and Porsche Design, known for its expertise in designing goods for men. Incorporated into the kitchen's aluminum frame are an audiovisual system, a coffee maker and a steam oven. A titanium finish adds that extra degree of class.

The kitchen is aimed at men with tastes in designer electronics and modern furniture, and is equipped with features that help it blend in as an extension of the living room. Put in simple words, the kitchen was made for a man who would drive a Porsche. Furniture importer and retailer Actus Co. is preparing the kitchen's Japan launch next fall.

Designers of kitchen utensils are also producing "for

men" line-ups. Zwilling J.A. Henckels Japan Ltd.'s first batch of 500 Miyabi branded knives sold out just two months after release in April. The Japanese knives, the first series of their kind, took three years to develop jointly with the firm's German headquarters. Despite price tags of ¥20,000 to ¥25,000, some stores selling as many as 20 knives a month, sparking a shortage in some areas.

Attractive

The stainless steel-bladed knives were originally developed for the export market. The handle was molded in a modern design out of special resin and stainless steel. "The designs and finishes meant for the export market were really attractive to Japanese men," said Yoshiko Matsubara, a marketing executive with the company. "They've been popular with baby boomers and younger

men who buy them as designer tools." The knives will be sold in 60 outlets around the country before the end of the year, up from 15 now.

One of the main factors behind the increase in men wanting to choose their own work space is that kitchen design has split into two directions. There are those for people who select a kitchen much as they would a piece of furniture; and those for people enthusiastic about cooking and want something that offers more.

However, what these two types have in common is that the men they attract tend to spend freely on high-priced kitchens just as they would on a luxury car. This means that the market for male-orientated kitchens and kitchen goods is not only potentially huge, but also lucrative.

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