



The Midcentury Kitchen: America's Favorite Room, from Workspace to Dreamscape, 1940s--1970s

Sarah Archer

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While it was once a hot and avoided workers' domain, by midcentury the American kitchen had become a "discrete living space: cozy, welcoming, and packed with conveniences." Sarah Archer's bright new book *The Midcentury Kitchen* celebrates this transformation, and its nostalgic ads and photographs will have vintage collectors going gaga.

Archer's pages capture yesterday's kitchen dreams of ease and individuality, showing how they reached toward a future characterized by style, homeyness, and inventiveness—so much so that Nixon used kitchen innovations to slap back at Khrushchev during a 1959 visit. Russia may have had Sputnik, but we had refrigerators, dishwashers, and ranges, marketed using the same colors, varieties, and sleek lines as automobiles.

Examples from the popular imagination involve a panoply of colors and inventions, from pervasive plastic, Formica countertops, Betty Crocker mixes, and Pyrex's boron atoms to the dreamed-of Food-a-Rac-a-Cycle and adjustable countertops. And if you think that "futuristic" is too reaching a word to apply to midcentury kitchens, consider: our own kitchens still mimic postwar designs. The "Miracle Kitchen" of 1959 even included a cleaning robot that—colors aside—very much resembles a Roomba.

While aesthetes will celebrate the book's dreamy images of "aqua blue [giving] way to avocado green," Archer's book is about more than just visual delights. "Without question," she says, "the innovations of the fully equipped postwar kitchen were one factor that made women's emancipation possible." Understood in context, a fifties woman dressed in pearls and heels to do housework represented freedom, shared duties, and an easier life. Even Tupperware became a feminist avenue, thanks to Brownie Wise's introduction of Tupperware parties, which made their saleswomen business owners in their own rights.

With its scholarly summations and smattering of atomic embellishments, *The Midcentury Kitchen* is a retro chic celebration of the kitchen's evolution from a place of drudgery to one of style and convenience. Secure it for the collector in your life.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May/June 2019)

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