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Outdoor Kitchens – The Must-Have Backyard Accessory

By Liz Morrison

You've customized your swimming pool, planted the perfect shade trees and found the most comfortable patio furniture. Now that you've settled in for a relaxing afternoon in your backyard paradise, wouldn't it be great if you could be just steps away from a cold beer or a juicy burger?

Outdoor kitchens are making backyard entertaining fun and easy. Gone are the days of trekking back and forth from the house to the pool just to keep everyone's drinks filled. Clint Dawson, sales manager of Catalina Spas and Bull Barbecues in Clairemont, explained that outdoor kitchens, also called outdoor islands, can be as elaborate or as simple as you'd like.

"The kinds of items most people want in an island are all stainless steel barbecues with cast brass burners and built-in rotisseries. Other things might include side burners, stainless steel refrigerators, stainless steel access doors and built in ice chests," Dawson said.

But before you run out and purchase any of these items, make a list of all things you want to be able to do in your outdoor kitchen. For example, if you want to be able to prepare several things at once, consider how many burners you might need. Is the primary cook right-handed or left-handed? This may determine location of certain accessories. Need to keep the grillmeister cool? Then

add a colorful umbrella or rustic palapa. If you tend to entertain several people at once, make sure you have the right capacity refrigerator and ice-making drawer.

For the ultimate party island, consider adding a full bar to the mix. From kegerators (refrigerators for chilling beer kegs, complete with tap), to glass front wine refrigerators, to stainless steel juice coolers and speed racks (enabling the bartender easy access to bottles), just add a blender and an afternoon in your backyard could rival a weekend in Cabo.

It's also important to consider the outdoor kitchen's location. Do you need the island to be closer to your indoor kitchen or your pool? If you plan to heat the grill with natural gas rather than propane, find the location of the closest gas line. You'll need plumbing near the island to accommodate a sink. And don't forget about a power source to run your appliances.

Once you've got these decisions made, then it's time to think about aesthetics. If you've spent considerable time and expense creating a backyard that not only works with the look and feel of your home, but also is an expression of your particular tastes, then you'll probably want your island to blend right in.

You can choose from a huge palette of stucco colors, or go with bamboo slats for a tiki look, or even

custom mosaic designs. In fact, you can create almost any kind of look you want for your island.

To keep your outdoor kitchen looking great, experts recommended you choose non-corrodible, weather-resistant materials like Trex (a synthetic material that resembles wood but is much more durable) and galvanized stainless steel studs treated with Rust-Oleum (a rust resistant paint) for maximum protection from the elements.

So how much does an outdoor kitchen cost? That depends. You can buy one right off the showroom floor or customize every last detail of the island to your liking. The least expensive islands with just the basics go for about \$4,900 but if grilling puts you in touch with your inner Emeril with a splash of Martha Stewart on the side, you may want to consider something in the \$18,000 range with all the bells and whistles.

So if you're tired of that beat up old grill that never cooks evenly, or spending all your time running back and forth to the house for drinks and snacks, it may be time to think about upgrading. Whether you're throwing a few burgers and hot dogs on the fire or planning an elaborate feast, San Diego weather is perfect for cooking and dining al fresco, and the best part is, with the convenience of an outdoor kitchen you'll be able to spend more time with your guests.