

Black stainless steel is sleek, but will it stick around?

BY MARIE ELIZABETH OLIVER

When the Toronto Interior Design Group dreamed up a kitchen for one of its cooking-obsessed clients late last year, it opted to anchor the space with a suite of Samsung appliances in black stainless steel. The finish, combined with custom cabinets painted Benjamin Moore's Florida Keys Blue and penny tile floors, not only thrilled the homeowners but also made a splash on the online design community Houzz. Houzz editors even used an image of the art-deco-meets-modern kitchen to accompany a poll on appliances in black stainless steel, where users voted in favor of the new finish by more than two to one.

What major appliance manufacturers, such as LG, KitchenAid and Kenmore, are trumpeting as "black stainless" is essentially traditional stainless steel coated in a sleek, dark finish. The actual hue varies by brand. There's no denying that this new shade on the block is sexy — well, about as sexy as dishwashers, ovens and refrigerators can get — but does it have staying power?

According to home improvement expert Karl Champley, whose job includes traveling the world looking for the latest design trends, the move toward darker appliance finishes started in Europe and is slowly making its way west. Champley, winner of "Ellen's Design Challenge" and a spokesman for the National Kitchen and Bath Association, says that although black stainless won't dethrone classic stainless in the U.S. market anytime soon, that doesn't mean homeowners shouldn't consider it now. "It looks fantastic," Champley says. "It's going to be quite a few more years before it goes mainstream, and you're already ahead of the game."

Houzz editor Sheila Schmitz says an increase in user-generated images featuring black stainless prompted the site's research team to add it to the 2017 Houzz Kitchen Trends Study. The survey results revealed that 7 percent of homeowners who have completed, are working on or are planning a kitchen renovation are choosing black stainless kitchen appliances.

Champley likens the glitzy marketing of black stainless across manufacturers to having a show car on a dealership lot. "They want to show that they're on trend. If they get someone hooked on this finish, you'll have to complement it with other pieces from the line." He recommends black stainless



This kitchen, designed by the Toronto Interior Design Group with appliances in black stainless steel, made a splash on Houzz's online community. The design website's editor, Sheila Schmitz, said she has seen an increase in user-generated images featuring the dark finish.

for anyone looking to make a statement or update to a modern or transitional kitchen style. "What makes it powerful is the look and the ease of maintenance," says Champley, referring to its appealing, smudge-proof coating that is resistant to fingerprints.

As good as that sounds, there's one drawback that anyone with a high-traffic kitchen should consider: It can scratch.

"If you accidentally run your engagement ring up it, it's going to scratch," says Champley, who quickly adds that in his experience, scratching is rare and fixable. He says it's similar to fixing a scratch on a car. He recommends reaching out to the manufacturer to get a sample of the specific hue and sealant. Then, you can sand down the scratch with a high-grit sandpaper, clean the area and dab on the finish with a cloth.

And for anyone worried about Lego-wielding toddlers, he says, "It's pretty unusual to hit an appliance hard enough to scratch it."

Scratches aside, perhaps the biggest question on the mind of those about to invest thousands of dollars in new appliances (de-

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pending on the brand, black stainless can run an extra hundred or so per appliance) is whether it will become a decision they'll regret a few years down the road.

Schmitz's biggest piece of advice: "Don't be swayed by trends. Choose the thing that makes your heart go pitter-patter." And if you can't decide between black or traditional stainless, try mixing things up and using one black stainless appliance as a statement piece.

"People are mixing metal finishes more and more intentionally," Schmitz says. "It's like mixing metals in jewelry. That is an element of a classic kitchen. They

tend to have a look acquired over time, a mix of new and old. It's actually a more beautiful kitchen because it's yours and it isn't like anyone else's. If it's balanced, you don't have to follow any design rules."

This is where Schmitz and Champley agree that a professional designer can be a worthwhile investment.

"I've gone through this process myself, and having a designer help you pick what to choose is worth the extra cost," Schmitz says. "It saves you money and time, rather than having that self-doubt and not being happy with the result."

"Having a certified designer is a good investment — that way you can get a rendering and visually see the end result before you buy," Champley concurs.

When it comes to resale value, Kerrie Kelly, a home design expert for Zillow Digs, says that although it's hard to trump stainless steel for universal appeal, black stainless can be striking and create an upscale European aesthetic, especially when combined with the right cabinetry and metallic elements.

Whether you choose black stainless, traditional stainless or a more integrated look for your major appliances, Champley says, the biggest trend he sees is people staying in homes longer and eschewing trends for universal designs that will still work 10 to 15 years later. "There's a lot of fancy stuff out there, but we need to cater the kitchen and appliances to suit ourselves both now and later in life," Champley says. "We should design the casa to suit our soul instead of the next buyer."

As for that Toronto kitchen, Jacyln Gray, who worked on the project team as senior designer at the Toronto Interior Design Group, says the homeowners are still "very happy" with their decision to go with black stainless appliances and, as of press time, have not reported any scratches.

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