Bringing More to the Table

Food writer Mina Holland muses on the changing role of cooking spaces

→ British food writer Mina Holland is pictured at home in her kitchen in Crofton Park, south London, where she lives together with her husband Freddie and their dog Ernie.

For a long time, I didn't have a kitchen. While my partner and I were saving for our flat, we lived at his mom's house. A kitchen of our own was a concept, a mental sketch roughly colored in by a dowry of possessions collected during years of anticipation. I had, among other things, a sharp knife wrapped in an old tea towel, a Charles and Diana commemorative mug bought at a charity shop (this republican's single concession to the British monarchy), and a stash of jam jars filled with various spices that gave off a dubious incense. These things lived in cardboard boxes but, more importantly, they occupied an imaginary space that was our one-day kitchen.

There is more significance to this than I knew at the time. So much of what the kitchen now represents is imaginative, intangible. While there was obviously a kitchen at my mother-in-law's—a room for food preparation—we didn't have a space of our own to fulfill all the other functions that a kitchen might have: somewhere to gather, to host, to toast, to make introductions, to feed, to potter, to laugh, to discuss, to quarrel, to learn, and to express ourselves with the things we choose to own, to cook, and to talk about. I couldn't wait to push the colored spines of my cookbooks into a designated shelf, to click my knives onto a wall magnet, to pile my ceramic plates pleasingly in a cupboard. Even more than this, I couldn't wait for the conversations that would happen in there, to listen to the radio with breakfast, to have a friend sit drinking wine while I made a pasta sauce. These were my ordinary domestic fantasies, but fantasies they were.

In the past, kitchens were hidden away and served a simple, unglamorous purpose, while public life took place in reception rooms. Whatever your social class, entertaining would have happened away from the kitchen until well into the Victorian era, and is perhaps most starkly represented by the televised period dramas portraying "upstairs downstairs" culture: downstairs kitchens were the dark, clattering, fat-scented domains of servants who prepared the dishes their employers would enjoy upstairs, in drawing and dining rooms flooded with natural light and the best furniture. How times have changed! Practically and symbolically, the kitchen has transcended straightforward culinary utility: it is the nucleus of a home. And now that I have a home, with a kitchen, it's where most of waking life happens. Though we might wander to another room to wash or sleep, the kitchen always draws us back with its smells, its tastes, its noises, and by the promise of action.

To grasp the symbolic role of the kitchen, it's important to first understand the emotive power of food for human beings, beyond being fuel for the body. Cooking—and learning to cook—is only partially a question of skill and know-how; the American food writer Paula Wolfert once told me that she learned recipes in Morocco "with kisses, cuddles, and measuring