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High-tech tools for the kitchen to inspire any cook

The traditional method for determining if the milk has gone bad is to take a healthy gulp, spew the offending matter upon the kitchen floor should it be sour, then proceed to seek a second, and perhaps even a third opinion from those dear to you. There are downsides to this approach, but as with many things in modern times, technology is poised to save us.

Over the past decades, technology has migrated from the computer lab into the home where it was initially welcomed into the home office before spreading to the family room. Now, it has taken root in the kitchen where it is performing wonders of varying degrees of usefulness.

Take that sour milk, for instance. Thanks to the technology, no longer will you be subjected to the unsuspected unpleasantness of curdled lumps in your Cheerios. The Milkmaid (www.quirky.com), which still is in development, is billed as a “smart jug” that uses a pH sensor to detect when milk has gone bad. When it does, the LED lights on the jug change color and a text alert is sent to relay the disappointing news the instant it happens. Also in the works is an iPhone app that will provide instant access to all of the milk’s vital signs such as temperature, amount remaining and its projected expiration.

Also in development is a cutting board (www.designboom.com) with a scale embedded into its surface so that ingredients can be chopped and measured at one convenient location. Precise measurements will be displayed using electronic ink, also embedded into the board. Designers estimate that they are five years away from making this dream a reality.

As you can see, this isn’t your grandmother’s country kitchen. It won’t be long before your boxy toaster will be replaced by a heating element embedded in a mat that can be rolled up like a towel and stowed away. Smart devices will stir simmering pots to your precise specifications. And you’ll be able to listen to all of your favorite songs through the salt and pepper shakers.

Curt Trampe has seen his share of kitchens. The president of DreamMaker Bath & Kitchen said that the most common technological advancements he sees are smart appliances that connect directly to the Internet, and ultimately, to the homeowner. Never again will an absent-minded cook have to wonder if they left the oven on after going out for the evening.

But it's about more than simply not burning down the house. It is no longer enough for kitchen appliances to cook, clean and preserve; advanced features will soon make the Jetsons look like a bunch of cavemen.

That's perhaps a tad hyperbolic, but the LG Smart ThinQ Refrigerator (www.lg.com) is certainly moving things in that direction.

If you've ever stood dumbfounded before an open refrigerator while pondering what to eat (and wasting precious energy,) then this \$3,499.99 beauty is for you. Food can be inventoried upon entering the refrigerator through voice commands or scanning barcodes. A built-in touchscreen then not only can show you what's inside but also suggest recipes based on available ingredients. If you see a recipe that looks good, press a button and your LG compatible oven will automatically heat to the proper temperature.

Has this ever happened to you? You have a medium-sized sauce pan that's too big for the small burner, but too small for the big burner. Frustrating, right? Well not anymore.

The Gaggenau CX 491 (www.gaggenau.com) features a free-induction cooktop that allows you to place that pan anywhere on its 36-inch surface and only the area beneath the pan will heat. It retails for about \$5,500, a small price to pay for putting a stop to years of frustration.

While the "wow" factor of these advancements vary greatly, they lean more toward extravagance than necessity. But there are some more practical solutions currently on the market.

Since recipe cards almost are obsolete and cookbooks are heading in that direction, many people want easy access to online recipes while cooking. The Belkin Kitchen Cabinet Mount (www.belkin.com) will keep your iPad at the ready, but out of spill's way. The mount will attach to any cabinet or shelf using adjustable clamps. It can be purchased from many retailers for about \$5,460 less than the Gaggenau CX 491.

In terms of kitchen design, Trampe said that LED lighting is another growing trend. Previous iterations of the technology tended to cast a bluish hue, which was particularly unflattering when preparing and serving food. Improvements have now made LEDs a popular energy-saving option and homeowners seem to like the idea of never having to change the hard-to-reach bulb over the sink.

As far as how Trampe goes about designing a kitchen, the use of computer-aided drafting tools and 3-D renderings isn't really cutting edge anymore. What is new is how technology is helping his clients better communicate what they envision their dream kitchen.

Houzz (www.houzz.com) is a Pinterest-like site that allows users to browse a large database of stylishly decorated and designed kitchens, and then create a scrapbook of their favorite images. Trampe and his staff can then use these images to further customize a design to the particular client's tastes. Houzz gets more than 16 million unique visitors each month, currently making it the largest residential remodeling and design community on the Web.

These are just some of the advancements being made in kitchen technology that may make our time there a little easier. But the real breakthrough still is some years off. The good people at Panasonic

are working on a robot that can grab dirty dishes, rinse them off and then place them in the dishwasher. Perhaps someday, it will be as common as the kitchen sink.

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