

LUXURY LIVING

The launch of its Living Kitchen is designed to give Kitchens International's Aberdeen showroom an edge in the premium market, says studio manager Kieron Bell

Words **Amelia Thorpe** Photos **Paul Mavor and Robert Michael Wilson**



From left to right: TV chef Nick Nairn, Kitchens International brand director Paul O'Brien, Aberdeen studio manager Kieron Bell

If you want to know how luxury kitchen retailing has changed in less than a decade, this statement by Kitchens International Aberdeen studio manager, Kieron Bell, says a lot. "When I joined the company in 2007, there were at least double – and probably treble – the number of displays in here," he explains.

Now the 320sq m showroom has just nine super-spacious displays including its latest launch, the Living Kitchen, a fully working roomset complete with the latest appliances, large dining table and AV entertainment system, that can be used for demonstrations, dinner parties and events.

"We have deliberately moved away from showing off everything you could come up with, to showing design concepts," continues Bell, 34. "The vast majority of kitchens we design and install are in spaces that don't exist at the start of the project. They are in new builds, extensions and houses that are undergoing complete re-modelling, where clients want open-plan kitchens with dining and other social areas. Our showroom is designed to reflect the type of rooms we are working with and the increase in scale." All the displays are working. "They are designed to be really good-quality examples of our design work that also help clients ►

essential retailer profile Kitchens International Aberdeen



Each Sub-Zero wine storage unit can hold up to 147 bottles, shown here next to the working Wolf coffee machine

- » **What is your greatest opportunity?** "To grow our presence in the local marketplace. Many of our clients come to Aberdeen from around the world, and there isn't a horrendous amount of competition at this [luxury] level locally. Our biggest opportunity is to get to know more of them," says Bell
- » **And challenge?** "Recruiting design talent. There's such a pull southwards that it's hard to find people to stay in or to come to Aberdeen," he explains
- » **Strange but true** "Clients have been making requests to hire the Living Kitchen for their private events. We didn't expect that, but why not? It's definitely something we'll consider," he says

A floating unit in Poggenpohl ML Matt Black Silk laminate features a glazed central back panel framed in aluminium and V-Zug appliances



At the launch event [in May 2015], Kitchens International Aberdeen studio manager Kieron Bell, left, and TV chef Nick Nairn

► understand how the concepts could work in their own homes," he says. The Living Kitchen launched in May with an event featuring TV chef Nick Nairn cooking up a storm. With bespoke furniture by Stoneham, Bell says that the kitchen is designed to "embrace the idea [of open-plan social concepts] to the optimum". The kitchen occupies a space that was once home to three displays and an office.

The company currently hosts about one event a month in the Living Kitchen. "We invite a mix of clients past and present, architects and interior designers, and people in our network," he says of the dinners, wine tastings and social events – the most recent for the Rugby World Cup – held in the space. But it is most definitely not for hard-sell-style dealings, says Bell. "It is not about wining and dining prospective clients, but more about cementing relationships we already have."

The Living Kitchen in Stoneham bespoke furniture, with sweeping island in Anthracite Oak veneer and a curved inset panel of Black and White Zebano veneer and LED lighting



"THE VAST **MAJORITY** OF KITCHENS WE **DESIGN** AND **INSTALL** ARE IN **SPACES** THAT DON'T **EXIST** AT THE START OF THE **PROJECT**. THEY ARE NEW BUILDS, **EXTENSIONS** AND **HOUSES** THAT ARE UNDERGOING COMPLETE **RE-MODELLING**"

Kieron Bell, studio manager, Kitchens International Aberdeen



A bespoke kitchen by Stoneham featuring walnut inlaid with Ebony Macassar veneer

Studio manager Kieron Bell on bringing clients' ideas to life

- » **What is your approach to selling?** "We like to get to know and understand our clients, and that is done by listening very, very carefully and by spending a lot of time with them. We probably spend up to four hours with them before creating any design work"
- » **But surely that's expensive in terms of time before you have confirmation of the sale?** "It's our opportunity to tender for the project, and we don't foresee a situation where a client is not satisfied with our tender. But in order to get to that place, we have to understand what the client wants and bond with them. We need to understand the family dynamic, their personal preferences, their sense of humour and so on"
- » **Do you encourage clients to use the Living Kitchen?** "Yes, once we are going through the design detail phase, we often cook with clients, or let them use the appliances. We believe this is all part of how to deliver the best client experience. Of course it's not right for everyone – but it is for those who want a very special kitchen and for those who want to enjoy the process"



Curved corner drawers by Stoneham feature finger rebates lined with stainless steel

This approach is something that is at the heart of the Kitchens International way of dealing with its affluent clientele. "We are well aware that clients can go to London to buy their handmade kitchens. They may not be aware that they are available locally, especially because the local market is saturated by mid-market retailers," explains Bell, pointing out that Aberdeen's position as the oil capital of Europe brings in a cosmopolitan community from all over the world, many of whom are very familiar with luxury brands. In order to encourage those customers to buy locally, Bell says that the events in the Living Kitchen have a very specific networking focus. "We have a relationship-based approach," he says. "The events are designed to help us become even better known locally by building up an understanding of who we are with the right people." ■



The dining area in the Living Kitchen display, complete with TV screen

Tall cabinets painted in Thunder Grey are finished with Dove Grey painted frames



Kitchens International showroom in Aberdeen

retailer profile

Kitchens International

Who are we? Kieron Bell, studio manager, Aberdeen

Where are we? Denmore Road, Bridge of Don, Aberdeen AB23 8JW. Tel: 01224 824 300. Also at Edinburgh Westfield, Edinburgh Dundas, Broxburn, Glasgow, Perth. www.kitchensinternational.co.uk

What we do Luxury kitchen retailer

Business history Kitchens International was founded in 1994 by brand director Paul O'Brien and CEO Gerry Watson. Today, the company has six showrooms across Scotland, including two in Edinburgh, Broxburn – also the site of the distribution centre and head office – Aberdeen, Glasgow and Perth, the most recently opened in 2012. Co-executive directors Charlie Stephen and Kevin Buchanan sit alongside Paul

O'Brien and Gerry Watson to form the board of Kitchens International. Kitchens by Poggenpohl, Mowlem & Co, Callerton, Leicht, Stoneham, and its own brand KI Collection. Appliances by Gaggenau, Siemens, Wolf, Sub-Zero, V-Zug, with most sinks and taps by Blanco. Kitchen prices from the Aberdeen showroom start at £15,000; average £35,000; most expensive to date, £120,000. Sales are split 70% retail and 30% contract

Sales stats Current annual turnover for Kitchens International is about £12m. "Our current annual turnover for the Aberdeen showroom is £3m," says Bell

Staffing levels 90 including 18 in Aberdeen, including the in-house installation team



"We often cook with clients, or let them use the appliances. We believe this is all part of how we deliver the best client experience"

Kieron Bell, studio manager, Kitchens International Aberdeen



The Living Kitchen with fully working Wolf multi-function gas cooktop, electric grill and induction cooktop with Wolf ovens behind, flanked by Sub-Zero integrated freezer and fridge