

MAGAZINE

15.02.14

DESIGNER JACKET COURIERED
TO YOUR OFFICE IN TWO HOURS

Not on the high street

How this woman
changed the way
we shop

NEXT SEASON'S TROUSERS
ORDERED BY THE POOL IN IBIZA

SECRET SHOE
SHOPPING IN BED



It's plain, it's wooden and it might be tastefully taupe or daringly dark. It has no plastic bits and despises gadgets. It is the one thing that every fashionable house needs right now. What is it? A Plain English kitchen.

Everyone wants one, even me, and I never go into my kitchen. That great arbiter of middle-class truth, Mumsnet, has endless threads discussing which paint colours they think Plain English uses, whether it's Farrow & Ball (it's not) or Paint & Paper Library (more likely), and whether they could get their own joiner to run up something for half the price. (You could, but even if you squint, it's not going to be the same. We all know that the plainer something is, the more perfect it needs to be, and Bob the Builder's best efforts aren't going to cut it.)

"There's been a shift away from the opulent, glossy, high-lacquer finishes that developers used to put in when they were doing up flats," says Sophie Rogerson, of interior design and property search company RFR. "Plain English have cornered that end of the market, because they're traditional, but with a little bit of New York urban to them. They've made the traditional Shaker kitchen a little more interesting; a little more cool."

According to Rogerson, many of her European clients still prefer the open-plan, clean lines of all-white kitchens – "modular Italian stuff". But for a certain swath of wealthy English people, only Plain English will do.

As for colour, neutrals rule: the last word in fashionability, says Rogerson, is to do the whole kitchen – walls, units, surfaces – in different versions of the same shade, such as grey. Dark navy is an increasingly chic option, but, "It would be clumsy to do that style of kitchen in a primary or a bold."

Plain English was started in 1992 by Katie Fontana and her partner at

the time, Tony Niblock. It's only in the past year or so that it has hit mainstream consciousness.

"I've heard three people in the past six months say Plain English are the best," says Fontana. "I thought, 'Crikey, we're really getting noticed now.'"

They started the company by accident: having abandoned

London for a new life in Suffolk, Fontana, a trained interior designer, found herself hankering for a Shaker kitchen, but on a budget of only £3,000.

"I called the Shaker shop in London and they said one of the units I liked was £1,000, so I couldn't afford it. Out of frustration, I decided to design something very simple for myself."

Simple, of course, rarely comes cheap, and Plain English is no exception: that first kitchen, 20-odd years ago, came in on budget at £3,000. These days, you're looking at £50,000. And that doesn't include VAT.

Fontana concedes that her clients are wealthy, but counters that they've now launched a more accessible range, British Standard – they'll sell you just the cupboards, ie, Plain English units, but you have to do the measuring, design and fitting yourself. She reckons £6,000 or £7,000 would get you a British Standard kitchen, with another £5,000 or so on getting it fitted.

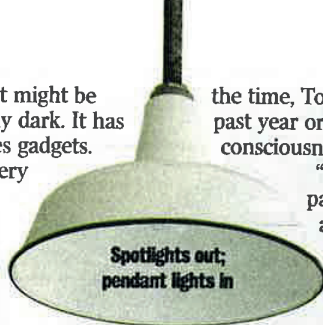
"I never wanted to be elitist," she says. "But our kitchens had become so expensive that a lot of genuine fans couldn't afford them. I felt sorry about that. Yes, people get their own joiners to copy ours, but I think imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. If I've helped to improve fitted kitchens in this world, then that's good. I think people get enchanted by the quirkiness of it."

And in a bid to solve that most middle-class of problems – which brand of paint to use – the company has launched its own range: 12 paints that are only available to Plain English customers. Just to make quite sure those people feel within their comfort zone, they have names like Woollen Flump and Boiled Dishcloth. Remind you of anything?

Let us conclude, then, with a rather nice irony: what's Fontana's own kitchen like?

"I hardly have a kitchen at all," she admits. "It's in Suffolk, with whitewashed brick walls, a brick floor, a black Aga, a zinc-topped work table and a massive sink that I found on the pavement outside our office in Hoxton Square. I don't have any Plain English units at all." ■

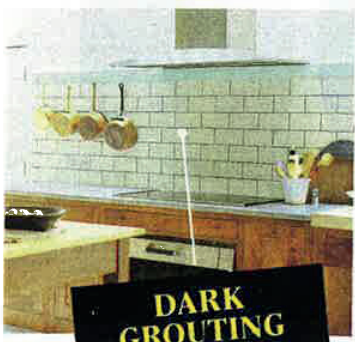
plainenglishdesign.co.uk



THE ONLY 12 SHADES



The Williamsburg kitchen. Right: the Plain English paint palette



MAKE YOUR KITCHEN COOL

Think Plain English units are enough to cement your coolness? Think again. Here's what else you need.

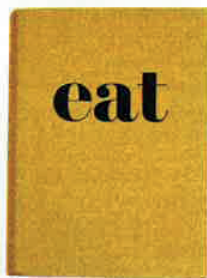
White Metro tiles
Still in, but the grouting must be anthracite, not white. I have no idea why, it just does. OK?



Falcon Enamelware
For all the home-cooked meals you will one day get round to making. Copper taps Never brass or, God forbid, gold. Must look vintage.

Vitamix Professional 500 juicer (£600)
Because Gwyneth swears by hers.

Jacob Jensen modern kettle (£100) OR an old kettle on the stove.



Cookbooks with vintage-style "cloth" covers Nigel Slater's *Eat*, Russell Norman's *Polpo*.
Wine cellar Racks are very 20th century. Hiding your Mouton Cadet in a dark cellar is the ultimate in stealth-wealth. Oh, and it's better for the wine, too.



Original Fifties Pierre Jeanerret chair and 1949 Wishbone by Hans J. Wegner (above) It's not about comfort. **Crittall industrial doors and windows** Bi-fold is over and French windows are too ubiquitous. **Industrial-looking Wolf oven** (£11,000+) and **Sub-Zero fridge** (£9,000+).



Wooden work surfaces, as long as they look old. **Vintage hanging light fittings** from Retrouvius No spotlights, ever. Your kitchen is mainly there to look good, so it doesn't matter that you can't see anything (retrouvius.com). **Top of the range Nespresso coffee machine** (£500) Even if you don't drink coffee. **Full range of glass Divertimenti storage jars**, filled with a colour-co-ordinated selection of beans, pulses, grains – and, of course, quinoa, this season's seed of choice.