

## **Formal Dining Areas Taking a Back Seat.**

Thoughts of a castle feast or 19<sup>th</sup> Century aristocratic dinner evoke images of a bustling social event characterized by a long table loaded with food, goblets, sparkling crystal and fine silverware. As our middle-class prospered a desire to capture this lifestyle experience gave birth to a formal dining room in many of our homes. It is estimated that in recent decades about 50% of homes constructed included a formal dining room.

For generations the formal dining room has been the focus of holiday meals and social gatherings. Although still popular in many areas, the formal dining room is progressively becoming a dinosaur. Today the keeping of a formal dining room appears to be a vanishing symbol in the American dream of home ownership.

So why is desire for a formal dining room drifting away? At the core of this shift are both economic and lifestyle changes. First, as home ownership continues its escalating price many opt for being more practical in purchasing their space. Every square foot of living area costs in terms of purchase price, real estate taxes, insurance and maintenance. For many it has been more sensible to focus a housing budget on a single useable dining area as opposed to separate formal and informal dining areas. Alternative spaces such as a home office, media room or hobby area have grown in popularity.

There are also household lifestyle changes that have firmly taken place. Busier schedules have overshadowed the time once spent preparing meals. The stay at home Mom in many cases has been replaced by working Moms and Dads with less time to spend in the kitchen. This coupled with today's preference for more casual social settings has resulted in the creation of multi-use living spaces. Home designs with distinct formal dining rooms have been increasingly replaced with "great room" floor plans. This option brings both kitchen and dining room in more direct contact with the general living area to create surroundings that promote greater interaction among family members and guests. Unlike the formal dining room that encourages interaction during meal time, the open design format allows for conversation while meals are both being prepared and eaten.

To better accommodate a single eating area in the home the casual dining space adjacent to the kitchen has grown in size. Kitchen counters and islands have also been enlarged to create usable "breakfast" bars with increased seating capacity. In more temperate climates, such as Florida, screened porches equipped with outdoor kitchens or grills provide further dining space.

As for existing homes with a formal dining room, use of the space generally leans one of two directions. Many maintain the formal area as a décor highlight of the home with use of the room sparingly for special occasions. Others abandon a formal dining setting and retool the space for some other use. Among the converted uses commonly found is home office, hobby area, music niche, quiet reading corner and even wine room or bar.

It is true that many households continue to cherish formal areas as an element of their homes. The formal dining area is not likely to completely disappear, especially in the luxury home market. However, if the current trend of the fading formal dining room continues, the result

should be added economy in delivering newly constructed homes and increased flexibility in use of converted space within many existing homes. So whether your preference at home is enjoying meals in the ambiance of a formal setting or casually leaning over a breakfast bar counter, the most important wish is....Bon Appetit.