Chicago's McCormick Place was the site of the 31st annual Kitchen and Bath Industry Show (KBIS), where attendees were treated to three days of nonstop sights, sounds and tastes as manufacturers vied for the attention of designers, contractors, remodelers, dealers and other industry professionals with their latest product innovations for the kitchen and bath. Incorporating over 300,000 square feet of exhibit space, the event attracted more than 20,000 attendees and nearly 550 manufacturers and service providers from across the globe.

Two things were clear from the show: One, HGTV is not a substitute for experiencing kitchen and bath products up close and personal. It is clear that kitchen and bath professionals really want to see, feel and taste the differences (many of the appliance manufacturers had professional chefs on hand whipping up tasty treats for attendees). And two, from appliances to tile, manufacturers are sincerely concentrating their research and development efforts on providing consumers with products and features that make life more convenient while being respectful of their budgets.

**Best of Show**

There were dozens and dozens of unique products on the show floor but two stood out for not only their innovative qualities but also for how they addressed more than one need or desire by today’s consumer. First, there were numerous LED (light-emitting diode) products offered but the light-integrated trim (LIT) by Keeler was heads and shoulders above the rest. LIT is a highly flexible, modular lighting system that can be used indoors or outdoors in crown molding, decorative trim, baseboards, cabinets and backsplashes, stair railings, coves, recessed ceilings and porch and deck railings. It is as functional as it is decorative (coordinating with the finishes of Keeler’s high-quality decorative cabinet hardware) and can provide added safety when used as a night or path light. The materials can be cut in the field.
The second Best of Show product was the Urban Cultivator. The Urban Cultivator is a locavor’s (and chef’s) dream come true! Sized like a standard dishwasher, this is a fully automated, self-contained, indoor-growing appliance. You can grow fresh herbs and greens in your own home 365 days a year for pennies per bushel. The unit lists at $2,200 (Canadian), comes in a built-in and a free-standing model with multiple top and glass options. (For more information go to www.urbancultivator.net.)

‘Ripley’s Believe It or Not’

Faux no longer looks fake! Laminate and quartz countertop manufacturers such as Formica, Wilson Art, Consentino (Silstone) and Cambria have had their proverbial noses to the grindstone, developing new countertops that look amazingly like quarried stone (think granite, travertine, limestone, etc.), so much so that you have to belly up to them to realize they are not the real thing.

You will see lots of movement in the surface, as you do with natural stone. Further, laminate manufacturers have also expanded the variety of countertop edges that can be applied and these new edges conceal the tell-tale “brown line” so disliked in traditional laminate installations (products may be found at Creative Countertops, West Shore Interiors, Home Depot or Lowe’s).

Reduce, Reuse, Rehydrate

Reduce your expenditures on bottled water (and your plastic consumption) by using refillable water bottles filled conveniently at your filtered kitchen water dispenser. Several manufacturers have introduced stylish dispensers to suit any style of décor including Brizo, InSinkerator, Delta, Moen, Kohler and Rohl (available at Ferguson and Keller Supply).

For the Indecisive Decorating Diva

The Kitchen Palette allows you to change out a 26-inch-wide by 18-inch-high section of your tile backsplash at will. A unique frame system allows you to “pop” in and “pop” out a fully grouted tile installation in just seconds. Think of the opportunities — you can have a different scene for every season, holiday or special occasion.

Speaking of tile, there were numerous gorgeous and cost-effective tile options on the show floor. The predominant theme was small, decorative tiles in a multitude of materials (natural stone, porcelain, glass, metal, etc.) to provide that perfect accent. The product lists for $150 and can be purchased directly from www.kitchenpalette.com.

Didn’t receive an invite to Kate and William’s wedding? Not to worry, you can get your royal bling on with Carpe Diem’s “Crowning Glory” decorative cabinet and bath hardware.
While we are on the subject of decorative hardware, manufacturers seemed focused on providing consumers with more choices in sizes, coordinated accessories (such as towel bars) as well as price points. So regardless of whether you are longing for something ornate or minimalist, there is a style of cabinet hardware out there to help you give your cabinetry a quick, cost-effective, updated look (available at Fergusons, Keller Supply, A Kitchen That Works and Kitsap Kitchen & Bath).

**Home Automation to the Max**

If you think it is cool that you can set your home’s thermostat or turn on the lights with a mobile application on your smartphone, then you will really love the new technology that allows you to monitor your kitchen appliances with your smartphone, mobile device or laptop computer. Wolf Appliance, Inc. and Sub-Zero, Inc. partnered with Control4, a leader in affordable IP-based home-control systems, to create the Smart Appliance App and Smart Appliance Module. This system gives consumers the ability to monitor and control everything in their home anywhere, at any time, whether that’s from another room in their home or miles away.

As an example, you will be notified on your phone/iPad/etc. when the wall oven has completed preheating so that you can pop in those appetizers just before your guests arrive. Also, you can be notified if there appears to be a malfunction with your refrigerator, wine captain, etc. This technology has a variety of uses but one that comes to mind is saving a valuable wine collection from being damaged during a power outage or a malfunction (available from Nilsen’s Appliance in Silverdale and Schmidt’s Appliance on Bainbridge Island).

**Stylish Assistance**

Think all aging-in-place products are ugly and institutional looking? Think again. Health Craft has expanded its line of universal design products to give you a two-fer — a toilet paper dispenser that is also a grab bar allowing you to leverage yourself after using the commode. Beauty and comfort in one — fold down teak/ipe shower seats were also released by several manufacturers including Moen, Health Craft and Teakworks4U. There when you need it, folded away when you don’t.

**Two in the Space of One**

Light and storage in one! Element Designs’ eluma LED shelving is made of anodized aluminum frames, which encapsulate energy-efficient LED lights, allowing you to highlight whatever you place on the shelf or in the cabinet. This is a particularly good application for glassware and sculptural art display, as light is emitted above and below the shelf, which eliminates shadowing seen in traditional cabinet-lighting methods. The shelves are available in a variety of styles and finishes.

Another two-in-one: Panasonic displayed the Whisper Recessed, an Energy Star-rated recessed can light/fan unit. These units combine the illumination of a can light with the function of an exhaust fan, minimizing the number of perforations in the ceiling and reducing installation costs. They can be used in tandem with a Panasonic for those who forget to turn on their bathroom fans. This unit lists for approximately $233 (available from Ferguson and Consolidated Electric Supply).
Panasonic had several other great products that address whole-house ventilation and makeup air ventilation for both new construction and remodels — in an effort to meet the new, stricter building codes that are coming into
effect in the near future (these products can be purchased at Ferguson, Keller Supply, Consolidated Electric, Home Depot and Lowe’s).

**For Shower Performers**

Do you like to sing in the shower? Kohler Co. and its subsidiary, Robern, have come out with new products that incorporate music in the bathroom. Kohler debuted the Sound Tile speakers (list for $380/pair without amplifier) that can be mounted right in the wall of your shower or anywhere in your bathroom to help make your bathing experience more tuneful. For a slightly less involved installation, consider the StereoStik (lists for $227), which is a set of speakers built into the Robern medicine cabinet and plays am/fm radio. It can also be plugged into an iPod (available at Ferguson and Keller Supply).
Hardware Does the Heavy Lifting

Several functional cabinet hardware manufacturers, including Blum, Hafele, Salice, Sugatsune and Richelieu, have focused their energies on bringing a vast array of convenience items to consumers. This includes wireless electronic-controlled opening and closing mechanisms for cabinet doors and drawers as well as lift mechanisms that bring cabinets to the user rather than the user going to the cabinet. This is a wonderful application for universally designed spaces by minimizing the need for the user to bend and reach to access the interior of a cabinet (available through major cabinet manufacturers and local custom cabinet shops).

Whether you are a do-it-yourselfer or prefer working with design-build professionals, you can find a wonderful array of kitchen and bath products that can meet all your storage, convenience and time-saving needs. Wishing you much success with your next project!