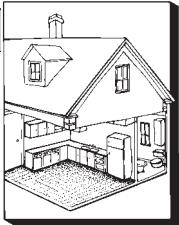


The Forgotten Kitchen Appliance

by Lynn Comeskey



My appliance supplier recently commented that most homeowners take great care in their selection of kitchen appliances, with one exception: kitchen ventilation. The choice of a hood or the specs on an appliance's downdraft capabilities seem to be left mostly to chance and dictated by how much pocket change is left over.

That's a shame in a room as expensive as the kitchen. And although most building codes don't specifically require a kitchen ventilator, it adds significantly to comfort and cleanliness by carrying away excess heat, damaging steam, grease, and odors. Kitchen ventilators can be broadly divided into two categories: overhead hoods and downdraft systems. Downdraft ventilators can be a built-in feature in ranges or cooktops, or be purchased separately for installation at the rear of a cooktop. Overhead hoods are installed against walls and sometimes suspended from ceilings. They include fixed hoods; compact models that tilt out, flip out, or pull out for operation (see illustration); and hoods that incorporate microwave ovens.

By the Numbers

When specifying a hood, area coverage and cubic feet per minute (cfm) ratings are the important issues. The hood should at least cover the burners laterally, but an additional three to six inches left and right makes it more effective. Unfortunately, few clients seem to be willing to give up these few square inches of storage.

The depth of coverage of most hoods is compromised so that they don't project too far into the room.

Most manufacturers offer units varying from 17 inches to 24 inches; the deeper units typically are mounted higher than the more shallow ones. New compact designs that expand are offered by Ventahood (its Tiltout and Flipout models) and others.

Another approach is the thinline "European" ventilators with pull-out glass visors (Gauganau, Broan, and Nutone). In all cases, hood ventilators should be installed 24 to 30 inches above the cooktop, although the closer the better.

When it comes to how much air a ventilator should move, the effective minimum is 300 cfm for a standard four-burner cooktop. Sadly, most of the inexpensive fixed hoods on the market—which make up the bulk of ventilators sold—don't meet this standard.

If you have a grill unit in your range or cooktop, you should double the minimum cfm rating. A freestanding hood installed over an island or peninsula where the hood has to draw from four sides instead of three, requires a 50-percent increase over normal.

You'll also have to choose between a ventilator that is ducted (through sidewall or roof) and the recirculating type. I don't think there's much argument that ducted ventilators deal with moisture, grease and odors better. They are particularly important if the burners are gas and will be used for a lot of high-heat cooking and frying. However, where there is absolutely no way to vent a unit to the outside, or if you have cold climate concerns about condensation forming in the ducting,

you can use a recirculating hood. I have a contractor friend in Wisconsin who swears by the Broan recirculating unit, giving its "Microtek" filter system high marks.

Another available wrinkle is a remote blower; I've used this option with a Thermador unit. Installing the fan motors on the exterior wall where the ducting exits cuts down on the precious kitchen space taken up by the motor, reduces the amount of noise the fan makes at its highest setting, and allows you to increase the size of your blower up to 1,000 cfm.

Downdraft Systems

Most of the appliance manufacturers make downdraft systems, but there are three that seem to have the bulk of the market: Jennair, Thermador, and Modern Maid. However, this may be changing with the introduction by GE, Dacor, and others of "pop-up" ventilators that are installed at the very back of the counter and run the entire length of the cooktop.

When downdraft systems were first introduced, they got rave reviews for freeing us from the bulky fixed hood, and it was easy to imagine them everywhere. But I look carefully at both the location in the kitchen and my customer's cooking habits before making the downdraft/overhead decision.

Downdraft systems are perfect where you can't install a hood overhead or where you want to have the area open, such as on an island or peninsula. And they are trendy. However, I usually allow twice as long to install the vent portion of a downdraft unit (two to four hours) as I do an overhead hood. I am also critical of them because their "draft" is at the cooking surface, which can pull off cooking heat.

This can be dramatically demonstrated with a gas downdraft—boiling water will stop boiling once the vent system is turned on. It's also my experience that steam- or grease-laden air coming from a pot with high sides gets away from a downdraft ventilator because that air is rising fast and the intake is just too far away. The "Pop-up" tops I mentioned earlier help with this problem in that they are 6 to 8 inches off the deck when operating. I've had good luck with Thermador's unit. I've also used Dacor's surface ventilator (it, too, can be used with almost any cooktop), but my one experience wasn't entirely successful.

Overhead Hoods

Overhead hoods typically provide more pulling power and better coverage of the cooking area. The hood's blower mechanics also tend to use less storage space than the downdraft units.

Wall hoods are relatively easy to install and to vent (one to two hours labor), though it's getting harder to generalize with all the different varieties. In addition to the standard fixed hood, a number of retractable units are now being manufactured. These provide the effectiveness of a fixed hood with a sleeker silhouette. Also in that category are the thinline "European" hoods, but they tend to generate small cfm numbers and are sometimes more difficult to clean than standard hoods.

Combination microwave/hood units also are limited somewhat on cfm, but they offer the obvious advantage—a convenient place to put a microwave oven. The high-end GE combination

The minimum amount of air a ventilator should move is 300 cfm for a standard four-burner cooktop. Sadly, most of the inexpensive fixed hoods on the market don't meet this standard.

unit offers a slide-out plastic shield that increases the hood's effectiveness. Most of the major appliance manufacturers make combo units; Broan's "Micromate" offers a vent mechanism and oven support frame that will take almost any microwave.

But these microwave/hood combinations are most useful on a partial remodel where there's no other place to add a microwave oven. If you're going for a complete kitchen remodel, think about a bigger hood and locate the microwave elsewhere.

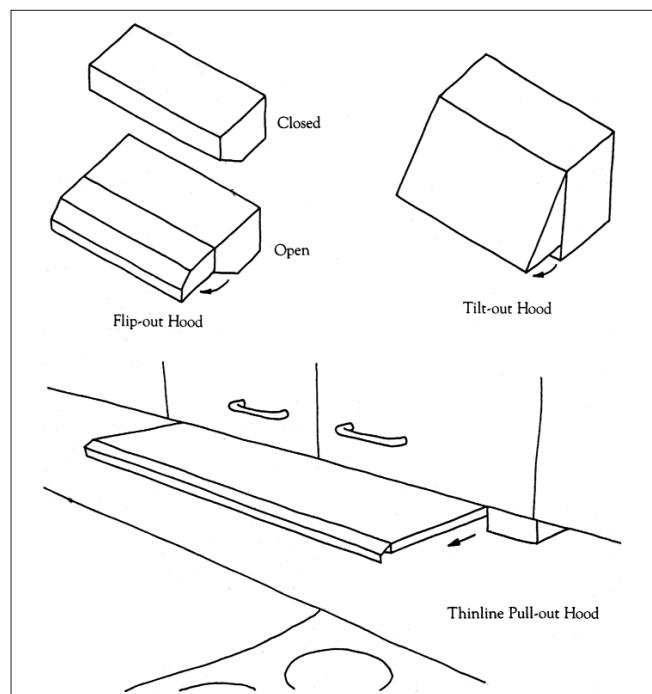
Some Other Considerations

At the very high end is the option of having a hood designed and fabricated by a metal shop. A little more accessible is having a hood made that can be covered with plywood to match the cabinets. You can buy all the electrics from Thermador or Nutone and have a sheet metal shop and cabinet shop team up on the frame and wood covering, but you can beat this system too. Purchase a Ventahood "Tiltout" model and have a cabinet shop make and install two extra doors for the front. This should save you several hundred dollars over the former approach.

With the new interest in hoods spurred by Eurostyle, they can be a decorative item in themselves—witness the multiplicity of shapes, colors, textures and materials offered by a "custom" manufacturer like Ventahood, and to a lesser degree, Thermador. Even stock manufacturers offer white, black, almond, and stainless. The latter is a good neutral choice in a remodel where not all the appliances have been changed.

The hoods we end up installing are made by Thermador, Ventahood, Broan, Nutone, and GE, but the first two are our favorites because they are very well made, are flexible in their product lines, and provide higher cfm. Not surprisingly, we also get better service from the more expensive hood manufacturers; the suppliers of the cheaper units will only send parts. However, a lot of that depends on local representation.

And that builds up a final point: Check with your local appliance supplier regularly for information on both new products and how the stuff in the field is faring overall. I checked with mine while writing this column and realized how much information I have missed out on in the past. ■



These three new hood designs eliminate the awkwardness of typical fixed hoods. With "European" thinline pull-out hoods, check on cfm rating and ease of cleaning.

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