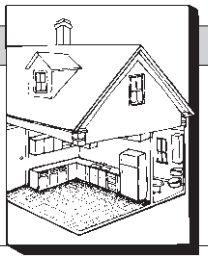

Cooktop Choices

by Lynn Comeskey

The choices clients have in cooktops these days are a little staggering. The last half dozen years have been innovative ones for this very popular appliance—in materials, burner design, and style.

It was surprising how many questions I had to ask when I started focusing on cooktops a few weeks ago. Like a lot of contractors, I end up sending my clients to the appliance dealer I work with to make their product selections, and I'm always too busy to get down there for my own education. Then I lull myself into a false sense of security by leafing through the ads in a few magazines each month. I know from having had a showroom in the past how valuable product knowledge can be at both the design and installation stages of a remodel. And it's just one more way you can help guarantee that your clients will be happy with their kitchen about the time you're looking for referral work. But back to cooktops.

Burner Innovations

The basic choice of firepower is largely the same as it's been for years—gas or electric—but there are a lot of new twists as to how these are delivered. This is particularly true of electric burners.

The "hottest" choice in electrically-powered burners these days is *quartz halogen*. If this sounds like a term you last heard from a lighting designer, you're on the right track. The element is composed of two quartz halogen lamps that put out an impressive amount of heat with a very quick response time for not having an open flame.

The element is self-sensing and cycles on and off to maintain a steady temperature. But even though it glows brightly, you don't have the same sense of control you get by visually gauging a gas flame under a pot.

Halogen burners were developed in Europe and first imported to this country by Gaggenau. Another import that gets high marks for halogen tops is Creda. This English company offers a 24-inch top that's a real space saver in smaller kitchens.

Amana was the first U.S. manufacturer to offer halogen burners, but now several American companies feature them. Dacor's halogen burners come in modules for greater flexibility (see Figure 1). Because halogen units are very expensive, most manufacturers offer one or two halogen elements along with less expensive radiant burners. These tops start at around $600. (In general, cooktops range from less than $200 to more than $2,000 with most in the $250 to $700 range.)

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Induction cooktops also trade on their high-tech image. Like a microwave oven, the burner itself doesn't produce heat. Instead it makes the metal in the pan (this requires *ferrous* cookware) hot through magnetic induction. But unlike the microwave, induction tops may be going the way of eight-track tapes and broasted chicken. General Electric and Fasar still make them, but I notice Jenn-Air has dropped theirs.

The *hob* or cast-iron disc (it's cast right around the electric heating element) is a European development, which has a flat, sealed surface that is supposed to offer more even heat. The people I've talked to who own these burners are impressed with their "European" look and easy cleaning, but don't find them a significant improvement over a bare electric element.

Which brings us to the lowly resistance coil or *Calrod element*. It's been around for years and is still the biggest seller. It's slow to heat, slow to change temperature, difficult to adjust because you can't *see* an appreciable difference in the heat it's putting out, and no fun to clean. But it's reliable, long lasting, and easily replaceable.

Top Materials

Some of the best news with most of the new designs is that the burners—or the tops themselves—are sealed against spills and boil-overs. In the case of gas, the pan beneath the burner can be sealed, and a heavy diffuser used to cover the gas inlet and the flame. Sealed electric elements include solid disks or radiant units in a tempered glass top.

This last innovation has almost completely displaced the Corningware (*pyroceram*) top of ten and fifteen years ago. Although they sold well at the outset, they were slow to heat, slow to cool, expensive, and easy to scorch. The tempered glass tops, with either radiant elements, halogen units, or both under their one-piece glass diffusers, are supposed to be a real improvement.

These thin, glass tops—just 1/2 inch shows above the surface of the counter— are also popular for gas cooktops. But higher-profile units of porcelain/steel and stainless steel are still popular in traditional kitchens.

More Refinements

Another improvement in electric cooktops is the built-in sensor that monitors the temperature of the cooking surface even after the burners are shut off. It lets you know with an indicator light whether the surface is still hot. Some units are also equipped with a sensor that will notice when there is no pan on the burner or when the liquid contents of a kettle have boiled off. They respond by automatically reducing the wattage to the element.

Some of the manufacturers are also offering controls with temperature indications by degree rather than *1, 2, 3, 4, 5* or *Low*, *Medium*, and *High*. This is long overdue; I've never been able to relate to *1, 2, 3*. And there is KitchenAide's design for the dull-witted—thick lines are drawn from the controls to their respective burners on the surface of the cooktop. Most gas cooktops come with electric ignition; Thermadore and Creda go one step further and offer reignition if the flame goes out.

Still another popular accessory in cooktops is a grill. Made popular by Jenn-Air, many cooktops now come with plug-in modules that allow you to shift from grill (or griddle) to burners and back. However, I suspect this convenience is used less than most consumers imagine when they're purchasing. Plus the grills on most gas cooktops are 110 volts, which won't really *sear* a steak like a barbecue, but do require a serious vent hood.

Size, Power, and Style

At the same time that they have grown in size and importance in the kitchen, cooktops have also gotten more compact. The Creda gas cooktop is only two inches deep, so there is now room for a drawer below, where it was once necessary to use a blind front.

And when it comes to width, it's no longer just 30 and 36 inches. If space is really tight, Thermadore offers a rather spartan two-element, 15-inch-wide electric unit, and Gaggenau has a two-element, 11-inch-wide top in a choice of gas, electric hob, or halogen. On the other extreme, Thermadore, Jenn-Air and Dacor offer six-element, 4-foot-wide electric cooktops. But Gaggenau outdoes them all with its truly modular cooktop that can be expanded as much as good taste will allow. The top displayed in their brochure is over 50 inches wide.

For the "power" cook, there are now three professional-looking, high-Btu cooktops that can be safely installed without the clearances from combustibles that have often been ignored in the past. Of these three—Thermadore, Viking, and Russell (a San Francisco company)—I have only seen the Thermadore. It's a good looking unit with 15,000-Btu burners; I don't know of a consumer cooktop that exceeds 11,000 Btus. But these tops also carry a hefty price tag: approximately $2,000.

But for all the welcome innovation, I also see some really impractical design features. The key hype words for the new cooktops are *sophisticated* (read "expensive") and *sleek* (read "flat"—so flat there's no way to control a spill). And how about black appliances? Remember your Dad telling you never to buy a black car because they are so difficult to keep looking clean? It's even worse with a cooktop. The grease that splatters on a stainless or white top goes unseen; you see every splatter on black.

One last pet peeve: those heavy, black, burner grids some cooktops come with in order to look like professional ranges. In addition to looking ridiculous, they absorb heat, they're more difficult to clean, and they can cause a lot more damage if they're dropped. ■

Figure 1. *This 46-inch Dacor cooktop has two 2,200-watt quartz-halogen burner modules as well as 1,200-watt electric elements and an electric grill. The client can choose white, almond, or black, but might regret black since it shows every last grease splatter and drop of water.*

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