

New K&B Products:

More Choices, More Questions

by Pat Galvin

A dizzying array of k&b product lines complicates the choices for builders and customers alike

In their continuing effort to meet every consumer whim with a new product, k&b manufacturers are expanding their product lines at an explosive rate. While this may bode well for high-end consumers intent on getting the latest European cooktop, it has complicated product selection for contractors. In the '90s, we need to know more than ever about k&b products in order to discuss them knowledgeably with our clients, and keep ourselves out of hot water in installation.

In the kitchen, for example, consumers can now choose between several different cooktop options, as well as between domestic, commercial, and "commercial-look" ranges; between high-gloss polyester finishes, glossy lacquers, and decorative laminates on their cabinets; and between conventional and exotic sink and counter materials. But does that fancy new faucet meet U.S. building codes? Maybe not.

In the bath, will the tub be acrylic, fiberglass, acrylic-reinforced fiberglass, steel, or cast iron? Will the new low-flow toilet work with only one flush, or should you install a pressurized flushometer system? And will the flushometer startle the clients by flushing itself in the middle of the night when the city water pressure increases? (It happened in Newton, Mass.)

These and other questions pop up more often now as kitchen and bath product ranges expand. I'll try to guide you through the most recent developments, as witnessed at the major kitchen and bath shows of the last year.

The Halogen Question

Smooth, tempered-glass cooktops featuring one halogen burner along with hidden gas burners have been featured for a couple of years now by a few foreign and one domestic range maker. But this year they showed up in greater numbers. Appliance makers are heavily promoting halogen

burners and their smooth tops, so builders will be asked about them.

Halogen burners, which burn halogen gas within sealed tubes, produce high heat instantly, just as gas burners do. But unlike gas burners, halogen burners can take a half-hour to cool enough to be safely touched. This means adjacent countertops and cabinets require intervening insulation, which adds to the cost. With a tempered glass cooktop retailing for about \$1,400, and a set of halogen burners adding another \$900 or so, that cost is pretty high. Finally, when a halogen unit burns out, it can be replaced only by a skilled service rep.

Today's glass cooktops, incidentally, with their burners under the glass, bear little resemblance to the first white ones introduced by Corning 20 years ago. Now nearly all are black, translucent, and made of Ceran by Schott, a German company. They get hotter faster than the older models, and

can now boil water as fast as a standard 10,000 Btu gas burner. (A standard electric coil is still faster.)

The fastest boil, however, comes from a 7 1/2-inch, 2,000-watt magnetic induction burner. The magnetic induction burner, also called a "cool-top," works by generating a magnetic current that causes the metal pan to heat instantly, while the cooktop stays relatively cool. A favorite demonstration trick is to put a paper napkin between the burner and pan; the napkin won't ignite.

Unfortunately, induction burners are still hard to find. The only one I could easily find among major vendors is Jenn-Air's, which comes as a two-burner cartridge you plug into their modular electric range-tops. The cartridge is \$680 on top of the \$999 cost of the standard Jenn-Air range.

Commercial-Style Ranges

A proliferation of "commercial" ranges dominated the 1991 Kitchen/Bath Industry Show in

Dallas. These are increasingly popular among gourmet cooks and others who simply like the look. Some are more genuinely commercial than others.

True commercial ranges are made to custom specs and might be any size when ordered. More importantly, they don't meet most residential codes. Oven door and surface temperatures can exceed 500 degrees, so they are not approved for home use by the American Gas Association without added insulation and fireproofing.

A standard home gas range weighs about 200 pounds and has a 1/4-inch gas line feeding 8,000- to 10,000-Btu burners. A true commercial range can weigh 900 pounds or more, requires gas lines up to 3/4-inch, and has burners that produce up to 20,000 Btus. Code-conforming commercial-look home ranges roughly split these differences. They weigh 300 to 500 pounds, need 1/2-inch or 3/4-inch gas lines, and have burners producing from 15,000



This Viking range with hood typifies the trend toward commercial-look ranges for residential kitchens. True commercial ranges extend 8 inches further into the room and require extra insulation because of their high surface temperatures.



Figure 1. Heartland Appliance's Elmira stove has a turn-of-the-century look and burns wood or coal. But it also has a modern gas or electric cooktop, as well as a vent hood hidden in its overhead warming oven.



Figure 2. Wood-Mode's Regency cabinet line was one of many sporting a high-gloss polyester finish.

to 17,500 Btus.

A true commercial range for the home. One genuine commercial range, Garland's "Restaurant Range for the Home," has added insulation to keep surface temperatures down, allowing zero clearance around it. It comes either in 36-inch or 60-inch widths. Its 32-inch depth will extend about 8 inches further into the room than standard base cabinets. It comes in gas only, with electronic ignition.

Commercial-style home ranges. A better fit can be found with one of the many commercial-style ranges. These fit standard kitchen dimensions and have almost the same cooking capacity as true commercial ranges. They include models by Thermador, Viking, Wolf Range, Brown Stove Works, and Russell Range.

Thermador, originator of built-in ovens and cooktops in the 1940s, now offers its Professional Collection of 36-inch and 48-inch-wide gas cooktops with 15,000-Btu burners. Also available are three 24-inch modular units that can be installed alone or side by side; modules include griddles, grills, or woks. The Professional Collection also includes higher-capacity dishwashers, wall ovens, microwaves, and compactors, all in restaurant-look stainless steel.

The Viking models are designed to fit domestic kitchens but to look and cook like restaurant ranges (see lead photo). This year Viking adds a full family of modular mix-or-match built-ins that include two-burner gas or electric cooktops, grills, griddles, and deep fryers. Full Viking ranges run 30, 36, and 48 inches wide.

Two other ranges drew crowds in Dallas. The AGA Cooker, from England, is a massive, expensive range in fashion colors; it is designed

to never be shut off. The idea is to leave it on all the time, so the unit is always ready to cook. Unfortunately, keeping the pilots burning consumes about 1,700 cubic feet of gas per week (about \$10 to \$12 worth), or, in the coal-burning version (Princess Di owns one), about 115 pounds of coal. This is clearly for the avid cook — or princesses who don't load their own coal.

The Elmira Stove, from Heartland Appliances in Canada, looks as it did in 1906, and still burns wood or coal (see Figure 1). But it is also thoroughly modernized, with gas or electric burners on top and a vent hood built into its overhead warming drawer.

Yet More Gloss on Cabinets

The trend toward glossy finishes on cabinets expanded this year, especially in whites and off-whites. There are more glossy polyesters, lacquers, and decorative laminates than ever.

Multi-colored edges. Builders who must choose among these finishes usually opt for the tried and true laminates. One high-end custom manufacturer, Millbrook Kitchens, combines two or three different colored sheets of Formica Colorcor. This gives a uniform color on top, but a stunning multi-color edge.

Lacquers generally have less "build" (thickness) than do polyesters and aren't as glossy, but are easier to apply and repair. One high-end firm, Rich-Craft Custom Kitchens, takes the time and effort to increase the build and gloss on its lacquer finishes, which rival polyester finishes.

Polyester is the glossiest finish, giving a glassy appearance (see Figure 2). The difficulty of the application process also makes polyester the most

expensive, as well as making it virtually nonrepairable. Fortunately, the finish is so hard and durable it seldom needs repair. Much polyester-finish cabinetry is imported from Italy, though a few U.S. firms now do their own polyester finishing.

HomeCrest Cabinetry, for instance, this year introduced a new white finish, called Prima, on its new Affinity Collection, which is made from a polymeric laminate foil. The finish is very hard, and is stable in the face of light, temperature, and humidity extremes.

More Semi-Custom Cabinets

Nearly all stock cabinet makers now offer semi-custom lines under different names. For example, Merilat offers Amera, while American Woodmark offers Timberlake. Meanwhile, the leader in the custom end of the business, Wood-Mode, has joined the semi-custom market with its Brookhaven line.

"Semi-custom" means stock sizes and styles, but with many of the interior fittings and accessory cabinets that until recently were found only in true custom cabinets — such things as sponge drawers, cutlery drawers, corner lazy-susans, and pull-out cutting boards (see Figure 3).

Tops and Sinks

Builders are by now familiar with many of the solid-surface counter and sink materials, such as Corian, Formica Surell, Nevamar Fountainhead, Avonite, and Swanstone.



Figure 3. Semi-custom cabinets, while manufactured to standard sizes, incorporate features such as pull-out baskets and cutting boards, which were formerly found only in custom cabinets.

Newer entries include Spring Ram American (based in England), VTI's Durallure, and others made of Asterite, quartz chips, or acrylic modified



Figure 4. Elkay's Gourmet Cuisine Centre includes a double bowl with a built-in drainboard next to the disposal sink for cleaning fruits and vegetables.



Figure 5. Blanco's octagonal sink is one of many undermount systems designed for use with solid surfacing materials.

polyesters. Added to this is the recently developed Gibraltar, by Wilsonart. All of these are constantly being improved with added colors and new adhesives that permit them to be cut apart and rejoined with practically invisible seams.

Wilsonart's unique triumph is the perfect color match they have created between their Gibraltar solid surfacing and their own laminates. Thus a Gibraltar countertop can be matched to a laminate backsplash or wall (surfaced with material that might be left over from another job). And it's a true match. Gibraltar comes in 1/2-inch sheets, 30 inches deep by 96 or 144 inches long.

Slicker sinks. Kitchen sinks still come mainly in more conventional materials, but are growing ever fancier. Many now include accessories such as work covers, movable drainboards, and vegetable-cleaning drainboards alongside the sink (see Figure 4).

Blanco has introduced an undermount system (in which the sink is mounted from below, resulting either in a seamless sink-counter joint or in a slight drop into the sink); their stainless-steel or quartz sinks can be undermounted to any solid surface, as

in Figure 5. Elkay and others now offer undermount models as well.

Elkay has introduced its Water Centre, a plumbed-in, hard-wired, under-counter appliance that purifies water and delivers it chilled to 45°F or heated to 190°F. It also delivers room temperature, purified water, as well as up to five pounds of sediment-free ice. It is about the size of a dishwasher, 24 inches wide by 24 inches deep.

Faucets Funky and Functional

Lately there's been such a proliferation of new faucets in every price range that one question gets asked a lot by the builders I talk to: Why do some of these faucets cost more than \$500 while others cost only \$50? The answer depends on four factors: construction and material quality, valve mechanism, functional features, and aesthetics (or flash).

Materials. Construction might be plastic or brass, or possibly brass with plastic handles. These would be at the low end, under \$100. Low-end faucets made of brass may be fabricated from extruded tubes, while better faucets are of die-cast brass. Cast brass faucets start at around \$100, while most faucets over \$200



Figure 6. Jacuzzi's J-Dream model uses two standard low-flow heads, a hand-held massager head, and 16 miniature low-flow heads to give an "all-over" shower. And in case you get bored, you can sit down and let the optional waterfall cascade over you.

have die-cast brass spouts to go with the rest of the mechanism.

Mechanics. Low-end valving mechanisms have rubber washers, which must be periodically replaced. High-end models do their valving work with ceramic cartridges. In between are "washerless" faucets, which have plastic or metal compression fittings (such as a cone sliding into a cone-shaped recess). Faucets with ceramic-cartridge valve mechanisms start around \$150.

Features. Functional features include single-lever actions; aerators; pull-out, side-mounted spray nozzles; spouts that pull out and can be used as sprays or goosenecks; and special bodies like the Moen "Riser" that can be raised, lowered, or turned upward for use as a drinking fountain.

Flash. This is mainly a matter of finish, which might include enamel or epoxy finishes baked and fused onto the brass body; polished brass; or glamour materials like gold. Chrome remains the most popular finish. But polished brass, plated on and then coated with lacquer, acrylic, or epoxy powder, is an increasingly popular choice, even though it can double the price of a given design.

In the \$200 to \$500 range, faucets go up a little with each added feature, including color finishes, color accents, polished brass, specialty handles, pull-out spray spouts, top-mounted single levers, side-mounted

One item to avoid is a pull-out spray that needs on-site modification to meet building codes because it lacks backflow prevention in the form of an airgap or diverter valve. These will be of foreign origin, perhaps acquired through nonstandard distribution channels.

The easiest and cheapest way to correct this is to install two pressure-vacuum breakers, one on the hot line and one on the cold. These cost about \$10 each and take about an hour to install. To avoid this cost and hassle, check any faucet for printed notice of compliance with ASSE 1025. Also, if a customer has picked up a fancy foreign faucet, don't commit on an installation price until you check not only for diverter valves, but to make sure all the parts are there and that they will fit each other and the standard domestic plumbing supply.

Plusher Flushers

Opulence has become commonplace in the bathroom. For example, Kohler has introduced a line featuring hand-painted designs baked in under vitreous surfaces. We're also seeing more of the paradox we saw last year — showers that use staggering numbers of low-flow valves, thus at once making a nod toward water conservation while dramatically increasing the overall amount of water used in these whole-body showers (see Figure 6).

For More Information

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American Woodmark
Box 1980
Winchester, VA 22601
800/388-2483

Blanco America
1001 Lower Landing Rd., Ste.
607
Blackwood, NJ 08012
800/451-5782

Broan Mfg. Co.
P.O. Box 140
Hartford, WI 53027
800/637-1453

DuPont Corian
P.O. Box 80010
Wilmington, DE 19880-0010
800/426-7426

Eljer Industries
Box 37
Plano, TX 75074
800/753-5537

Elkay Mfg. Co.
2222 Camden Ct.
Oak Brook, IL 60521
708/574-8484

Formica Corp.
Box 415729
Cincinnati, OH 45241
513/786-3400

Garland Commercial Industries
Box 5
Conyngham, PA 18219
800/257-2643

Grohe America, Inc.
900 Lively Blvd.
Wood Dale, IL 60191
800/323-9660

Heartland Appliances
5 Hoffman St.
Kitchener, ON; N2M 3M5
Canada
519/743-8111

HomeCrest Cabinetry
Box 595
Goshen, IN 46526
219/533-9571

Jacuzzi Whirlpool Bath
P.O. Drawer J
Walnut Creek, CA 94596
800/288-4002

Jenn-Air Co.
3035 N. Shadeland Ave.
Indianapolis, IN 46226
317/545-2271

Kohler Co.
444 Highland Dr.
Kohler, WI 53044
414/457-4441

Merillat Industries
Box 1946
Adrian, MI 49221
517/263-0771

Millbrook Kitchens
Rte. 20
Nassau, NY 12123
518/766-3033

Moen, Inc.
377 Woodland Ave.
Elyria, OH 44036
800/347-6636

Nevamar Corp.
8339 Telegraph Rd.
Odenton, MD 21113
301/551-5000

Rich-Craft Custom Kitchens
141 W. Penn Ave.
Robesonia, PA 19551
215/693-5871

Russell Range
325 S. Maple Ave., #5,
S. San Francisco, CA 94080
415/873-0105

Schott America
3 Odell Plaza
Yonkers, NY 10701
914/968-8900

Spring Ram America
534 North York
Bensenville, IL 60106
708/595-7726

Swan Corp.
One City Centre, Ste. 2300
St. Louis, MO 63101
314/231-8148

Thermador
5119 District Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90040
213/562-1133

Viking Range Corp.
Box 936
Greenwood, MS 38930
601/455-1200

V-T Industries, Inc.
1000 Industrial Park
Holstein, IA 51025
800/882-7732

Wilsonart (Ralph Wilson
Plastics)
Box 611
Temple, TX 76503
800/433-3222

Wolf Range
19600 S. Alameda St.
Compton, CA 90221
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Wood-Mode Cabinetry
1 Second St.
Kreamer, PA 17833
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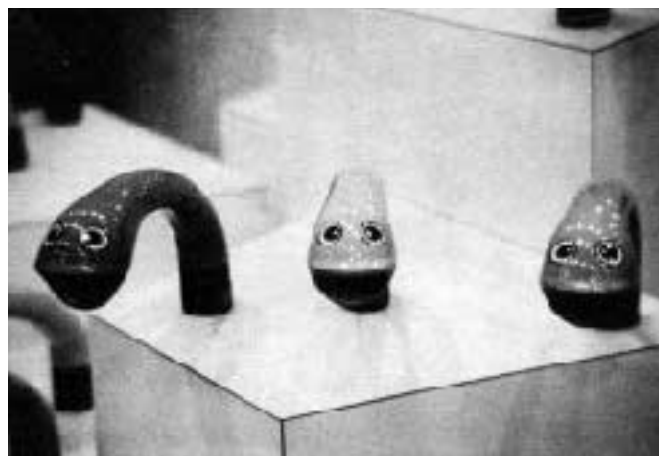


Figure 7. Here's Grohe's "Nessie" — a hand-held children's shower head named after the Loch Ness monster. You can get Dumbo the elephant, too.



Figure 8. American Standard's low-flow design uses a flushometer system for a pressure-assisted flush. This allows a larger water spot, reducing cleaning needs.

At the cute end of the scale, Grohe America offers children's hand-held shower heads shaped and painted to resemble their namesakes, which include Dumbo the elephant and "Nessie" — the affectionate term in the United Kingdom for the Loch Ness monster (see Figure 7). These can be mounted at child height. To preserve adult dignity, they can be changed to more conservative shower heads with a click.

EcoBath. Not all the bath world is glitz. Eljer devoted its entire display at the Dallas show to ecology and the environment, with tasteful messages about conservation and waste on nearly all groups of products. The emphasis was on low-flow toilets (1.4 and 1.5 gallon-per-flush), which have, Eljer claims, the same performance as standard toilets.

The controversy over the cleaning power of low-flow toilets is far from dead, however. Makers are still tinkering with their toilets to make them effectively move solid waste without double flushing. Some use a smaller water spot (the surface area of the water in the bowl), and others

have flushometer systems, which use an extra, pressurized tank to give a pressure-assisted flush (see Figure 8).

The problem is that with the lower water volume in the bowl (yesterday's toilets use up to 3.5 gallons per flush), the water spot to which we are accustomed—about 10x12 inches—spreads the water too thin to generate adequate gravity pressure for a cleansing, high-speed flush. Squeezing the water spot down to 7x8 inches makes the water deeper, but the smaller spot leaves more porcelain unprotected by water, thus requiring more frequent cleaning by the consumer.

The answer for the builder, it appears, is to check the products with users (such as newer hotels or motels) to be sure they work, and to warn the consumer of the possible cleaning problem. This will be increasingly necessary as more states and communities require low-flow toilets. ■

Pat Galvin, the former editor of Kitchen and Bath Magazine, has written numerous books on k&b remodeling.