What's New in Cooktops

by Sandy McAdams

Cooktops have changed quite a bit in recent years. New technologies have bred an abundance of new products in both gas and electric versions. Gas units have always been a favorite with serious cooks — they're clean, have fast heat response, and permit a high degree of fine temperature control. The new gas models allow even more control. Electric cooktop improvements have been even more dramatic, making some of the newest electric cooktops as quick and efficient as the new gas models.

Traditional Electric Cooktops

The most common electric cooktop is the electric coil or calrod type, which works by conduction. Electricity heats a steel coil, which transfers its heat directly to any pan that's placed on it. The main disadvantage to coil models is their slow response time (they can take a long time to heat up and cool down) and limited temperature control. (Some have only three heat settings — low, medium, and high.) Coils can also heat unevenly, and may develop hot spots that cause burns in one area of a pan.

The main advantage of coil cooktops is their price, which ranges from $199 to $299. I tell my clients to buy any of Whirlpool's Kitchen Aid models or any model made by General Electric. Both companies' models have hinged or removable lids that make them easy to clean.

Another common electric cooktop uses cast-iron disks instead of coils. The solid disks heat more evenly and cook more uniformly than coils, but they have some strikes against them. They're difficult to clean — spills tend to burn onto the hot cast iron and there's no way to scour them — and the cast-iron disks tend to rust, making them look pretty bad in a short time. Disk cooktops are also more expensive than coil types, ranging in price from $300 to $500. I never recommend them.

New Electric Technology

Glass or ceramic cooktops have also been around for a while, but have recently gotten much better. The most notable change is the type of glass used. Early models used heavy Corning glass. The glass was both dense, which made it slow to heat, and porous, which made it hard to clean. The new models use a thinner, nonporous glass that heats quickly and cleans easily. Some models come with a patterned glass that hides fingerprints and scratches.

In most glass cooktops, an electric element beneath the glass gives off radiant heat. Radiant cooktops are priced from $400 to $600. I usually recommend GE's standard radiant cooktops because they're affordable, have good color selections, and offer various burner sizes.

The newer glass cooktops have a halogen lamp beneath the glass instead of a coil. They provide instant heat and use very little energy. I recommend Halogen cooktops made by Amana or Thermador, since both are good quality and are available with patterned glass. They range in price from $600 to $900.

The newest glass cooktop is GE's induction model. Instead of radiant heat, it heats utensils by magnetic friction. It has a very quick response time, and the pot and the food are all that gets hot; the cooktop itself stays cool (you can lay a piece of paper on the burner under a pot and it won't burn). This means no burned-on spills to clean. The one problem with the induction cooktop is that it only works with utensils made from ferrous (iron-containing) metals. Thus, you can use pans made from steel, porcelain on steel, or cast iron, but not those made from glass or aluminum. (In general, if

GENERAL ELECTRIC

Electric coil. *Nothing beats the price of an electric coil cooktop. The author recommends brands with hinged lids for easy cleaning.*

GENERAL ELECTRIC

Glass. *Most glass cooktops use an electric element or halogen lamp to provide radiant heat. A new development is GE's induction model, shown here, which heats by magnetic friction.*

a household magnet sticks to the pan, it will work on the cooktop).

This limitation, however, does act as a safety device. The heating element will only activate when a 4-inch-diameter utensil is placed on it: It won't inadvertently heat up if it's turned on and you happen to leave a knife or an aluminum can on it. The induction cooktop is also designed to sense when a pot or pan is empty and to shut itself off. It costs between $650 and $950.

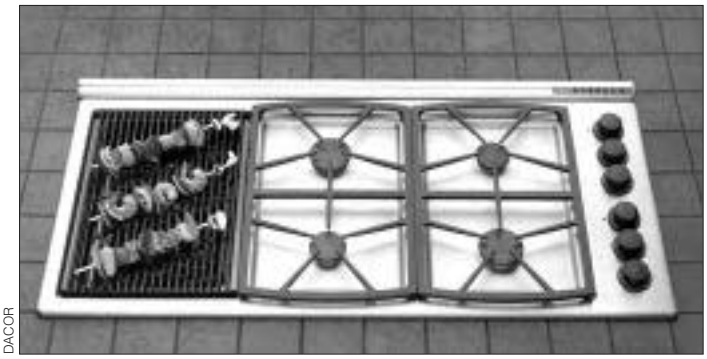
Gas Cooktops

Gas cooktops have also undergone numerous changes. At one time, all gas cooktops used pilot lights to light the burners; now virtually all have electric ignitions. But the biggest improvement is the infinite range of temperature settings now available. All Thermador's models have a patented "extra low" setting that cycles the flame on and off at intervals throughout the cooking process. This lets you simmer foods slowly and for long periods of time. Dacor's cooktops have a "permanent flame" feature that restarts the flame instantly if it goes out, protecting the house from dangerous gas buildup. Prices range from $299 to $499 for basic, nonsealed burners and from $400 to $1,200 for sealed burners.

One of the most recent gas innovations is modular design. Modular cooktops let you mix and match different types of elements — even different types of fuels — on the same cooktop. A module is a completely sealed unit that contains standard burners or an accessory unit like a grill or griddle, and that can be plugged into the cooktop frame. Most companies now sell at least one modular cooktop. Many offer a wide range of accessories, including griddles, barbecue units with rotisseries, woks, and large canning kettles. Dacor's Preference goes a step further: You can install the modules individually rather than all in a single frame. This means you can put cooking elements in more than one location in the kitchen without having to put in more than one complete cooktop. They're great for kitchens with multiple work zones. Of course, if you install modules in more than one area, you'll need additional wiring, gas piping, and venting.

THERMADOR

Gas. *Gas cooktops, long the favorites of serious cooks, offer even more control than before. For example, Thermador's gas tops feature an extra-low setting that lets food simmer for long periods of time.*



DACOR

Modular. *Dacor's modular gas cooktops allow you to choose between various accessories — including standard burners, grills, griddles, and woks — for a truly custom cook station.*

Choosing a Cooktop

Helping a client choose a cooktop can be difficult. I start by asking if they prefer gas or electric. Most people can answer that fairly quickly. Next, I try to find out what features are important to them. If they need quick heat response, for instance, I won't recommend a coil-type burner. If they like glass cooktops but want something that's easy to clean, I recommend one of the patterned glass models. A cooktop is like any other design project. The most important thing is to discover what the client is looking for and base any recommendations on these requirements. ■

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