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SOCK IT TO YOUR BUDGET

If you're tired of spending a fortune on dryer sheets to soften your clothes, buy a (much cheaper) bottle of fabric softener and pour a little on an old sock or washcloth. Throw it in the dryer with your load instead of that expensive dryer sheet.

A new head of steam

Modern appliances take advantage of this proven technology



Gaggenau's combi units, available in 24-inch and 30-inch-wide models, are designed to be plumbed, like an ice maker, to a water line. *Gaggenau*



In-wall dishwashers, like this one from Gaggenau, may have longer cleaning cycles but are better at cleaning glassware.

Arclinea

By Carl Larsen

Like the little engine that could, steam is chugging its way back into our household lives in a big way. The comeback of steam brings with it a host of high-cost, high-performance appliances with little of the fears from years past of being scalded or having a pressure cooker explode on the stove.

"It's all over the place in the kitchen," said Celia Kuperszmid Lehrman, deputy home editor for *Consumer Reports* magazine. Look for it in the laundry room, too.

Today, the centuries-old technology promises energy savings while making clothes and dishes cleaner and a wider range of food preparation choices for home cooks via steam-assist commercial-style ovens.

Makers of steam appliances range from the Sears Kenmore line to the upscale Viking and Gaggenau brands. Whirlpool, the largest appliance maker, offers steam in a variety of products under its Whirlpool, Maytag and KitchenAid brands.

The price for adding a steam option to appliances, however, can be daunting.

Built-in steam-only ovens can cost more than \$1,500, while so-called combi ovens, which mix convection and steam cooking features, are priced up to \$5,000. In the laundry room, energy-saving front-load steam

dryers are \$1,000 to \$1,400, with a paired washing machine costing close to \$1,500. Steam-assist dishwashers range from \$600 to \$1,500.

In an article rating dishwashers earlier this year, *Consumer Reports* found that "the most expensive models worked well without the steam," said Kuperszmid Lehrman. With steam added, the dishwashers take longer to complete their cleansing cycle. "Do you want to wait 2½ or 3 hours?" she asked.

But Whirlpool says that steam dishwashers can make a noticeable difference, especially on glassware. "The



Consumer Reports found that washer-and-dryer models that use steam raised results "from excellent to extra excellent." Maytag

steam option in Maytag dishwashers enhances the cleaning of glassware by removing film and small particles such as those found in tomato juice. The option does add to the total wash time," said Kristine Vernier, a spokeswoman for Whirlpool Corp.

"The cycle begins with a main wash which removes and cleans large soils from dishes. Then steam is created and circulates throughout

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► STEAM

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Whirlpool offers Energy Star washer and dryer

the dishwasher loosening any remaining soils on the glassware. The cycle ends with a high-temperature rinse to remove loosened soils."

Extra excellent

Perhaps the greatest battle among steam appliance makers is for the laundry room, where many lines of steam-assist washers and dryers are available, including models from LG Electronics and Samsung. Maytag earlier this year came out with the first steam top-loading washer and dryer.

In February, *Consumers Reports* found that models using steam as a boost to cleaning cycles raised results "from excellent to extra excellent," said Kiperszmid Lehrman. The steam clean Kenmore Elite and Whirlpool Duet dryers tested "did a good job of getting rid of wrinkles and odors from the shirts we tested," the magazine reported, but it noted that the steam mode allows only up to four garments per load and cost about twice as much as dryers rated Best Buys. Steam dryers also require a water-line

hookup to work.

In clothes washers, Whirlpool spokeswoman Audrey Reed-Granger says that steam assist functions "have improved stain-penetrating performance," while steam dryers present a quick fix to treat clothes with "a refreshing cycle" that removes odors and wrinkles.

"If you've worn cologne or perfume, and the clothes aren't dirty, you can just throw them in the refreshing cycle and that removes the odors. Some things will still need an iron, but many are ready to wear," she said.

"It depends on lifestyle and your concern about wrinkles. If you're a professional, you may want dry cleaning, but if you've got small kids or kids in sports, you'll want a steam washing machine."

Whirlpool offers a steam washer and dryer in its popular Energy Star-qualified Duet line of front-loading machines, proven water and energy savers. Suggested price for the DuetSteam washer is \$1,399, compared to \$1,099 for a Duet without steam. DuetSteam dryers range from \$1,299 (electric) and \$1,359 (gas), about \$200 more than the steam-free models.

Maytag's Bravos top-loading steam washer is priced at \$999; the Bravos steam dryers are \$849 (electric) and \$909 (gas). Top-loading models are gener-



Whirlpool offers steam in a variety of products, including this Duet line of front-loading machines.

ally less expensive than front loaders, but also don't achieve the same water and energy savings.

Cooking with steam

Despite its proven cleaning ability, steam's biggest at-home virtue, however, may be as a cooking choice. Among foods, steam cooking can be reason enough for jettisoning microwaves and older style ovens.

Almost any type of food, with the exception of popcorn, can be cooked, or reheated, in new steam ovens, often quickly and to a quality that other conven-

tional ovens can't match.

Steam is introduced into the cooking process from either a direct water-line hookup, or through a refillable reservoir. When combined with a convection feature, steam gives cooks more flexibility in preparing meats, breads, souffles and desserts such as cheesecake or crème brûlée. Suddenly, it's easier to achieve a glazed crust on a fresh loaf of bread.

When Jo-Ann Jaffe and her husband, Andre Hardy, rehabbed a Victorian house in Sherman Heights, they had a top-of-the-line wall-mounted Gaggenau steam combi oven installed in their kitchen. They made the choice after consulting with their kitchen designer, Lisa Wilson-Wirth, owner of Arclinea San Diego design studio in Bankers Hill.

"From my standpoint, steam ovens are the most exciting appliance to transition from the restaurant kitchen into the home," Wilson-Wirth said. "Our clients who have steam ovens have found that they reinvigorate their passion for cooking and the types and varieties of dishes they can accomplish even on a busy time-compressed weeknight."

Jaffe said the steam oven was a "must have. I wouldn't have a kitchen without it. I love healthy, good food."

Indeed, healthy eating is a benefit strongly touted by manufacturers.

Appliance maker Miele says "steam cooking is well established as the healthiest method of food preparation." The company cites studies at two German universities that found that fewer vitamins, minerals and trace elements are lost to steam than other types of cooking, both for frozen and fresh produce. And with steam, there's no need to cook with oils.

Miele's MasterChef steam ovens come with hundreds of preprogrammed touch-screen selections (as well as manual control) to guide cooks through the preparation of a variety of foods. Miele also has a Web site devoted to steam cooking, steamoven.com. Cost of Miele's 24-inch built-in steam oven with convection retails for \$2,449.

While considering appliances for their new kitchen, Jaffe and her husband took Wilson-Wirth's advice and attended a cooking demo at a Gaggenau distributor's showroom in Huntington Beach. Miele offers similar cooking classes at a Beverly Hills showroom.

"It's important when considering such a large expenditure, and it's a new way of cooking. You want to be comfortable with it," Wilson-Wirth said.

The Gaggenau combi units, available in 24-inch and 30-inch-wide models, retail for \$4,699 and \$5,299, respectively, and are designed to be plumbed,

like an ice cube maker, to a water line. By comparison, a Gaggenau self-clean stainless steel convection oven, without steam, retails for \$3,349. Also available are a 30-inch model with a manual water tank and a counter-top steamer in its Vario 200 series.

Jaffe said consumers considering steam need to be sure the capacity of the oven meets their needs. Many are the size of microwaves.

KitchenAid, which makes steam-assist ranges as well as built-in steam models, says its steam ovens have the largest capacity on the market. It's Dual Fuel Convection Range with Steam Assist line carries a suggested price of \$4,299 for a 30-inch, four-burner model, and \$6,499 for a 36-inch, six-burner model.

When they opted for steam, the Jaffes jettisoned their microwave — a move that initially upset the couple's three grown children. Eventually, however, they came around. The wait to reheat last night's dinner of pizza may be a bit longer without a microwave, but it's worth it, Jaffe said, since the steam-heated food doesn't taste like dried-out leftovers. Start-from-scratch meals generally can be cooked in less than 30 minutes.

"Steam is the end all, and be all," she said.

Carl Larsen is a San Diego freelance writer.