



Not so long ago, the refrigerator lurked in the corner of every kitchen, an energy hog in basic-but-boring white. As kitchens—and how we use them—change, however, so does the good old fridge.

Today's styles complement any kitchen, from Euro-sleek to restaurant chic, from retro to raised-panel traditional. New models are quieter and more energy-efficient; gone are the days when the fridge accounted for 25 percent of your electric bill. If you haven't shopped for a refrigerator in years, wait until you see the technology and accessories designed to make your life easier and your food last longer.

### High-profile or hide-away?

You need not wait until your old fridge dies before replacing it with one that just looks and works better. If style is your priority, your first decision may be whether to buy a model that blends in or stands out.

Built-in refrigerators, also known as cabinet-depth, were first offered

# A Fresh Look

Cool new sizes, styles, and accessories show that manufacturers are really thinking outside the (ice)box

BY KATHIE KULL

in the late 1950s by the commercial freezer company Sub-Zero. The beauty of the built-in was its 24-inch depth, which didn't protrude past the front edge of a standard 2-foot-deep kitchen counter. In the past several years, other companies, including Frigidaire, KitchenAid, and Thermador, began offering built-in models, which start at \$1,750 and can go as high as \$5,700. Most have top-mount compressors that add about a foot to their height.

Without remodeling, you can now get the built-in look for less with freestanding counter-depth models. Among the new side-by-side counter-depth models, Kenmore Elite offers a 21-cubic-foot unit (starting at \$2,000), and Frigidaire's Professional Series (starting at \$2,300) includes a 22.6-cubic-foot model that claims the same shelf and storage space as a standard 26-cubic-foot unit.

Another hide-away option is undercounter models from companies like Marvel and U-Line. Some resemble dorm-size refrigerators or hotel minibars; others are dedicated beverage centers or wine-storage units. This category of auxiliary refrigeration saves the day when your full-size model is full and excels at storage at the point of use—by the prep sink, in the pantry, or in the family room. Dallas, Tex., homeowner Richard Slack has an undercounter refrigerator in his outdoor kitchen. "It sits near my barbecue and makes a great bar setup," he says.

Fanny Bolen, an interior designer from Oklahoma City, Okla., loves her own kitchen's Sub-Zero drawers. "I have a big all-refrigerator



at the

# Fridge



**RETRO-COOL TO CUTTING EDGE** There's a refrigerator for every style and budget from modern models with a 1950s look to ultra-sleek units with a TV screen and Internet access on the door. New accessories behind the door abound, too. Bigger climate-controlled bins, deep doors, and crank-adjustable shelves are just some of the features that make your life easier and keep your food fresh longer. Undercounter models with drawers or wine racks offer convenience, tall slim models are elegant and fit in narrow spaces, and there's even a heavy-duty fridge on wheels designed for chilling out in the garage.



model plus freezer drawers. Now I wish we had refrigerator drawers, too, because they're so easy to use.

Really out of sight, the Freezerator by Whirlpool Gladiator suits families who buy in bulk or stock up for parties. Starting at \$1,000, this model, designed for the garage, tops its 15-cubic-foot freezer with a 6-cubic-foot compartment you switch to refrigerator or freezer, as needed.

Another market segment celebrates refrigerators as kitchen focal points. Here, the design theme drives the choice. Retro-style models from Heartland and Elmira Stove Works combine vintage exteriors with high-tech interiors.



Graphic designer Tina Hicks, of Seaford, Va., loves vintage architecture and her mint-color Elmira Northstar model 1950. "I was looking online. Once I saw it, no other refrigerator compared. I bought a matching range and range hood," Tina says. She sees only one negative: "It took longer to get than I expected."

Galley or apartment kitchens can be stylish, too. Equator's ConServ refrigerator (starting

at \$1,444) is tall and thin. Made in Denmark, the 12-cubic-foot unit is 78 inches tall but just 24 inches wide. It's also extremely quiet and is rated at 1kWh or less per day. Charles and Jeanetta Miller, of Newtown, Conn., bought a ConServ when they remodeled their kitchen "We call it the supermodel," says Charles. "Tall, thin, beautiful, but it doesn't hold a lot of food. We ended up also putting in a smaller undercounter refrigerator to give us enough space for leftovers."

But in many new kitchens, bigger is still better. Fanny Bolen's clients crave the glass-door commercial-style refrigerators made by Hobart and Sub-Zero. "It's a status thing for people who want their kitchens to be different," she says. "But some clients look at the glass doors and realize they don't keep their refrigerators that neat."

In fact, doors make a refrigerator's biggest visible impression. In open-plan kitchens, a popular design trick is trim kits, which frame thin panels that match adjacent cabinets. And Frigo Design makes door inserts in materials including copper, textured steel, even chalkboard.

White is still the favorite finish, but most models also come in bisque (or biscuit) and black, and many also offer stainless steel. The latter is today's hottest finish, but fingerprints can turn fashion into frustration. One option is vinyl-laminated metal, marketed as CleanSteel (GE), Titanium (LG), Ultra-Satin (Kenmore), and Satina (Whirlpool). Fingerprints wipe away with glass cleaner and, unlike authentic stainless, the surface holds magnets.



**TALL AND BUILT IN** Cabinet-depth refrigerators don't protrude past the front of a standard 24-inch-deep kitchen countertop, but the compressor is mounted on top of the food compartment, minimizing the space for a cabinet above.

**STAINLESS LOOK WITH NONE OF THE WORK** Vinyl-laminated metal doors that look like stainless steel (above right) won't show smudges and fingerprints.

**PLAIN VIEW** With a glass-door fridge it's easy to see what's inside, including any mess.

## Quiet efficiency

Open-plan homes where the kitchen is next to the dining area can benefit from a quieter fridge. New insulation and motor technology have made them much quieter in recent years. Models from LG incorporate an efficient linear compressor instead of the typical rotary motion. The reduced vibration lowers noise to 20 dB and saves energy. If you're really noise-sensitive, Klondike Case's hand-built refrigerator (starting at \$3,900) uses a remote compressor you install in the basement or in a nearby room. These models have no freezer.

Traditionally the biggest electricity user in the house, refrigerators are more energy-efficient than ever. Spurred by new federal standards in 2001 and competition since, new models are at least 30 percent more efficient than a same-size model from 1993. Chances are, if your current model is more than 10 years old, the energy you'll save by buying a new refrigerator will more than pay for the purchase. Yellow Energy Guide labels help compare operating costs among same-capacity models.

Spot the most watt-frugal by their blue Energy Star labels, certification that they cut energy use a further 10 to 15 percent. Some models claim to draw the same power as a 75-watt light bulb. These units cost more, but utility company rebates and lower electric bills help erode the difference.

In general, top-freezer refrigerators use 7 to 13 percent less energy than side-by-side units, and 16- to 20-cubic-foot sizes use the least. Too large a model uses more energy; too small a model can mean more frequent supermarket runs. And if you're thinking of keeping the old fridge for holiday backup, keep in mind that it costs less to run one large refrigerator than two smaller ones.

## Doors galore

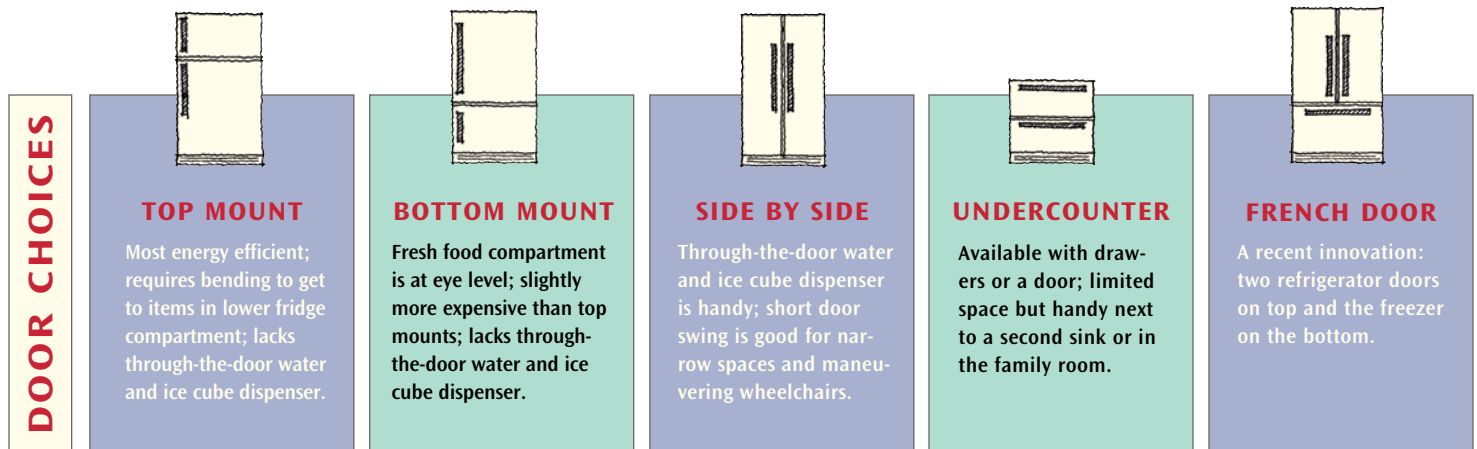
Which fridge should you choose: a side-by-side, a top-mount, or a bottom-mount? Each has its pros and cons. To narrow the field, consider your budget, your kitchen layout, and what you store. The choice of two-thirds of buyers, top-mount (freezer on top) refrigerator



**DRAWERS INSTEAD OF DOORS**  
Some undercounter models have easy-access freezer or refrigerator drawers—little bending is required.



**BEVERAGE BAR**  
Cold drinks are close at hand with an undercounter fridge fitted with can shelves and bottle racks.





**ARE THREE DOORS BETTER THAN TWO?** *The latest model to gain popularity is the French-door fridge, which features a full-width, double-door fresh food compartment with a freezer on the bottom. Chances are, you'll always open both refrigerator doors.*

tors offer the most models, sizes, and prices. The wide interior makes it easy to reach the back, but doors swing wide into kitchen aisles, and you have to bend to reach the bottom shelves.

Because people reach for fresh food more often than frozen, bottom-mount models such as Amana's Easy Reach (starting at \$720) position the refrigerator section at eye level and the freezer below. This design reduces bending but adds slightly to the price. Capacities are comparable to top-mounts'.

Joan Wheeler of Sedona, Ariz., recently replaced her top-mount fridge with a bottom-mount model. "In the last 10 years," she says, "the supermarkets have been stocking so much good fresh food that all we really ever use our freezer for is ice cubes and ice cream."

Side-by-side models arrange the refrigerator and freezer next to each other, with a center opening, and are ideal for narrow-aisle and accessible-design kitchens. Side-by-side models typically cost the most because they offer more specialty features, namely in-door ice cube and water dispensers. Two narrow doors occupy less floor space when open, but bulky items may not fit.

Gary Kull, of Grants Pass, Ore., bought the zigzag-interior Maytag Wide-By-Side (photo top right, facing page; starting at \$1,450) "because it was about 2 cubic feet bigger than the other side-by-sides we saw. We're saving money because we can fit giant jars of condiments. We keep platters and big casseroles on the top three



**CUBE STORAGE IN THE DOOR** *New models store ice in the door rather than taking up main freezer space. The in-door cube bin lifts out for filling your cooler.*

**MORE THAN ICE AND WATER** *In-door info centers let you adjust temperatures in fridge and freezer and lock the cubes and water to thwart an over-zealous child. They even signal when a door is ajar.*

**HIGH AND LOW SHELVES** *Split shelves adjust for items short to tall. They can also be lined up for full-width food storage.*



widest shelves." Gary's only disappointment is freezer space: "It would help if the freezer were wider, but we use the deep bins inside the freezer door for a lot of items."

Two doors become three in recent French-door refrigerators. Offered by Amana, Jenn-Air, LG, Maytag, and Kenmore, the armoire-like style merges narrow side-by-side doors at the top section with a bottom-mount freezer drawer. John DeLong of Huntley, Ill., owns a Kenmore Elite Trio (starting at \$1,700), whose "gourmet pantry" drawer welcomes party trays and keeps food up to 5°F colder. "The two doors above don't need much clearance, and my wife likes the big drawer—it runs the whole width of the refrigerator."

### Accessories make your life easier

No matter its size, a refrigerator must store the kind of foods you buy. Many accessories and features once found only on high-end models are now standard on moderate-price models.

"Shelf help" is one storage theme. Spillproof glass shelves contain messes, and pull-out shelves make items in the back easier to reach. Frigidaire and Maytag have "elevator" shelves that crank up and down (without removing contents) to make room for tall bottles and cake stands. Folding shelves split to create storage at two levels. In the door, supersize bins, tip-out baskets, and deep, adjustable

**FOOD AND ENTERTAINMENT** Speakers, a TV screen, and Internet access are touted by some manufacturers as the latest must-have refrigerator features.

**ARCTIC AIR** Redirecting frigid air from the freezer to a special compartment in the refrigerator can chill beverages in minutes.



**BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?** Maytag's Wide-By-Side model has zigzag-shaped doors with wide and narrow compartments in both freezer and fridge.

**LOOK FOR THIS STICKER** Energy Star is a government-sponsored program that identifies refrigerators that use 10 to 15 percent less electricity than standard models.



shelves store most-grabbed items. Spacious crispers show off contents through clear fronts. Maytag's Safekeeper locking compartment keeps film, batteries, and prescription medicines inaccessible to kids.

Thirsty users demand ice and water dispensers, preferably through the door of side-by-side models. However, this convenience uses 14 to 20 percent more energy, adds about \$100 to the price, and tends to increase the need for repairs. Some top-freezer refrigerators have water dispensers inside the main compartment, requiring you to open the door to get a drink of water. Many models have easy-to-change filters for water dispensers and ice makers that improve purity and taste. LG and Samsung are pioneers in the field of silver-nano technology, which adds silver ions to refrigerator walls to inhibit germs.

Kenmore and Whirlpool side-by-sides offer in-door ice dispensers that create up to 19 percent more freezer space in the area normally occupied by the ice bin. These door-mount dispensers also lift out for entertaining. Party-givers might also like the GE Profile Arctica's express chill feature, which cools drinks in minutes.

Advances in overall cooling technology set other models apart. Because storing food at optimal temperature and humidity helps it last longer, many refrigerators offer drawers with separate temperature and humidity controls. LG and Whirlpool have systems that direct air from freezer to door bins to keep them as cold as the rest of the fridge despite frequent door openings.

### Information centers

If your refrigerator is also communication central, consider chalkboard panels from Frigo Designs or look for finishes that imitate stainless steel but hold magnets. The next step might be Amana's Messenger, a side-by-side model with a voice-memo device that records and replays brief digital messages. It also alerts you to power outages, water-filter life, and doors left open.

LG's side-by-side TV fridge is helpful when limited countertop space denies a portable screen. This 26-cubic-foot refrigerator (starting at \$2,900) dispenses ice and water from the left door and boasts a 13-inch TV, radio, and speakers on the right.

Time will tell whether Samsung's Homepad Internet refrigerator (\$5,000) is just a gimmick. The unit's detachable LCD screen lets you browse the Net, watch TV, play DVDs, or send video messages. The 27.2-cubic-foot side-by-side model also offers through-the-door ice and water, digital controls, and dual cooling systems that eliminate odor transfer. **H**

*Kathie Kull writes from Camden, Me., where she chills her food in an 18-cubic-foot bottom-mount refrigerator.*

**For more information, see Resources, page 86.**