

Choosing a Kitchen Sink

There are lots of shapes, sizes, materials and accessories available today, but it's still a good idea to get what suits your needs

by Steve Culpepper

When I was 6 years old, my family moved into a brand-new, state-of-the-art ranch house in a treeless subdivision freshly scraped out of a cotton field. By state of the art, I mean the house had built-in kitchen appliances that matched the kitchen sink, which was a gleaming copper-tone brown unit set into a gold-flecked, turquoise Formica countertop.

Actually, that sink wasn't anything special. In those days, almost every new sink in every new subdivision was either copper-tone brown, avocado green or snowdrop white; had two bowls; and was cast iron or enamel on steel. (I'm sure there probably were lots of stainless-steel sinks, too, but just how much is a 6-year-old expected to notice?)

As ordinary as it was, that copper-tone sink served the family well. My mother washed vegetables, scrubbed pots and pans, soaked dishes and polished silver in that sink. She also delivered the occasional haircut to an uncooperative head held over the sink.

That was a generation ago. Lifestyles, tastes and even the way people cook have changed substantially in that time. Sure, sinks are still used for washing things and filling things and preparing things. They're still required to take a good beating. The kitchen sink remains just as versatile and is still the most frequently used "center of activity" in the home, according to the National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA). But much has changed. For one thing, sinks don't just come in two-bowl copper-tone brown, avocado green or snowdrop white anymore; nor are they made only of ferrous metals.

What's important in a sink?—Let's say you're in the market for a sink. And for the sake of argument, let's say you've found a sink you like, one that looks good and that comes in a color to match your collection of Elvis commemorative plates. Besides looks, what else should you consider before plunking down hundreds of dollars?

If you're installing the sink yourself, you should consider ease of installation. For example, there's a lot more to installing an underhung, or under-



When there's room, small extra sinks add convenience. In larger kitchens with more than one cook, a smaller second—or even third—sink makes sense. One of these stainless-steel under-mounted sinks has a disposal. Both can be used for preparing food while the main sink is occupied.

mount, sink than there is to installing a self-rimming sink or drop-in sink, which basically involves laying a bead of caulk and setting the sink into a hole in the counter. And unless you've had the training, I wouldn't recommend even trying to install an integral sink of solid-surface material, such as Wilsonart's Gibraltar or DuPont's Corian.

Before you buy, you'll also want to consider the durability of the sink material. Will it chip, dent, stain, rattle, tarnish, scratch, crack, rust, blister or mar? And how quiet is it when water floods into the basin or runs down the drain?

Before you commit yourself to one type of sink, consider how easy it is to clean and otherwise maintain it. Depending on the type and amount of cooking you do, a low-maintenance sink may be what you want. With two boys in my house, the less scrubbing and wiping something needs, the better. However, somebody with no kids and a real compulsion for polishing may take a shine to a brass or copper sink. When it comes to size, depth and shape, sink choices increase as prices

increase. It's like a car. You can buy a lot more bells and whistles on a Lexus than you can on a Geo. And if money is no object, you can buy any sink you like and hire somebody else to install it and keep it clean—you can even hire somebody else to use it, for that matter. If you don't have a fortune, you still can buy a sink and choose from a wide variety of shapes, configurations, materials, sizes and depths.

Sinks of all varieties: as deep, wide or weirdly shaped as you want—People shopping for modern kitchen sinks are looking for bigger, deeper and different choices. Manufacturers appear to be glad to accommodate them.

An important consideration is depth of the sink bowl. While standard sinks are 6 in. to 8 in. deep, more and more sinks are available in depths of 10 in. to 12 in. or more. With solid-surface materials, an almost unlimited bowl depth is possible.

You might wonder why anybody would need their sink to be a foot deep. More things fit into a



Eurodesign sinks feature smooth contours. A high-quality, 18-ga. stainless-steel sink, such as this German-made sink by Franke, looks good and endures years of use. Top-of-the-line sinks are available in a variety of shapes and sizes, and can include a range of accessories and combinations of bowls, such as this large basin and a small vegetable sink.



A single-bowl sink is just right for a small kitchen. Kitchen designers recommend using single-bowl sinks like this cast-iron one for small kitchens that are less than 150 sq. ft. This single bowl is only 24 in. by 21 in., so it takes up less counter space.

deeper sink. Also, if the sink bowl is a standard size (about 14 in. by 16 in.), the sink will seem much larger if it's deeper than normal. There are other benefits to a deep sink. Water from the tap and soups or sauces poured into pots or bowls are less likely to splash out of a deeper sink. A tall stockpot fits neatly inside a deep sink. A taller person can operate more efficiently with a deeper sink. And in a neat, efficient use of space, many new sinks come with one large basin and one small basin (top photo).

Sink shape is often simply a matter of preference. However, there are certain shapes that fit certain locations, such as corners or small island countertops. (The NKBA suggests that corner sinks don't sit back more than 2 in. or 3 in. from the edge of the countertop.) Second sinks, popular in larger kitchens, often are round, oval or small rectangles (photo facing page). Designers insist, though, that before buying a sink with an unusual shape or one that's particularly small, deep or shallow, you should try to imagine how it

will work in your kitchen. With the variety of sinks available, homeowners can select the exact shape and size that fits their cookware and their kitchen, designer Charles Olsen says. Before you choose a kitchen sink, first give your cooking style, your lifestyle and your cookware a thorough examination.

Designers consider the sink another appliance. That concept almost requires that a good deal of thought go into choosing the size and shape of the sink. While shopping a plumbing-supply showroom, ask yourself these questions: How many cooks will use the sink? What size pots do you use? Who does the cleanup? What bugs you about the sink you have now?

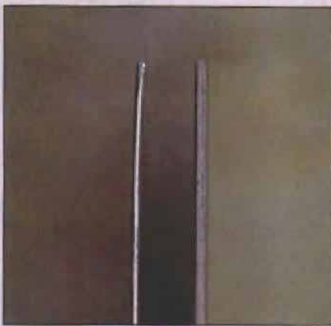
There's something else to consider. Although most homeowners want to maximize the amount of space beneath a sink, it's good to think about the location of the drain as it affects the garbage disposal. Many new sinks have offset drains, which are placed in a rear corner. This placement means the waste pipes are pushed to the

rear, leaving more space under the sink, but it means there's less space for the disposal. An offset drain can make installation of a garbage disposal a real problem for the plumber because there's not much room between the drain and the back of the cabinet.

Finally, a few rules of thumb. According to the NKBA, single-bowl sinks are recommended in small kitchens, which are less than 150 sq. ft. (bottom photo). This single-bowl sink usually is 24 in. by 21 in. and fits into a 27-in. wide cabinet. In kitchens larger than 150 sq. ft., double or even triple bowls, which often include a small disposal bowl, should be specified.

Stainless steel is still the sink standard—For good reasons, stainless-steel sinks continue to be the most popular. They're durable, they're easy to keep clean, and they come in a variety of sizes, shapes and price ranges. They can be undermount, rimless or self-rimming and can have one, two or three bowls, often of different size

Which Gauge Is Better?



Both pieces of steel are high-quality Elkay stainless, but left is 22 ga. and right is heavy 18 ga.

Americast vs. Cast Iron



Americast, right, is enameled steel with a thick coating that simulates some qualities of cast iron, left.



A new cast-iron sink that has an old-fashioned look. Kohler's new cast-iron apron sink comes in a new model with a traditional look. This single-bowl, tile-in model also comes in an un-demount version.

and depth. They're also available in a wide range of qualities.

The broad spectrum of qualities means you have to be careful what you buy. However, price is generally a good indication. You can buy a really cheap, single-bowl stainless-steel sink for \$25 or less at a home center and expect to get what you paid for. A good, heavy-duty stainless-steel sink with double bowls can run several hundred dollars (top photo, p. 49). If you spend even more money, you can install a stainless-steel sink integrally with a stainless-steel countertop, with no visible seam.

By far, the most important thing to remember about stainless steel is that thickness matters. The thickness of stainless steel is measured in gauges: the lower the gauge, the thicker the steel and, consequently, the better the sink (top photo left). A 22-ga. sink isn't quite paper thin, but it sure will dent more easily than heavier gauge stainless. The best stainless-steel sinks are 18 ga. In the middle are 20-ga. stainless-steel sinks.

For what it's worth, the stated gauge of a sink is slightly misleading. It's like a quarter-pound hamburger. It weighs a quarter-pound before cooking. In the same way, a blank of 18-ga. stainless steel is 18 ga. before it's set into a huge metal press and squeezed into a basin shape. Afterward, it's a bit thinner.

The content of the steel also is important. Nickel and chromium are two of the most critical elements added to the stainless-steel alloy. Steel

with higher contents of both nickel and chromium will be more resistant to rusting and pitting than steel that contains less of the two metals. Typically, stainless steel contains 18% to 20% chromium and 8% to 10.5% nickel. A top-of-the-line, 18-ga. stainless-steel sink would have a chromium-nickel content of 18:8, which means 18% chromium and 8% nickel. Carbon is another key ingredient. Good stainless contains from 0.08% to 0.15% carbon.

Most stainless-steel sinks come with a sprayed-on undercoating, although really cheap models don't. The coating helps insulate and soundproof the metal, which is important when water is running in the basin or when dishes and pots bang against the side. The coating also prevents condensation on the underside of the sink.

Peter Hemp, a plumber in Berkeley, California, describes thin, cheap stainless steel as having the appearance of pewter. "It contains very little nickel and it's very rough. You could almost sand your nails against the grain. And you don't dare put disposals in cheap stainless-steel sinks because it'll shake the tar out of them."

Joe Carmody, a plumber in Matunuck, Rhode Island, complains that in most inexpensive stainless-steel sinks, "the clips that hold them to the countertop are not stainless, and they'll break free if water gets on them." He likes good stainless, though. "I'm building a new house now, and it's coming with a double-bowl stainless sink. It's very practical and very durable. Stainless also

gives. If you drop a 16-oz. drinking glass in it, chances are it'll bounce off the bottom. If you do that with cast iron, you'd better get your gloves, because the glass is broken."

Lou Hall, a certified kitchen designer in Fresno, California, says stainless sinks are no longer his biggest sellers because of improvements in man-made materials and because of the look stainless gets as it ages. "Stainless steel seasons, and it takes a set. And it's never going to be as pretty as the day it came out of the box," he says.

If you can stand the occasional chipping, cast iron looks great and performs well—In its prime, the two-bowl, cast-iron copper-tone sink that I grew up with had the tone of, well, copper. In later years, however, its luster faded: Iron began showing through in dark, crescent-shaped bruises wherever heavy pots or skillets had slipped through soapy hands. The sink still did the job, but as its finish grew dimmer and hazier from daily applications of Ajax, its splendor waned.

The main drawbacks of cast iron are its weight and its tendency to chip. If you've got a sturdy countertop, the weight of a cast-iron sink should not be a problem—unless you're lifting it. Chipping is a problem. Although the enamel is fairly durable, it will chip off. If it does chip, the black cast iron can show through and could rust. Cast iron's beauty is its rich color, traditional look and substantial feel (photo above right). Lynda



Seamless contrast. DuPont, the pioneer in solid-surface sinks, makes this sink and countertop of acrylic Corian, which can be fused so that there are no seams to collect dirt. Also, scratches can be buffed out with a light abrasive.



There's a lot of solid-surface competition. This integral sink and counter are made by Wilsonart of its Gibraltar material. Gibraltar, which has properties similar to Corian, resists scratching and denting.

Wilhelmus, an Evansville, Indiana, kitchen designer, likes cast iron because of its good looks and because it comes in a great variety of colors. She warns, however, to be aware of the maintenance involved. "There is a little more upkeep in cast-iron sinks because they can chip, and you have to be more careful with them. Sometimes you have to use soft-scrub cleansers because certain kinds of pans leave marks on the sink. But they're beautiful."

"The one I'm using the most of is a unit made by Kohler, called their Executive Chef model," says Lou Hall. "A lot of my clients are heavy users of the kitchen. They cook. One compartment is 10 in. deep. It's oversize, and it allows room for those bigger pots and pans and stockpots to be washed. And the other compartment is still close to the traditional double-bowl sink size."

Chipping is the age-old problem of cast-iron sinks. Kitchen designer Charles Olsen says he

asked Kohler to refinish some old cast-iron sinks, but the company wouldn't do it. Basically, it's as easy to make a whole new sink. Enameling and firing a cast-iron sink takes a long time and involves repeated applications of powdered enamel and intense firing at 1,250°F.

Even in good sinks, though, there can be problems. Hall warns that occasionally a sink will have a run in it where the porcelain hasn't adhered properly. Under the right circumstances, the porcelain can pop off. "It's like a gun going off. I've dug porcelain out of a ceiling, like shrapnel." He suggests first dusting new sinks with graphite to find hairline cracks.

Professionals all suggest that a new cast-iron sink be thoroughly checked for nicks and chips as soon as it arrives, especially around the rim and the drain hole, and especially in self-rimming sinks.

Some cast-iron sinks can be undermounted, which is currently one of the most popular forms of installation. Hemp says he installs a lot of cast iron mounted under solid-surface counters.

Hemp has been a plumber for 23 years and still prefers cast iron to all other materials, despite the fact that he has to lift it. "If somebody asks me what kind of sink to use, I'll still tell them cast iron. But more and more homeowners are separated from this decision. More people are using professional designers, many of whom tend to pick things up from their appearance and not based on their performance record. I have a cast-iron sink, single bowl, that's been in this house since 1957, and it's still in pretty good shape. Every now and then I've got to put a little bleach in there, but it's held up very, very well."

Compared with stainless, cast-iron sinks are a little pricey. You can buy a basic two-bowl model for about \$180, or you can spend twice that for an exotic color or combination of bowls—and even more if you add lots of accessories.

Solid-surface sinks are coming into their own—One of the biggest kitchen revolutions since electric refrigeration replaced block ice occurred in 1969 with DuPont's introduction of Corian, a material made of acrylic resin and alu-

Comparing Sink Costs

The price of a kitchen sink can vary tremendously from retailer to retailer. Price also is affected by other variables, such as color. For instance, a cast-iron sink in black costs about \$100 more than a cast-iron sink in almond. Accessories, naturally, can add a lot to the price of a sink, as can extra-large sizes or extra-deep bowls.

For the sake of comparing apples to apples, I got price quotes on middle-of-the-road sinks from a half-dozen different Connecticut distributors from cities and towns large and small, and from building-supply stores, home centers, plumbing-supply stores and designer showrooms. Except for the stainless-steel sink, I

specified a white, double-bowl sink, approximately 22 in. by 33 in., with four holes for faucet, handles and sprayer. In stainless steel, I asked for a 20-ga., two-bowl sink with undercoating.

These are Connecticut prices and are among the highest in the country. You could pay less.—S. C.

Material	Highest cost	Lowest cost	Average cost
Stainless	\$265	\$89	\$182
Cast iron	\$386	\$189	\$263
Enamel-on-steel	\$186*	\$49	\$123
Solid surface	\$265	\$205	\$235
Composite	\$720	\$550	\$635

*American Standard's Americast

Buying an Exotic Sink Isn't Exactly Like Pouring Money Down the Drain

If you think a sink is just a sink, you might be content with the \$49 enamel-on-steel model for sale down at the home center. But if your kitchen sink needs to make a statement—and perhaps outlast Western Civilization—there are alternatives to the run-of-the-mill.

Right up there with the more eternal materials available is the German-silver, nickel-silver or vermeil sink, each of which is handmade to the customer's specifications by the German Silver Sink Company (89 Kercheval Ave., Grosse Pointe Farms, Mich. 48236; 313-885-1010).

Maggi Goscicki said her company's German-silver sinks come in any size the customer wants, or in any variation of bowl sizes and shapes. The traditional sink contains an S-curve design partition that runs between the bowls (bottom photo).

Company literature recommends the sinks be "resoldered every 30 to 45 years." And unlike other sink manufacturers, the German Silver Sink Company heartily advises customers to abuse their sinks. "The most charming vermeil sinks have the most dents, large and small. The more dents, the better the appearance." The company even will pre-dent the sink for customers who don't have time to dent it themselves. The S-curve sink retails for about \$3,400.

Charles Olsen of Ducci Kitchens in Torrington, Connecticut, said other luxury sinks available are made of slate or soapstone. "We are contemplating putting in a slate sink currently. It's about \$900 for a single bowl. But it's very heavy slate that they rabbet out and glue together with a marine glue, just like in a chemistry lab. It's almost impervious."

Kenton Lerch of Structural Slate Company (222 E. Main St., Pen Argyl, Penn. 18072; 610-863-4141) says his company sells three or four slate sinks a year. They make them by rabbeting the pieces and gluing them together using stone epoxy. The average thickness is 1 in., and the average one-bowl slate sink weighs about 125 lb. Compared with other custom-

made sinks, slate is fairly cheap. A single-bowl sink sells for about \$380.

A number of places make soapstone sinks (top photo), such as Vermont Soapstone Company (P. O. Box 168, Perkinsville, Vt. 05151; 802-263-5404). These sinks are fairly expensive. They average \$800, but can be as inexpensive as \$450 and as expensive as \$2,000, depending on the number of bowls and whether they have a backsplash. They are guaranteed for life.

There's also brass, which is a lot more popular for relatively easy-use bar sinks than for heavily used kitchen sinks. For one thing, there's still no good coating for brass that will make it hold its shine and also stand up to constant use and wear. The alternative is just to keep polishing.—S. C.



Soapstone sinks are guaranteed to last a lifetime. Soapstone sinks can cost as much as \$2,000 or as little as \$450, depending on the size and extras such as backsplash. Vermont Soapstone Company made this model.

It looks expensive because it is. This German-nickel, or vermeil, sink could be yours for about \$3,400, a price that can include pre-denting. The heavy, hand-soldered sink is quite durable and should last many years.



minum trihydrate. The really radical thing about Corian is that pieces of it can be fused seamlessly together, joining the counter with the sink. Also, its color goes all the way through.

DuPont worked hard to market its new material, and by the end of the 1980s, Corian began showing up everywhere in higher-end kitchens and baths. For countertops, Corian now comes in 41 colors, although sinks are available in only eight colors.

Over the last five or six years, a number of other man-made materials have come on the sink market, each an attempt to break into the niche created by Corian (top photo, p. 51). As a group, these sinks are called solid surface. Besides Corian, the bigger names include Gibraltar, which is made of polyester and acrylic resin (bottom photo, p. 51); Swanstone, which is a modified acrylic; and Avonite, made of polyester resins and mineral fillers. Other brands of solid-surface materials continue to enter the market. Despite its higher price per foot, Corian is still the biggest seller.

Cameron Snyder, president of the NKBA, says costs of solid-surface sinks are fairly similar. "By the time they're installed in the counter, for a double-bowl sink you're looking at \$700 to \$900. I don't see one brand as having a price advantage over the others, and that includes Corian."

Solid-surface sinks have their drawbacks. The material is expensive. Installation is specialized and labor-intensive, and the material doesn't like heat. DuPont suggests that if a pot is too hot to handle, it shouldn't be set on Corian. Manufacturers also recommend against use of harsh chemicals or stove and drain cleaners.

Still, people are buying more and more sinks made of solid-surface material. Kitchen designers like Stephanie Witt of Grand Rapids, Michigan, describe phenomenal sales of Corian. Sinks of the material are produced in 15 to 20 different shapes and configurations, which can be varied even more with the help of a good fabricator. Depth and shape can be determined on site.

Because of the material's flexibility, solid-surface sinks can be made to disappear into the counter. Or with different colors for the counter and the sink, the sink can be made to stand out. Gibraltar sinks come in 13 colors, and Swanstone comes in 18 colors. Kitchen designer Wilhelmus sees a continuing interest in solid-surface material because there's no lip to clean around or to get water into.

Solid-surface sinks don't have to be integral with the counter, though. Often, they're under-mounted below a countertop of different material. Some manufacturers (Swanstone and Corian) also make self-rimming sinks out of solid-surface material. But the main high-end use of solid-surface sinks is in an integral application.

Like stainless steel and cast iron, solid-surface sinks come in a variety of bowl shapes. Customers can purchase one-, two- or three-bowl sinks, or they can buy almost any variety of bowl shapes and depths and have them fused into an integral piece. Unlike stainless steel and cast iron, solid-surface sinks can cost up to \$600 or more for a two-bowl sink. You can buy a decent, two-bowl solid-surface sink, though, for as little as



Composite is the newest material for sinks. Blanco's Blancotec composite sink is made of Silacron 2000, which is formed of quartz and acrylic resin. Quartz sinks such as this one take heat better than solid-surface sinks, but they scratch more easily.

\$205. Plumber Peter Hemp generally likes solid-surface sinks, although he says the material is so thick around the drain hole that it's difficult to install standard basket strainers and garbage disposals. Unfortunately, bottoms of solid-surface sinks are thick so that they won't break if something heavy is dropped in them. Hemp suggests that manufacturers find some other material to reinforce the drain hole so that they can make it thinner at that point.

Repair of solid-surface material varies. Most manufacturers recommend you use abrasive compounds or pads to take out tiny nicks. Solid-surface sinks actually look better after a good scrubbing. Serious damage, such as burns or cracks, is much harder to repair.

Composite sinks can stand the matches but not the scratches—The newest innovation in sink materials is the composite sink, which generally is molded from acrylic resins and crushed minerals. These sinks stand up to heat a lot better than solid-surface sinks, but they scratch much more easily.

Quartzite, Cristalite, Asterite and Silacron 2000 (photo above) are examples of composite sinks. All are made from quartz bonded in an acrylic resin, which means the color goes through it. Because composite sinks are made with acrylic resins, they can be manufactured in a stunning array of colors. Asterite alone comes in more than 100 colors.

There are drawbacks, however. Composite sinks are expensive (prices range from a few hundred dollars on up). And although they're tough, they're not indestructible. Cameron Snyder says owners of composite sinks should take extra care not to scratch the material. He recommends that owners of composite sinks not use any sort of abrasive on them. Manufacturers recommend cleaning with baking soda, or water and vinegar.

In general, they're a little more finicky than solid-surface sinks. However, they are more durable than solid surface where heat is concerned.

Joe Carmody's only problem with both composite and solid-surface sinks is in securing self-rimming models to the countertop. They're fairly light, compared with cast iron, which is secured to the countertop with caulk. Because man-made materials are much lighter, they have to be clipped to the countertop.

Enamel-on-steel sinks are for the budget-conscious—When price is the only object, a porcelain steel or enamel-on-steel sink often is the first choice. These sinks look like cast iron, but they're much lighter and flimsier. They do suit some needs, though. Lou Hall has an enamel-on-steel sink in his mountain cabin, where it does just fine because it doesn't get a lot of use.

Hemp doesn't mind enamel-on-steel, either. "I think you can buy a good enamel-on-steel kitchen sink. If you're a real handy person and you can install the sink, I would almost rather put one of those in and after five years, when it started to look not so good, pop it out and put another one in there. The problem is if you have to hire a plumber to install it, it's not economical."

Enamel-on-steel sinks don't handle impact well. Also, they're thin and noisy, and they don't take garbage disposals well because the material flexes. But they are reasonably priced.

There are enamel-on-steel sinks on the market that seem to have overcome some of the traditional problems of the material. For instance, Americast, made by American Standard, is porcelain-coated, enamel-grade metal backed with a 3/8-in. thick layer of polyester-resin insulation (photo bottom left, p. 50). Jeannette Long of Americast says the material is half the weight of cast iron but about the same thickness.

"The backing material makes it more forgiving than cast iron, so it absorbs shock better than cast iron," according to Long. The backing makes it quieter to use and prevents flexing that can cause the enamel to pop off.

In general, enamel-on-steel seems to have all of the disadvantages of cast iron with none of

the advantages. Its main selling point is price, which ranges from about \$50 to about \$185.

Accessories increase costs but also make life in the kitchen a little easier—The most recent innovation in kitchen sinks is the advent of custom accessories and varied bowl sizes. Unlike the old days when the only thing you could get with a new sink was a box, sinks today can feature soap dispensers, filtered-water dispensers, cutting boards, dish racks, drain boards, vegetable holders, chilled-water spigots, instant hot water, colanders, baskets, recycling chutes, containers—just about anything that could possibly be fixed to a sink. These gadgets sometimes add hundreds of dollars to the cost of a sink.

NKBA president Cameron Snyder says, "If you pay \$400 for a good sink and \$300 to \$500 for a good faucet—with things like instant hot water and some of the other accessories—you could easily spend \$1,200 to \$1,500 on the sink and not be out of the ordinary."

Lou Hall says he finds that accessories are becoming an important part of the decision-making process in choosing kitchen sinks. "People tend to go to sinks that offer accessories. Part of the reason is that in a lot of tighter spaces, it allows us to use the sink as a functional part of the kitchen—as a workstation rather than just a cleanup station.

"People need the ability to buy accessories for the sink that makes it function really well," Hall says. "For instance, built-in colanders and strainers and drains and cutting boards that fit the sink exactly, sinks that have the strainers that are off-center, those are good." And unlike Peter Hemp, Hall likes sinks with off-center drains. "I like the units where the drains are way back in the corner. You can mount a disposal out of the way and have most of the sink available to you." □

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