

Getting the Right

How much you need to spend depends on what features you want



ENTRY LEVEL
LESS THAN \$700 (ELECTRIC)
OR \$800 (GAS)



MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD
\$700 TO \$1800



TOP-SHELF
\$1800 AND UP

BY PATRICK McCOMBE

Even though huge restaurant-style ranges get all the attention in the design magazines and home-improvement shows, most consumers opt for something far less expensive. Self-contained ranges with multiple-burner cooktops and ovens below dominate the marketplace. Prices go from \$400 for a bare-bones electric range to \$3000 for a fully optioned slide-in model.

The best values, however, are found in the middle (from about \$700 to about \$1800). In researching ranges, I visited a number of big-box stores, home-improvement centers,

Range



and appliance retailers, both brick-and-mortar and online. I found the pricing to be pretty consistent in all channels. The costs given here are based on regular retail pricing, not sale pricing. Sales are common, though, so it pays to shop around. If you're a bargain hunter, you can score even deeper discounts if you're willing to take a chance on closeouts, floor models, and scratch-and-dent models, which are often hundreds of dollars less than regular prices. □

Patrick McCombe is an associate editor and a serial remodeler. Photos courtesy of the manufacturers.

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WARRANTIES

Typical warranties for consumer ranges cover labor for one year and parts for two or three. The leader here is Maytag, which offers an additional nine-year warranty on parts. Most retailers offer extended warranties, but consumer advocates say that extended warranties are overpriced. Don't want to depend on a warranty? Customer-satisfaction surveyor J.D. Power and Associates just named Samsung the manufacturer of the best consumer ranges.

PLAIN VANILLA

The least-expensive white electric ranges with coil burners sell for a little over \$400. Gas ranges start at about \$100 more. At those prices, you can forget about extra features such as convection or self-cleaning. Given that, I think it's better to spend a little more. For as little as \$700 or \$800, you can get a much-better-looking stainless-steel appliance with the basic features plus a few extras. Spend more, and you'll get advanced electronics, oversize burners, and maybe even a pair of ovens.



Amana
AER5523XAW
\$400



CLEARING THE AIR ON CONVECTION

Any discussion of ovens should start with convection cooking. Available on electric ovens starting at \$700 and gas ovens starting at \$800, this useful feature adds a fan to the oven's interior to circulate the heated air for more-even baking and browning. Convection's ability to evenly bake two sheets of cookies on different racks is the often-cited advantage, but it's also good for more-even browning of large poultry and roasts.

The most basic convection ovens use a single fan in the back of the oven, but higher-end models sometimes include ducts or louvers to spread the flow of hot air more effectively. Because convection ovens generally bake and roast more quickly than conventional ovens, middle- and top-tier ranges can include electronic programming to automatically adjust baking time and temperature for nonconvection recipes. This is an especially useful feature for home cooks new to convection. Serious chefs and bakers generally consider convection a must-have.



Maytag
MER8700DE
\$760



BURNER BASICS



GE
PGB930SEJSS
\$1530

On entry-level gas ranges, you can expect four individual burners. Usually one is high power, which produces 12,000 to 18,000 Btu versus 7500 to 9500 Btu for a normal burner. A high-power burner is useful for heating a wok or bringing a pot of water to a boil in a hurry. You'll also routinely find a low-power burner for simmering. Middle- and top-tier gas models may have more than one high-power burner, or they may have an oval burner between the four round burners to create a two-burner grill or accommodate a griddle. Higher-end models also have full-coverage grates that allow you to slide pots to different burners without lifting them.

Entry-level electric models have exposed coil elements, but for \$100 more you can get sealed electric burners, which respond to temperature adjustments more quickly and are far easier to clean. Middle- and top-tier electrics also have a warming area, which is good for keeping a pot or casserole warm without occupying a full-power burner or running the oven. At the upper end, you'll find a few induction cooktops. These burners use magnetic induction to heat the pot, while the cook surface stays relatively cool. Although they're more expensive and require steel, stainless-steel, or cast-iron cookware, induction burners heat rapidly and offer quick, precise temperature adjustments. Induction is gradually replacing gas as the preferred burner type of serious chefs.

Multifunction burners.

Center burners such as GE's Dual-Purpose Burner can be switched from "round" to "griddle." The griddle setting adds the oval outer burners to the round center burner.



Brute power. Even moderately priced gas and electric ranges include at least one high-power burner for wok cooking and boiling a pot of water. Most models also include one low-power burner for simmering and delicate heating, such as melting chocolate.

TWO KINDS OF SELF-CLEANING

Virtually all ranges priced from \$800 have what is described as pyrolytic self-cleaning. The hours-long process uses high heat (900°F to 1000°F) to incinerate spills and spatters into a fine ash that's easy to wipe away. Although it's effective, it can create noxious fumes and acrid smoke. Many users have also found that the self-cleaning makes the oven so hot that it can damage circuit boards and electronic controls. (It happened to me. My range required a new primary circuit board to fix, and I had to cook a Thanksgiving turkey on the grill.) Manufacturers claim that newer self-cleaning ovens are better able to handle the high heat, but I still recommend waiting until after holiday meals and entertaining.

Some middle- and top-tier ranges also have steam cleaning, which involves pouring a small amount of water into the oven bottom or a small pan and then running the cycle. The process uses a much lower temperature (250°F) and is faster (30 to 60 minutes) than pyrolytic self-cleaning. Unfortunately, steam cleaning isn't as effective as pyrolytic cleaning at tackling a really dirty oven or at cleaning the oven's sides and back.



Maytag
MER8700DH
\$760



Steam for everyday spills. Self-cleaning ovens with a steam-clean setting use steam and a temperature of around 250°F to soften spills and spatters. It's not meant to take the place of pyrolytic cleaning, but it doesn't take as long and doesn't produce smoke.

EVOLVING OVENS

For generations, consumer ranges included a single oven under the burners. A more recent trend is to include a pair of ovens, one mounted on top of the other, below the burners. Prices for these models start at around \$1200. The advantage is that you can cook two items at different temperatures. Unfortunately, most models place the lower (and larger) oven so close to the floor that it can be backbreaking to use when cooking heavy items. An exception is Samsung's Flex Duo ranges, which have a thinner center section between the ovens, allowing the lower oven to be placed several inches higher than the others. Even better, the center section is removable, so you can combine the two individual ovens for roasting a turkey. Depending on where you grab the handle, the doors can operate independently for when you're using the individual ovens, or they can open together for when you've combined the two ovens. The Flex Duo ranges also have convection fans in both ovens.

Another useful feature is an electronic temperature probe for roasting meats. It alerts the cook or even stops cooking when the meat has reached the specified internal temperature.



Samsung
NE58K9850WS
\$2300



Dual-action door. Depending on where you grab the handle, you can either open both oven doors at the same time or the top door only. Samsung's lower oven is several inches higher than other double ovens, making it easier to use.

SLATE, BLACK STAINLESS, AND A NEW WHITE

Stainless steel is the most popular finish in most of the country. Perhaps its only downside is how hard it is to keep clean. Manufacturers have tried introducing similar finishes that are easier to clean. GE's Slate, a gray painted finish, is one example. Like stainless, it's meant to go with any color palette or decor but to hide fingerprints better. Finishes from LG, KitchenAid,

Samsung, and Kenmore have a black coating on top of brushed stainless. Sales representatives (who must wipe down dozens of appliances daily) agree that these finishes are easier to keep clean, but any scratches through the dark outer layer of paint reveal the shiny surface underneath. Whirlpool's White Ice is a new twist on what was once the most popular appliance color.



GE
PS950EFES
\$2430



LG
LRE3083BD
\$845



Whirlpool
WGG755S0BH
\$1800

FREESTANDING, SLIDE-IN, OR DROP-IN?

The market for consumer ranges is dominated by freestanding models with a control panel that sticks up in the back. But this style is not an option for islands or peninsulas because the back is like a tombstone sticking above the surrounding countertop. The solution is a slide-in or drop-in range. Slide-in models fit into a gap in the base cabinets of about 30 in. and go all the way

to the floor, while drop-in models have a skinny strip of cabinet material below. Both styles have a flat top and burner controls mounted in the front. In addition, many lap onto the adjacent countertops by a fraction of an inch to prevent crumbs and liquids from falling into the crack between the cooktop and the countertop—a problem that plagues freestanding ranges.



Maytag
MGR8650ES
\$949



GE
PGS920SEFSS
\$1800



GE
JD630SFSS
\$1500 (starting)

GETTING A PROBLEM-FREE INSTALLATION

Freestanding ranges slide into a 30-in. cabinet space. Slide-in and drop-in ranges require various opening sizes. Check the individual model's "cut sheet" for required openings and clearances.

Flexible appliance connectors must be approved for gas and installed so that they're protected from damage. The IRC limits connector length to 6 ft.

A Thanksgiving turkey resting on the door can easily topple a modern range. The solution is a metal anti-tip bracket that holds a back foot tight to the floor.

The nearest combustible material must be a minimum of 30 in. above the cooking surface.

Gas ranges must have an accessible shutoff that's protected from damage. Also, their circuit board and clock need a 110v receptacle.

Electric ranges require a 240v 40-amp (or greater) dedicated circuit. Installations from 1996 and earlier use three wires. Modern installations use four wires.

