



Outdoor kitchens: Make mine well-done

Appliances designed specifically for outdoors can add functionality and good looks for homeowners to enjoy

By Chuck Ross

So, do you really need us to tell you that outdoor kitchens are no longer a trend, but a fact of life for high-end homeowners? The move from backyard kettle grills to fully applanced outdoor living spaces is well documented, but new high-end offerings promise to take these designs to a newly luxurious level.

Viking's new E-Series features 25,000-Btu burners, a heavy-duty rotisserie motor with two forks and chrome-plated warming racks. True outdoor chefs can add an infrared burner that reaches temperatures topping 1,500 degrees, providing a super-hot surface for flash-searing meats to seal in their juices.

Once seen as a perk only the wealthiest homeowners could afford, the outdoor kitchen is fast becoming a standard amenity for a much broader market. A recent statistic from *Consumer Reports* magazine proves this point: The magazine estimates 1.2 million U.S. households installed a fully functional outdoor kitchen between 2006



Dacor meets homeowner demand for a consistent suite, including this general-use outdoor refrigerator. It is 24 in. wide by 33 in. tall for standard undercounter installation; it incorporates a more robust compressor than indoor models; and includes a UV-resistant gasket.

and 2007. And manufacturers say homeowners are enjoying their outdoor investments well beyond the traditional three-month summer season.

"What people really are after is a year-round outdoor kitchen," says Bob Lewis, assistant vice president for product development at Diamond Bar, Calif.-based Dacor. "It really

has opened up the realm of appliances quite a bit."

Other industry pros note that, though grills and refrigerators might be prominent players in the design of these spaces, plans need to reflect the broader role outdoor kitchens are playing in homeowners' lives.

"This progress is just a logical extension of the living room,"

says Ann Rottinghaus, marketing communications manager for Oak Brook, Ill.-based Elkay. "It's about entertainment, and so, by logical extension, it's a gathering place."

As design for these outdoor spaces has become increasingly sophisticated, so has the market for the equipment that makes them work. Outdoor kitchens have become almost as complicated to install as their indoor counterparts, so, increasingly, manufacturers are marketing to designers, builders and remodelers, in addition to the homeowners who are signing the checks.

"I would imagine that homeowners would want to bring in someone professional to do it right," Rottinghaus says.

Turning up the heat

The grill remains the center of today's outdoor kitchen, but today's grills bear little resemblance to yesterday's old kettle-shaped charcoal models. For example, Viking's new upgraded E-Series features 25,000-Btu burners, a heavy-duty rotisserie motor with two forks and chrome-plated warming racks. True outdoor chefs can add an infrared burner that reaches temperatures topping 1,500 degrees, providing a super-hot surface for flash-searing meats to seal in their juices. To emphasize just how upscale outdoor kitchens have become, these ultra-premium models retail for approximately \$6,000.

But Viking, like some other makers, isn't looking at grills as a standalone appliance. Instead, they see these products as ensemble players in the overall

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outdoor-kitchen production.

"The majority of our grills are built-ins," says Taylor Calhoun, product manager of outdoor products for Viking Range. Though the company sells stand-alone models, he says, "we're concentrating on selling outdoor kitchens."

Designers like the fact that Viking's offerings — which also include cabinets and other outdoor appliances — can be combined to fit a wide range of configurations, Calhoun says. And builders appreciate the company's ready-to-install designs they can include as standard upgrades.

"They really like the package deals," Calhoun says, which could include a 30-in. grill, trash pullout and sink. "And that's what they can develop for

their projects. We try to make it as turnkey as possible."

Cool design

A similar desire to provide a consistent suite also is contributing to Dacor's marketing efforts. The company announced the addition of a new, general-use outdoor refrigerator to its line at last month's Kitchen/Bath Industry Show, sized at 24 in. wide by 33 in. tall for standard under-counter installation. This unit incorporates a more robust compressor than similar indoor models and includes a UV-resistant gasket.

Stainless steel finishes are standard on Dacor's outdoor products — as they are on most other makers' offerings. This high-end look helps tie the company's beverage coolers and

other outdoor appliances together and provides an added pizzazz — another important ingredient for success among today's builders.

"They're looking for value, and something with some 'wow' factor that will grab someone's attention," Lewis says. That something extra might translate into a specialty beverage cooler — say, a refrigerator unit specially designed to keep a keg chilled to perfection.

"For a lot of guys, it's a big deal to be able to pour their own beer outdoors," he says.

Keg chillers — called "kegenerators" by some — are one of several specialty beverage coolers now being marketed for outdoor locations. Wine reserves and dedicated can dispensers also are available.

"There's definitely a niche market for that," Lewis says, about these various dedicated appliances. "Given that the homeowner has the space and budget for it, there's certainly a need."

But style isn't everything in outdoor installations because these settings also require special attention to performance. Wide temperature variations can place added demand on compressors and other mechanical parts. Buyers, including builders and designers, are becoming more aware of potential performance drawbacks, so manufacturers can't just create smaller versions of existing products and slap an outdoor label on them.

"First and foremost, these homeowners are looking for refrigerators that will get things cold in an outdoor setting," says Jeff Wimberly, director of sales



A mix of performance and diversity is behind Elkay's new Pursuit sink line, designed to meet the demands of both utility and outdoor settings. The line includes one free-standing model, along with five undermounts and nine drop-ins.



Perlick's offerings include several combination appliances, such as a wine reserve paired with a freezer, along with more standard refrigerator-freezer combos. The company also offers several refrigerator and freezer door options, including clear glass and, for the cocktail set, a shelf designed especially for keeping martini glasses chilled.

and marketing for Milwaukee-based Perlick. "When we say we have a product that's outdoor rated, that means it will have the same performance outdoors as indoors."

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bos. The company also offers several refrigerator and freezer door options, including clear glass and, for the cocktail set, a shelf designed especially for keeping martini glasses chilled — a surprisingly popular new offering.

"We've had some pretty good hits on that, right off the get-go," Wimberly says.

At K/BIS last month, Perlick also

RESOURCES

Dacor Inc.
Circle #79 for more information

Elkay Manufacturing
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Perlick Corp.
Circle #81 for more information

Viking Range
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introduced fully integrated digital controls. Additionally, perhaps as an indicator of the expanding market for outdoor kitchen projects, the company also launched a downsized 15-in.-wide line of outdoor appliances designed for more constrained installations.

"There are times when a 24-in. unit is too big," Wimberly says. "We just want to provide the most flexibility."

A sink-ing feeling

A similar mix of performance and diversity is behind Elkay's new Pursuit sink line, designed to meet the demands of both utility and outdoor settings. Recognizing the importance of weatherability, the company manufactures all designs using 18-gauge, Type 316 stainless steel for added anti-corrosion performance. As Rottinghaus notes, corrosion can be an issue in even warm-weather settings, especially in coastal locations. The line includes one free-standing model, along with five undermounts and nine drop-ins.

"I think, initially, sinks will be perceived as utilitarian for outdoors," Rottinghaus says. "But you can be every bit as stylish outdoors as you are indoors. I think consumers are going to be pleasantly surprised that they have so many choices." ●