Induction cooking puts hot meals on the table in a flash

by Mary James

For time-stressed families, nothing beats speed cooking.

As parents and kids struggle to make the most of limited hours together, a home-cooked meal is often reheated takeout or a nuked frozen entree.

READY IN A FLASH - GE is the latest appliance maker to introduce induction cooktops, favored by chefs for speed cooking. CNS Photo. Today, though, a quick meal doesn't have to mean "fast food." Appliance innovations are making it possible to enjoy fresh-cooked meals in a flash with cooktops and ovens that cook with light, magnetic waves, steam or a combo of heating methods. If that sounds a little too Jetsons-like for you, remember how Space Age microwave cooking once seemed.

"Our research shows that what people really want is quality food fast - to have a decent meal quickly," says Mike DeLain, product manager for built-in cooking products for GE.

"There are so many families who are just busy, busy, busy," echoes Sue Bailey, manager of major appliance new product development for Viking Range Corp. "Speed is extremely important to them. That's where our induction products come in."

A growing favorite in restaurant kitchens and European households, induction cooktops generate a high-frequency alternating current magnetic field that reacts with ferrous metal (iron or steel) in cookware to create heat. Energy-efficient and fast, induction burners can bring water to a boil in half the time of conventional gas or electric burners. Yet they offer gourmet cooks the same control as gas.

"A lot of chefs like induction because it speeds up the process and it's very responsive, giving them the temperatures they want when they want them," Bailey says.

Because the heat is efficiently transferred directly to the pot or pan, heat loss is substantially reduced and the kitchen stays cooler, she adds. So do grates and the ceramic-glass cooktop surface, which makes them easier to clean and safer, especially for families with small children.

"I have two small girls at home, so safety is important to me," says Bailey. "With induction, there is no flame, no heat, and if a pan isn't put on a burner in 60 seconds, it automatically turns off."

Induction technology is not new. It made a small splash in U.S. kitchens in 1979, but was generally abandoned a decade later by manufacturers because of sluggish sales and by consumers because of parts shortages, lack of a simmer function and the need for iron or steel cookware.

(Aluminum, ceramic or copper products won't work.)

"Simmer is no longer a problem," says Bailey. "We have a true simmer that lets you hold rice or melt chocolate. Plus, these appliances are now service-friendly and longer lasting. And most pans, including the Viking line of cookware, work with it."

Unlike some other induction cooktops, Viking's version doesn't power-share, a process that grabs wattage from one burner for use by another. Instead, each element has its own power source. The noise from fans that keep the elements' power sources cool is minimal.

Viking's 30-inch-wide, four-burner induction cooktop is about $3,000, more than double the cost of similar-size Viking gas or electric cooktops and one-third higher than a dual-fuel model. Earlier this year, the company introduced cooktops with a combination of induction and electric burners and a portable induction

cooker that allows consumers to experiment with the technology.

Viking's induction entry follows those by Wolf, Thermador and KitchenAid. At the end of September, GE unveiled its first induction products, 30- and 36-inch cooktops in its high-end Monogram and Profile lines. Prices will range from $1,799 to $2,649.

Will the cost come down? "Yes," insists Bailey, "as consumer demand rises. Induction is already very popular in Europe. Here customers aren't educated about it. They have to use it or see it perform."

MIX AND MATCH

In addition to induction, other speed-cook options from Viking and GE combine technologies. GE's Advantium over-the-range ovens harness powerful halogen light and microwave technology to bake, broil, roast and even grill food up to eight times faster than a conventional oven. The two cooking methods brown foods while quickly cooking them.

"When consumers see a batch of cookies perfectly cooked in 11 minutes, most are sold," DeLain says.

GE's Trivection ovens utilize electric heat, microwave technology and convection fans to "produce the best possible food - fast," DeLain says. Controls take the guesswork out of cooking by matching the right combination of cooking technologies with standard recipes and cooking times.

"You can prepare a turkey for Thanksgiving in half the time it would take in a conventional oven," DeLain says. "And the neat thing is, it works with normal cookware, including metal."

Trivection is available in GE's Profile line as a slide-in range for $3,249 to $3,349 or wall oven for $2,449 to $2,849. The company's Profile Advantium 120-volt built-in wall oven is $1,299 to $1,599; the 250-volt model is about $700 more. Advantium over-the-range ovens are $719 to $1,569.

Recent Viking introductions include a high-speed convection wall oven that features a two-speed fan and microwave capability, and a new steam/convection wall oven with a reheat-plus cycle that "restores" already cooked foods, Bailey says. Both appliances dramatically reduce cooking time and are programmed to speed-cook popular foods, she says.

"Plus all of these products are very consumer-friendly," she adds, "although consumers will have to read the manual to get the full benefit."

Cost of the high-speed convection oven is about $2,350; the steam/convection oven is about $3,500.

All of these options are giving rise to what Bailey calls the triple-stack, a lineup of wall appliances that meet the needs of individual cooks and their families.

"You may have an electric oven at the top as your main oven and under it have a microwave/convection or steam/convection for speed, and a warming drawer on the bottom," she says. "Between them, you can cook a quality meal in 15 minutes."

Â© Copley News Service

Induction cooking puts hot meals on the table in a flash by Mary James