

## **CATEGORY TO STUDY: TOASTERS/TOASTER OVENS**

### **Overview**

In the U.S., an estimated 75 million people eat toast every day, making the toaster one of the most important small appliances in today's kitchen (Quick Servant Company, 2016). Food manufacturers have made toasters even more important to consumers by creating foods specifically designed for the toaster, such as pop-tarts and waffles. The toaster oven is not only an alternative to the regular toaster, but has also become popular as an energy-efficient way to cook and reheat small volumes of food that you would typically prepare in a traditional oven. Both types of toasters have seen many improvements over the years, with many options now available to consumers.

### **A Brief History of Toasters**

People have been toasting bread for centuries.

Before the toaster was invented, toasting was done over a fire or flame using various tools, such as a long metal fork or in a metal frame (Snodgrass, 2004). "Toasting" started to change in 1893 when Alan MacMasters from Edinburgh, Scotland, invented the first electric toaster. General Electric came out with their first electric toaster in 1909 (Kyalo, 2021). Toaster ovens came onto the scene at this time as well, with Westinghouse Electric Company's in 1910 (Cooper, 2019). However, these early toasters only toasted bread on one side. That changed in 1913 when the Copeman Electric Stove Company introduced the "toaster that turns toast" that toasted both sides of the bread (Hagley, 2017).

In 1919, the automatic "pop-up" feature was added to an electric toaster designed for restaurants, and by 1926 the product was redesigned for home use and sold it under the brand name *Toastmaster*. This new kitchen gadget introduced features we commonly see in toasters today – toasting both sides of the bread simultaneously, a timer for the heating element, and automatic ejecting the toast when finished (Hagley, 2017). It wasn't cheap, selling for \$13.50, which doesn't sound like much but that is the equivalent of more than \$150 today (FoodReference.com, n.d.).

By the 1960s, prices were low enough that the toaster was commonly found on the kitchen countertop of most U.S. households (Kyalo, 2021). Since then, toasters and toaster ovens have continued to evolve with new features resulting in many choices for consumers today.

## **Selection Features**

(Consumer Reports, 2021; Cook's Illustrated, 2019; McManus, 2021)

There are several factors to examine when deciding which toaster to purchase.

### *Type:*

1. Two or four-slice toasters: This appliance is the least expensive of the two and is a good choice if you only need to toast some type of bread or toaster pastry in the morning. Two-slice models are purchased more than four-sliced models.
2. Toaster ovens: Toaster ovens provide more versatility as they can broil, bake, roast, and reheat small quantities of food, in addition to making toast. This appliance is available as a countertop model and models that are mounted underneath a cabinet.

*Design:* Several options of exterior finishes are available (i.e., chrome, copper, brushed metal, and a variety of colors). Retro and contemporary designs are also options. Two-slice models may have two side-by-side openings or one long slot. Slot widths and depths vary with toasters, with the widest slots designed for bagels and thicker bread slices. Also, slots less than 5 inches deep are typically too shallow. Some models have windows to let you see your bread toasting.

Toaster ovens size vary widely and are important considerations relative to available counter space. The size of the food that will be prepared in the oven is also a consideration. For example, if you intend to heat frozen pizza in this appliance, the interior needs to be large enough to accommodate this food. Interior lights may be available on some models.

*Controls:* Choices include "shade" dials (i.e., how light or dark you want your toast), as well as the more precise numbered dials and electronic touchpads. The toast automatically pops up when ready for most toasters, but how high it pops up is different. This feature is important as it impacts how easy or hard it is to get the toast out of the slots. Some models don't have auto pop-up and instead have a chime or click to indicate the toast is ready.

Toaster ovens may have special settings for warming, reheating, broiling, and defrosting. Some models have a convection setting; these models have a fan that allows faster cooking at a lower temperature. An air-frying feature is also available with some models.

*Performance:* For even browning of bread, toasters have the advantage over toaster ovens. However, toaster ovens are used to cook a wider variety of foods – essentially, most foods you would cook in a traditional oven, but smaller quantities. All toasters/toaster ovens have an automatic shutoff feature, with some having a "countdown" feature.

The numbers of wires on the heating elements of toasters make a difference, with the best models having around 15 wires on each side of the toasting slots. Additionally, the heating element may be wires or quartz rods.

For toaster ovens, the adjustability of the racks is a consideration, especially if you plan to broil food.

*Cleanup:* Toasters have a crumb tray that is hinged or removable, which is the easier of the two to clean. Nonstick and porcelain interiors are easier to wipe down than other surfaces. Appliances with few vents and holes in the housing reduce cleanup as there are fewer places for grease and grime to collect.