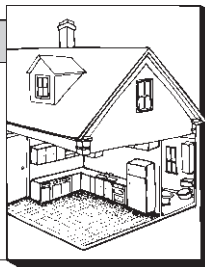


Built-in Refrigerators

by Lynn Comeskey



Ever notice how often designers and architects either fail to include the refrigerator in kitchen plans, or draw the front of it flush with the front of the cabinets? As we know all too well, a freestanding refrigerator can measure as much as 32-1/2 inches deep including handles – one-third deeper than the base cabinets beside it. And this doesn't take into account that you won't be able to push the refrigerator tight against the rear wall. In most cases, customers have been forced to live with the fact that their refrigerator will stick out into the kitchen.

A second technique we use to accommodate freestanding refrigerators is to order deeper base or pantry cabinets, or set standard 24-inch base cabinets as much as six inches away from the wall (see Figure 1, bottom). This is easier than framing in a niche, and it gives this area of the kitchen a deeper counter, which can appeal to the serious cook. However, it makes the countertop more expensive, requires extended end panels on 24-inch cabinets that are set out from the wall, and eats up precious space in the kitchen.

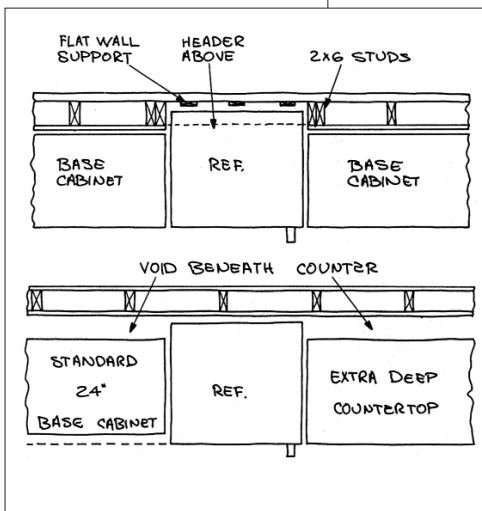


Figure 1. For a built-in look with standard depth refrigerator and cabinets, you can carve out an opening in the wall behind the refrigerator (top). Another solution (bottom) is simply to bring the cabinets out flush and order an extra deep countertop.

Until recently, there were only two ways around the refrigerator depth problem: designing around it, or purchasing a "Sub-Zero," which was the only well-known brand of refrigerator designed as a built-in.

But this is changing, and it's probably about time.

Design Solutions

There are a couple of tricks that we use to accommodate full-depth refrigerators. One deals with the wall behind it, the other with the cabinets (see Figure 1, top). Neither is perfect, but both work.

In the first way, we carve out an opening in the wall behind the refrigerator to pick up the depth of the studs. We frame it out just like a door opening, installing a header, king studs, and jack studs. On a 2x6 exterior wall this often can buy you all the room you need. If you're dealing with a 2x4 wall, you can sometimes increase the recess by furring out the rest of the wall a few inches.

This technique has its problems. For one, it leaves the drywall (or sheathing and siding on an exterior wall) unsupported at the back of the recess. If this is a problem, you can use flat studs or plywood to stiffen the wall. It also leaves little room for insulation. In addition, it's difficult to precisely locate the opening, and it makes locating the electrical and water supply a little tricky.

Shallower Refrigerators

Although they are still much more expensive than their bulkier cousins, 24-inch-deep refrigerators are now being offered by most major appliance manufacturers. They have become popular not only because of their high-end, seamless look, but because their shallower depth means less searching for the jar of applause in the back (or the forgotten leftovers growing third-generation mold).

In my local search for built-in refrigerators, I found eight manufacturers. Although some models come with stainless-steel or colored door panels, all but Traulsen's units can be faced with matching cabinet panels (and 90 percent of my customers opt for this arrangement).

Some also offer an in-door ice and cold-water dispenser. These may be a hit with some people, but I don't like them. As far as I'm concerned, one of the beauties of a built-in refrigerator is that it blends in with the rest of the kitchen. A dispenser breaks up the undisturbed surface and calls attention to the appliance that you've gone to the trouble of hiding. To a lesser degree, there is a similar problem with the grilles that some manufacturers place in front of their top-mounted compressors. Sub-Zero, Defiance and KitchenAid are now making kits available so that a panel can be fit in front of the compressor.

Inside the box, each brand has

numerous attractive features – special shelves, drawers, blowers, etc. – that should be considered along with your dealer's comments. Also remember to read the installation instructions before doing the kitchen layout: Most models require some distance from an adjacent wall for door swing. Another potential problem that can prevent doors from opening fully is a countertop with more than the typical one-inch overhang.

Here is a brief review of the companies offering built-in refrigerators in my area (California).

Sub-Zero. This company's name is almost synonymous with built-in refrigerators. They've been making them since I can remember. They offer 11 different 84-inch-high refrigerator/freezer combinations from

\$2,800. The refrigerator/freezer models have two compressors, and the freezers are available frost-free or not.

General Electric. GE offers an 84-inch-high, 42-inch-wide, side-by-side in its upscale, Euro-style "Monogram" series. It runs approximately \$3,600. Since the distribution of the Monogram line is intentionally limited, it isn't heavily discounted. One advantage of this unit is the excellent service available from GE.

Like the Defiance, the top-mounted compressor is shipped separately and requires considerable installation time. A metallic grille is provided to cover the unit. The refrigerator comes with wheels so the main box can be installed relatively easily.

KitchenAid. This well-known manufacturer has introduced 36- and



Figure 2. This distinctive, steel and glass refrigerator, from Traulsen Co., is one of a growing number of 24-inch-deep models, designed to install flush with standard base cabinets. Most will accept matching cabinet panels for a seamless look, and many use separate, top-mounted compressors.

30 inches to 48 inches wide – one of the best selections in the business. Most models come with two, top-mounted compressors, which provide more precise temperature control and some energy savings. However, the cost of a Sub-Zero is often in excess of \$3,000.

We have installed numerous Sub-Zeros and they're no snap. I allow three man-hours per installation. But the same is true for other similarly designed built-ins with compressors to install, tight tolerances and no wheels to aid in pushing the heavy box into place.

Defiance. This brand is not well-known in my area, even though the company has been manufacturing built-in refrigerators for more than 25 years. It offers sixteen 84-inch-high models in widths from 18 inches to 48 inches. Prices range from \$2,000 to \$4,000. The "power module" is separate and installs on top of the units similar to the Sub-Zero. This makes maintenance easier, but I have been told that installing it properly is difficult. I have had no personal experience with Defiance.

Amana. Long known for its fine refrigerators, Amana this year redesigned one of its 36-inch-wide side-by-sides as a shallower unit. It is a good, sleek refrigerator. At \$1,500 to \$1,600, it is by far the most reasonably priced built-in. The box is 23-1/2 inches deep, but with the handles it is 27-1/2 inches. Since it's a redesigned regular unit, it is 67-1/2 inches high, and does have rollers for installation ease.

Frigidaire. This old-line company offers an imported built-in called "Euroflair." It has four, 24-inch-wide models in different configurations. The idea here is to join two together. A pair range in price from \$1,800 to

42-inch-wide, side-by-side built-ins in the last year. They use top-mounted compressors and stand 84 inches high. At a cost of \$2,700 to \$2,800, the KitchenAid product has been well accepted so far. The standard ice/water dispenser is black – especially glaring if the kitchen is done in bleached wood or light plastic laminate.

Modern Maid. Modern Maid offers a 36-inch-wide side-by-side (67-3/4 inches high) at just under \$2,000. The box is an unusual size at 25 inches deep (28-1/2 inches with handles).

There are separate freezer doors above and below. This unique feature offers both convenience and some energy savings in exposing fewer frozen goods to warm air each time a freezer door is opened. One other significant advantage is this unit also can be used freestanding, so it doesn't have to be left by the homeowners when they move.

Traulsen. This manufacturer of commercial refrigeration units entered the residential built-in market six years ago. Traulsen offers 11 models in various configurations and widths (30 inches to 48 inches wide, and 81 inches high) ranging in price from \$1,600 to \$4,000. These units are finished in stainless steel, and many have glass doors (see Figure 2). Double, top-mounted compressors are used on freezer/refrigerator models. We have installed only one to date, and were very impressed with the quality although it took time and manpower to wrestle it into place. ■

Lynn Comeskey is a remodeling contractor who specializes in kitchens and baths. He is from Mountain View, Calif.