

Sink Inserts



Zeroline from Hafele

More to it than meets the eye

Whether it is an expensive kitchen with all the bells and whistles or just a plain, low cost but functional one you will find as the focus, the kitchen sink. In fact, a lot of people may not realise that when you are using the kitchen you will on average, spend at least 50% of your time utilising the kitchen sink. It forms part of the so called kitchen triangle being between the oven and the refrigerator. The humble kitchen sink turns out to be more than meets the eye. Bob Nordgren from JOINERS Magazine spoke to several of the leading suppliers of kitchen sink inserts here in New Zealand about the nature of the sink insert market and its rapid growth, particularly over the last decade, into a highly competitive market segment within the kitchen manufacturing industry. Today, if you look at both the commercial and residential markets together there are a staggering 900 sink insert alternatives available.

The emergence of the sink insert market as we know it today has its foundations in parallel developments that occurred in the manufacture of benchtop surfaces. Laminate fabrication of a variety of different surfaces generally to an MDF substrate had been a popular form of benchtop in the kitchen since the 1960's, remember the 'Rickstan' benchtop?

By the 1980's this process had become highly sophisticated. The one piece stainless steel



sinktopy was still around but dictated of fashion meant the consumer/end user was looking for more variety. The emergence in popularity of other benchtop materials such as natural stone as well as other manmade composite surfaces meant the sink insert could be fitted to a whole host of surfaces.

This was on the product level. On the marketing side other changes were occurring. The traditional means of distribution of the sink

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sink inserts



The Franke Compact from Burns & Ferrall is the classic modern sink. The range incorporates many variations of bowl and sink size to accommodate every kitchen and lifestyle.

insert had been through the manufacturer or importer to the traditional sources of architects, designers and merchant outlets. This began to change in the 1980's as the importance of those in the trade (the installers) and the role of the consumer became more recognised as influential in the decision making process. Existing manufacturers and importers began to see the opportunity to market their product more directly to these people through their own sales forces and through kitchen orientated consumer outlets. The removal of import restrictions in the mid 80's opened the way for new players to enter the market as well.

Of the current market players in the sink insert market (of which there are 35 plus in total)

there is a mix of local manufacturers such as Burns and Ferrall (Regency and the imported Franke), Mercer Products (Mercer) and Pacific Stainless and a host of importers including Duratech Industries (Reginox & Bisonne), Dux Industries (Oliveri & Lakeland), Caroma Industries (Clark), Hafele NZ Ltd (Blanco) and Wenrite Marketing (Hans, Galaxy, Orbit and Fiori) to name but a few. The interesting feature is that all these companies have specific products for specific market segments. Burns and Ferrall for example, one of the few New Zealand manufacturers of sink inserts, started manufacturing in 1956. Today, they have two manufacturing plants in Auckland and one in Wellington and Christchurch. They offer several locally made brands such as their

Regency brand for the middle market and two specific commercial brands in their Classic and Fluteline products. In 1989 they started importing the Swiss made Franke range aimed at the middle and upper residential market. Aaron Carson their National Sales Manager Domestic Products comments "Today our sales teams need to call on not only the traditional plumbing merchants but also the furniture and joinery trade. We cover these trades through merchants like The Laminex Group and Carters."

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The Australian made Lakeland range, available in New Zealand through Dux Industries, has a range to suit a variety of needs. Here the traditional look with a square outer edge, embossed drainers and raised tap landings is very popular, as is the practical bowl only design which is ideal for compact kitchens.



sink inserts



The QLX621 range, available in New Zealand through Totara Marketing offers a diversity of choice in drainer and bowl arrangement and design to suit space and budget requirements.

The Direct Approach

The change in approach to the market came in the early 90's with the emergence of companies such as Duratech Industries based in Hamilton. Owner Rob McLachlan explains "We felt that the kitchen industry as such was not as well serviced as it could be and saw that by importing a quality European made sink insert, in our case the Reginox range from Holland, and selling direct to the kitchen industry and the trades that we could be successful. Importing the product by passed the issues of the high start up cost of the necessary tooling and imported steel for local manufacture: as an importer it provides for a greater range of product and a better margin."

During the 90's other importers emerged notably Caroma with the Clark range and Dux Industries with the Australian made Oliveri range. Oliveri was established here in New Zealand in 1996 and has become a leading brand over the last decade. Like the other importers and manufacturers Dux Industries has looked to a combination of a sales force combined with approaches to the trades and trade organisations and the more traditional field of architects and designers. "Creating points of difference and linking that to a brand has become the norm in what is now

a fairly crowded marketplace." points out Dux's National Sales and Marketing Manager Ian Fraser. Rob McLachlan takes the issue a little further and comments, "Our research has shown that kitchen designers in particular tend to look at the package offered, being the company, the product, the support material and the representation in considering who they deal with."

The Product

Looking at the product itself the similarities and the differences are a little more complex than one would probably expect. The two core similarities is they all are made from grades of stainless steel (see 'What is Stainless Steel?') and the design is driven by their particular function be it in a residential or commercial setting. In talking to the various suppliers each has a particular 'best seller' which is largely determined by which market sector the supplier is aiming at. A common approach has been the development of range of sink inserts denoted by brand name to suit different market segments and marketing approach. For example, Dux Industries has their Oliveri range for the middle to upper end market and their Lakeland brand for the commercial/project market; Burns & Ferrall have their Franke range for across the

board but particularly the top end and their New Zealand made Regency brand for other sectors and their Classic and Fluteline ranges for commercial applications; Duratech have the Reginox range for across the board and the French made Bissonne range for the top end; Hafele, a relatively new player, have their German made Blanco range for all levels and Wenrite Marketing have a wide range for all market sectors under brand names such as Galaxy, Orbit, Hans, 'W' Series and Fiori.

The most popular sink insert type appears to be the one and a quarter bowl and the one and a half bowl which is a move away from the popular 18" by 12" bowl of yesteryear. "Functionality is the driving force behind the design of sink inserts." comments Hafele's National Product and Marketing Manager Greg Adams, "These days the end user needs more than one bowl to complete the tasks they have from food preparation to disposal. 'Insinkerators' for food disposal are now seen as just as important as say the microwave in the modern kitchen." Another interesting aspect has been the emergence of value added items such as chopping boards, stainless steel trays and colanders as part of the sink insert package which all the suppliers have ranges of.

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Accessories have increasingly become an important part of the total package of the sink purchase, as shown in this range from Burns & Ferrall.

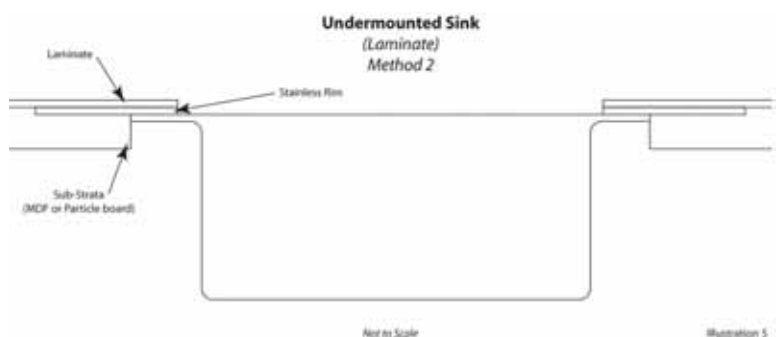
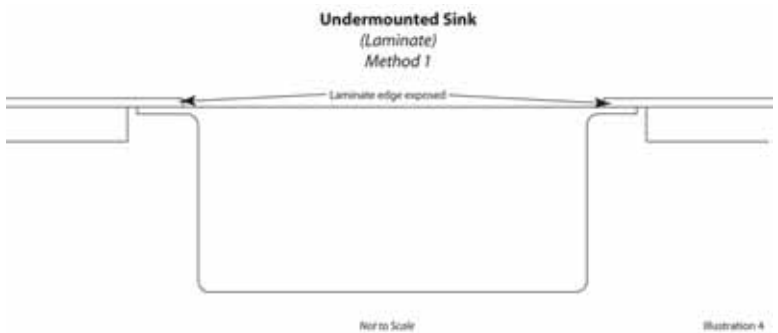
sink inserts

Installation

The issue of installation offers a real insight to the influence the tradesperson has in the whole process. All sink inserts come with written instructions on installation, a template and other specifications are in most cases preglued ready for installation. A successful, hassle free installation is the aim of all the suppliers as the installer is more likely to comment to the designer or architect if they should find they had problems rather than none at all – a sort of no comment by the installer is usually good news. Installation of sink inserts is determined by three particular methods. The most common is overmounted followed increasingly by undermounted, the third method being flush mounted (see diagrams). The most talked about issue in sink insert design has been the lip. “Kiwis are great ones for ensuring their benchtop and sink has an uninterrupted flow when it comes to cleaning hence the interest in the kind of lip the insert has where it is overmounted.” points out Rob McLachlan. A variety of edges be they right angled or bevelled have evolved accordingly. This design issue combined with the emergence of a whole of new benchtop surfaces saw the popularity of the undermounted sink insert in the early 90’s. This did away with the issue of a lip and led to the ‘seamless’ look in both manmade and natural products in benchtops. Duratech’s ‘Ezywipe’ system, a world first, has enhanced this popularity. The third method of flush mounting is also becoming more popular as well. Stainless steel thicknesses can vary from product to product although a fairly standard thickness appears to be around 0.7mm. Strengthening the area where taps are installed through profiling is pretty much common these days as well.

The sink insert market has some thirty five plus manufacturers and importers here in New Zealand today. All those spoken to agree this is probably too many for the market to sustain in the long term. Traditionally, sink inserts have largely come from Europe. That has changed in recent years with imports now also coming from SE Asia, particularly China. Tony Vugler from Wenrite Marketing is one of those companies importing Chinese made sink inserts. “Its all about price and quality control. In our particular case we are able to take advantage of the buying power offered by an alliance of companies both in Australia, Asia and here to purchase 304 grade stainless steel from Germany and have our selected Chinese manufacturer to produce the sink decks from our tooling, weld in the chosen sink bowl and utilise our pioneered bonding strip. It goes without saying that without the quality control aspect and then the international, national and regional service at a competitive price we can’t expect to compete here in the long term. This particular combination means for Wenrite and the customer that we can offer good quality at a competitive price.”

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sink inserts



Blanco Axis from Hafele

The Future

And what of the future? The complex relationship between the designers of sink inserts, kitchen designers and architects and the end users will continue to influence what we see in the modern kitchen environment. "The current trend is towards larger bowls with tighter radii." comments Aaron Carson. "Seeing the sink insert as the heart of the overall design of the kitchen will continue with functionality still being the guiding hand in design."

"The challenge for the industry" comments Ian Fraser, "will be to create brand loyalty to combat the multitude of similar products in the marketplace today." Rob McLachlan offers the observation "In the foreseeable future the design influence, in tandem with manufacturers, will continue to come out of Europe as it has done for some considerable time. The influence of the interior designer and the architect will continue to take precedence although the influence of the trades has become more and more significant."

"At the end of the day product, service and price in combination should always be the basis for success in what is a very competitive industry" says Tony Vugler, "Function will certainly remain the guiding hand in designing the inserts of the future." As to the longevity of those selling sink inserts it's interesting to note that all the successful ones appear to be diversified businesses selling other product lines as well as sink inserts. "The notable thing about this market has been the emergence of a more disciplined supply chain usually governed by a head office that deals with the various retail and trade groups. This has been complemented by vertical integration in many cases leading to house brands and a consequent closer eye on costs of production and distribution. This will no doubt continue into the future." says Ian Fraser.



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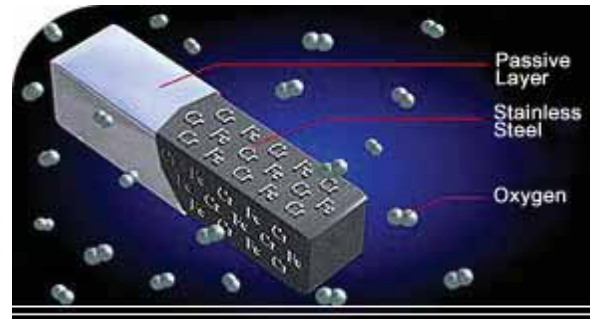
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What is stainless steel?

Stainless steel is the generic name for a number of different steels used primarily for their resistance to corrosion. The one key element they all share is a certain minimum percentage (by mass) of chromium: 10.5%. Although other elements, particularly nickel and molybdenum, are added to improve corrosion resistance, chromium is always the deciding factor. The vast majority of steel produced in the world is carbon and alloy steel, with the more expensive stainless steels representing a small, but valuable niche market.

Distributed homogeneously throughout the entire stainless steel structure, chromium – on making contact with oxygen – forms a fine, all encompassing and resistant layer of oxide on the steel surface, protecting it against the corrosive attacks of nature. Despite being invisible and very thin, this oxide film adheres extremely well to the stainless steel base, and its resistance increases when chromium is added to the compound. Even when the steel is scratched or cut, oxygen from the air immediately combines with the chromium to provide the protective layer. Other elements added to stainless steel such as nickel, molybdenum, vanadium and tungsten, also increase corrosion resistance besides making stainless steel suitable for multiple applications. The correct selection of the stainless steel type and surface finish are important in ensuring its long life.

Stainless steel's main families are Austenitic ("400" series), Martenitic ("300" series) and Ferritic. Most of the standard grades of stainless steel still in use today were invented between 1913 and 1935. The most everyday use of stainless steel is obviously in cutlery. Cheap cutlery is made out of grades 409 and 430, with the finest Sheffield cutlery using specially produced 410 and 420 for the knives and forks and grade 304 (18/8 stainless, 18% chromium 8% nickel) for the spoons and forks. The different grades are used as 410/420 can be hardened and tempered so that the knife blades will take a sharp edge, whereas the more ductile 18/8 stainless is easier to work and therefore more suitable for objects that have to undergo numerous shaping, buffing and grinding processes and is probably the main reason for its use in the manufacture of stainless steel sink inserts. Also often used is stainless steel with a slightly higher nickel content (18/10 stainless).

Stainless steel offers many advantages: high resistance to corrosion, high mechanical resistance, easily cleaned with a hygienic appearance, maintains its properties even under high temperatures, low maintenance and recyclable.



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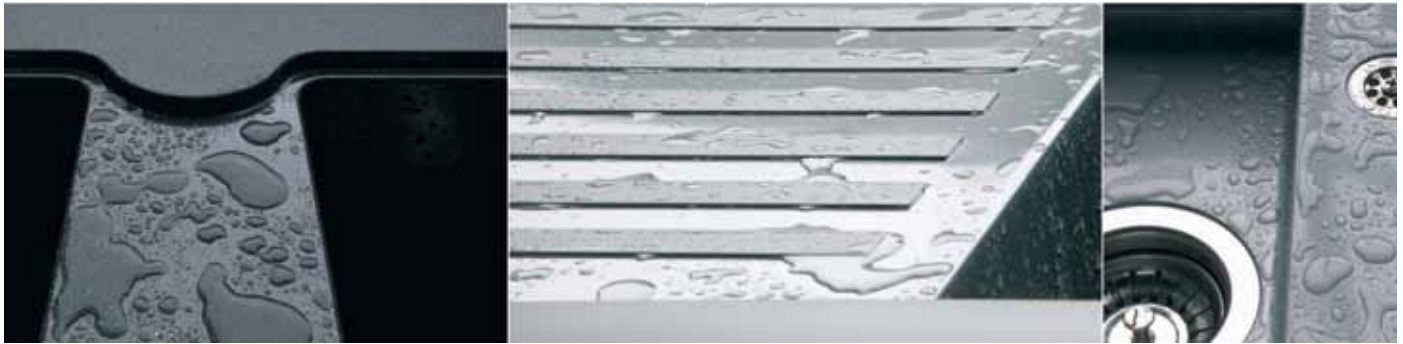
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Aren't we the lucky ones?

Spoilt for choice with more than 30 competing sink brands on the market - Dale Marsh from Totara Marketing muses on the impact this has had on the kitchen industry.

With the proliferation of low cost kitchen manufacturers, the retail kitchen concept, kitchens have never been as affordable and accessible to the public.

Kitchen manufacturers employing state of the art technology put together cabinet ranges available on very short lead times, at incredibly low prices. Fantastic for the consumer...until...

In a drive to compete against other "production line" manufacturers quality becomes sacrificed for cost. Hardware, handles and sinks... the cry being "where else can we save money having squeezed what we can out of manufacturing?"

At what cost is quality lost?

Studies show that 60 % of the time in the kitchen is spent at the kitchen sink. It follows then that if the sink isn't up to scratch, what about the rest of the kitchen?

Good quality sinks are made from 304 grade stainless steel either 18/10 or at a pinch 18/08. Be wary of low cost/quality sinks which manufactured in AISI 201 and AISI 202, sometimes even chrome plated to look super shiny.

Frequently low cost sinks have timber panels glued to the back of the sink, giving the appearance of a heavy sink, at least until the panel drops off!

The "Laser Edge" sink copies which reveal their origin when spot weld marks transfer through to the top of the sink and become evident when the sink is clamped to the bench top, another give away trademark. Laser edge sinks are difficult to manufacture, and therefore expensive. Blanked out sinks with spot welded clip rails are low cost to manufacture. Rolled edge sinks are generally much stronger, the formed metal edge increases the strength of the sink deck.

Ask yourself of your sink supplier, what backup, and after sales service is expected in the event of a failure. How long has this company been supplying sinks, what do we know of the credibility/reliability of the brands they represent?

Commodity or design element?

Without doubt, in the context of production line kitchen manufacturing, kitchen sinks have become a commodity item. What is interesting to watch however, are brands synonymous with quality and technology, determined to compete

at the commodity end of the market, thereby destroying their own brand equity.

Their answer? Probably that it's a small market so you need to be active at all levels. The same logic has me waiting for when I can buy a three cylinder diesel Ferrari shopping trundler.

Beyond the production line, sinks and tapware are as much design elements in a kitchen as the range of appliances, textures, and colours available. Sinks are now available to showcase our differences and lifestyles whether the classic country butler sink, the edgy minimalist cubist styles, or a sleek modernist combination of circles and squares.

Its refreshing to finally see progression in sink design considering styles haven't changed markedly since the days of the IB80.

As a last thought - *the bitter taste of poor quality remains long after the sweetness of a cheap price is forgotten.*



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