

All the *Rage*

Efficient and eye-catching stoves promise to be hot sellers this season.

BY GREG THOMPSON



Ashford 25 insert from Blaze King

Stoves are normally tepid sellers in the warm summer months, but sales heated up nonetheless for many manufacturers as consumers stayed home and looked for ways to improve their dwellings. Chris Neufeld, vice president of Blaze King Industries, saw a “tremendous surge in demand” that started in mid-July and stayed strong. “Showrooms began reopening in many locations across the U.S. and Canada,” Neufeld says, “and all our dealers are reporting great foot traffic.”

Officials at Hearth & Home Technologies tend to agree, declaring that 2020 stove sales are making a comeback. “2020 started out soft, even before COVID, but has turned very strong in the past few

months,” says Karen Smeltz, brand marketing director at Harman & Vermont Castings. “Most retailers have depleted their inventory due to EPA 2020 Step 1s going obsolete, so they are well positioned for a successful season. Our manufacturing facilities are working full throttle to meet demand.”

Many of the manufacturers represented in this issue’s spotlight tell a similar tale—soft start, busy middle, and hopeful finish. Twenty-six-year industry veteran David Kufahl has seen a similar phenomenon, but when it comes to the pandemic, he is keen to put everything into perspective. “Several times in my hearth career, we have had natural disasters or events that cause trepidation,” says Kufahl, president

of HearthStone. “In most cases, this leads to a stronger ‘home’ focus. Fixing up and investing in your home, while making it more self-reliant, is the recipe for a very strong hearth year.”

Specialty retailers looking to capitalize on that stronger “home focus” can find new ideas in the pages ahead. With an optimistic eye on 2021, the 10 manufacturers in this issue’s spotlight have been honing their designs and reading the fine print that governs emissions.

REGENCY FIREPLACE PRODUCTS

As the market emerged from the worst of the COVID lockdowns, Regency Fireplace Products



Norsk Kleber Kube 3-0 (Soapstone) from BAC Fireside Group

(Delta, British Columbia) noticed an uptick in stove sales, with the trend continuing into the fall season. The uptick encompassed plenty of upgrades, in addition to first-time purchasers. “We are looking forward to seeing that trend continue throughout the year with our 2020 lineup of hybrid catalytic and non-catalytic units being well positioned in the market,” says Kyle Grant, director of marketing.

Regency’s team of engineers has worked hard to produce catalytic and non-catalytic 2020 certified units that meet New Source Performance Standards (NSPS) regulations. The result is a full line of high-quality stoves suited to every type of wood burner—from casual users to people heating their entire home overnight.

“From our discussions with customers and dealers, we believe that a blend of product features helps to create a popular stove, including fuel efficiency, ease of use, burn time, aesthetics, and easy maintenance,” Grant says. “As a result of extensive testing and tweaking, we were able to reconfigure many existing products to meet the 2020 guidelines, as well as considerably expand our product line.”

To properly show the benefits of any given stove, Grant wants dealers to understand the needs of consumers. For long-term or overnight heating, he recommends a catalytic stove. If users are looking for supplemental heat during the day, a non-cat-

alytic unit may be best.

Maximizing choice and customization options for wood or gas stoves is crucial to capturing the market, and social media has only made it easier for consumers to scout what they might want, well before they walk into the showroom. “With the rise of Instagram, Pinterest, and other image-sharing platforms, consumers are increasingly looking to create a ‘look,’



The Gateway 3500 by Empire Stove



The Neo 1.6 LE Ivory from Pacific Energy

Grant explains. “They need a stove that will help tie the room together. By offering more units, more sizes, more accessories, and more finishings

than ever before, Regency is poised to take advantage of this trend and help consumers create the look of their dreams.”

EMPIRE GROUP

Echoing the sentiments of many of his colleagues, Nick Bauer, president of Empire Group (Belleville, Illinois), described the previous months as “three different years in one” so far. “We had a pretty strong winter season in 2019, and sales were solid coming into early buy-in in 2020,” Bauer explains. “COVID hit and everything stopped for a couple of weeks. As things started to find a new normal, we have seen a drastic increase in sales for residential-type products—first in our outdoor products and now in the indoor products, which include stoves.”

In light of consumer demands and 2020 NSPS regulations, Empire has focused on easy-to-close door latches, simple-to-use primary air control, and a no-mess ash management system—all part of Bauer’s aim toward “ease of use” for consumers.

To make it easier on wallets, Bauer reveals: “We price our units in the

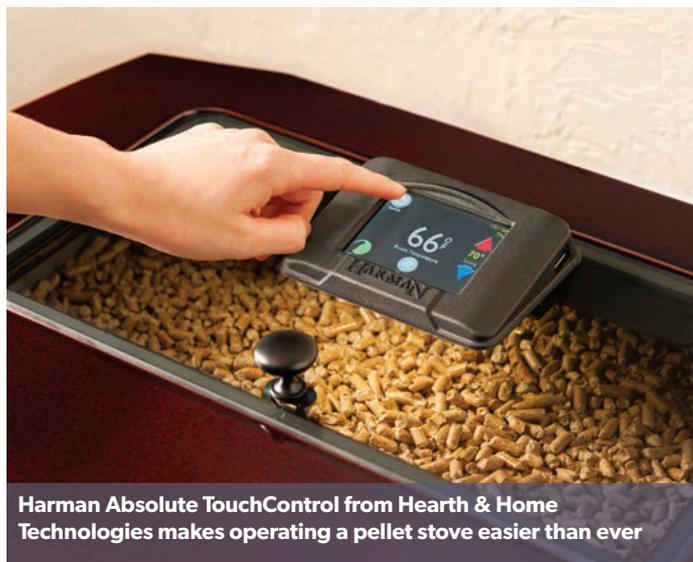


INVICTA model Antaya from Energy Distribution 2015

product spotlight



The VC Dauntless stove by Hearth & Home Technologies with optional cooking grill



Harman Absolute TouchControl from Hearth & Home Technologies makes operating a pellet stove easier than ever

BLAZE KING INDUSTRIES

With summer over and the chill of fall gradually setting in, 25-year industry veteran Chris Neufeld, vice president of Blaze King Industries (Walla Walla Washington and Penticton, British Columbia) has had a chance to reflect on a most unusual year. He describes the first quarter as “flat in the

value price range and strongly believe that in order to sell a product, one needs to show the product, which is why we have a really aggressive live burn and static display program. We provided 50% of the cost for a live burn and 25% of the cost of a static display to the dealer to encourage them to display the product.”

On the aesthetic side, Bauer’s team chooses to emphasize the workmanship and downplay the flourishes. “We really like to keep our designs simple,” Bauer explains. “Simple lines, nothing fancy. I know some people like to use some elaborate designs, but ours is not something you are going to see in a designer magazine. Call us basic, but we design things for our consumers’ wants and tastes, not what our engineers think looks cool.”

ENERGY DISTRIBUTION

Hopes are high at Energy Distribution (St. Alphonse, Quebec), particularly in a year when travel restrictions remain and staycations motivate homeowners to improve their dwellings. Daniel Beaugard, vice president, is ready with a lineup of 12 stove models with “a fresh modern look for cast-iron wood stoves.”

Excitement is justified for the dozen new offerings, but the best-seller at the moment is the Kazan GA. The “well proportioned” stove features a heating capacity of 1500 pi2, 63% efficiency, weight of 346 pounds, log size of 22 inches, flue dimension of 6 inches, and color in anthracite.

“We think that today’s customers are looking for aesthetics more than just a heating system,” Beaugard says. “This is a completely different



Green Mountain 60 from HearthStone

United States” with the early buy “Commitment Program” up.

It may seem like a paradox at first, but it shows an optimism among dealers looking to prepare for future demand. Offerings from last year continued to feed that demand, thanks to positive sales and enthusiastic reviews. “Although released in 2019, the demand for the Boxer 24 has really impressed us,” Neufeld says. “We also increased options for our stoves, which has provided dealers a great deal more flexibility, allowing them to increase sales.”

Neufeld is keen to know what dealers and end users think, and recently sent out a 2020 Wood Stove Users Survey in an effort to drill down on exactly what consumers want.



The Alderlea T5 LE from Pacific Energy

stove than its European version. We had to redesign the entire firebox and baffle in order to reach the EPA 2020, so we made a decision to go with a single burn rate.”

Banking on the “beauty of cast iron, but with a modern look,” Beaugard makes a point to educate dealers about the single burn rate, which makes it easy to operate. “You only have to load it with wood, light it up, and let it burn while you enjoy an amazing fire.”

While the Kazan leads the way, the Invicta line is still relatively new to the North

American market. “Invicta relies on its foundry and enameling, which enables it to offer a wide range of products and to bring new innovations in terms of design and technology,” Beaugard adds. “The Invicta foundry has state-of-the-art equipment that allows it to regularly develop new foundry parts. It also manages 100% of the manufacturing process in-house.”

While the survey is so new that results have not been fully analyzed, the ability of stoves to sustain a clean, low burn is near the top of user wants.

“With the media’s attention on the EPA’s tightening of standards in 2015 and again in 2020, it was inevitable that some consumers would start to pay more attention to emissions,” Neufeld explains. “Fewer consumers are looking for the melt-your-face high BTU output of past years, but instead focusing on aesthetics and efficiency. After all, few users of wood heaters run them on high output for more than just starting a fire and during reloads.”

On the topic of NSPS, Blaze King has made stoves well under 2.0 g/hr since 1984. “When test method M28 was revised to M28R, or in the case of the ATM [alternative test method] using cord wood, we found it necessary to make slight modifications,” Neufeld says. “These modifications allowed us to not only meet 2020 standards, but nearly all models certified below 1.0 g/hr. The actual physical changes would be considered proprietary.”

WITTUS-FIRE BY DESIGN

At Wittus-Fire by Design (Pound Ridge, New York), sales are up 24% over last year, with Patti Boker, PR

product spotlight



Regency Cascades F1500 small hybrid catalytic wood stove

be prepared for new 2020 regulations six years ago. The result is a family of Tru-Hybrid 2020 products that are exceptionally clean and efficient. “We took no shortcuts,” says Dave Kufahl, president. “While some companies are struggling to approve their old models, we added an entirely new lineup to go with our well-known names. All these Tru-Hybrid models are exceeding our expectations, and we will have three more by January.”

For those interested in the nuts and bolts behind Tru-Hybrid stoves, Kufahl explains the system works by having “a non-cat stove clean up the combustion in the firebox, and a combustion chamber above the baffle, followed by a catalytic treatment for the best performance levels in the industry. It’s clean and uber-efficient.”

Getting customers to care (and understand) is the job of HearthStone sales reps who communicate in person and via brochures. “Consumers care more these days as we get more conscious of our environment,” Kufahl says. “For our dealers, HearthStone has a ‘HeatLife’ poster available for showrooms to



The Enerzone Harmony from SBI International

and marketing, attributing the gain to a rise in home upgrades. “Business is booming,” she says. “Heating is one of the things that seems to be taking off as part of the big picture in upgrading new homes.”

Consumers continue to respond to The Shaker, a stove that remains a best-seller. Designed in a traditional “shaker furniture inspired style” with a contemporary flair, the stove joins Wittus’ Stack ceramic stoves from La Castellamonte, Italy, that have also gained in popularity, particularly among people looking for colorful, uplifting products.

“We are also excited about some new models that include the 600 and 700 wood-burning series with three versions—modular freestanding stoves, zero clearance built-in fireplaces, and traditional fireplace inserts,” Boker says. “In addition, wood cookstoves seem to be requested more often as a supplement to standard home appliances.”

Wittus’ stoves are mostly imported from Europe and made with high quality materials for people who want a combination of style and practicality. “People

want products that can function if the power goes out in a storm,” Boker says. “Wood-burning cookstoves are great in this situation. Wittus’ wood stoves are designed to burn very efficiently and have added special features like air wash systems to keep the glass clean, cool handles, and ash pans for easy cleanup.”

Wittus is currently testing Shaker and Stack stoves for 2020 emissions compliance. Boker confirms that The Shaker will incorporate a catalytic converter to meet the new standards, and will be ready in early 2021.

HEARTHSTONE

HearthStone (Morrisville, Vermont) made the commitment to



Shaker Stove from Wittus – Fire by Design



Stack Stove from Wittus – Fire by Design



The Archway 2300 by Empire Stove



The Boxer 24 (BX24) freestanding stove from Blaze King



The Kinderhook Pellet Stove (Hudson River Stove Works) from BAC Fireside Group

walk customers through their heating needs.”

Efficiency and environmentally friendly designs are important, but looks (as always) are crucial. “Smaller stoves with cleaner lines are growing in popularity,” Kufahl says. “Our Green Mountain line was designed with a new consumer in mind. Also, on the higher end, our Hase Bari is sold out through November. A small footprint and beautiful modern styling put it in a category of its own. It also has the Tru-Hybrid design.”

SBI-STOVE BUILDER INTERNATIONAL INC.

After a tough start to the year, SBI-Stove Builder International Inc. (Saint-Augustin, Quebec) experienced improved sales in July, and business remains robust. “It’s difficult to keep up with demand, and we are headed for a record year,” says Marc-Antoine Cantin, president.

In spite of positive sales, he remains cautious. “A second wave of COVID could bring unpleasant surprises,” he warns. “Production capacity can be an issue if we have COVID cases in the factory, or if people have to miss work because they have family members infected...there is still risk.”

Another factor is what Cantin calls the “2020 effect”—the result of a lot of non-2020 products on the market

in 2019. “Some dealers and distributors still had stock at the beginning of 2020,” he explains. “However, the vast majority of dealers and distributors are now squeaky clean. This has created a stronger demand for 2020-certified products. Since we have a complete portfolio of complying products, ranging from small to extra large, our lines represent a tremendous opportunity for distributors and dealers whose manufacturers have not been able to come up with a full range of compliant products.”

SBI’s 3.5 Series continues to do well and features the company’s “largest box” in the form of the Enerzone Solution 3.5 and Osburn 3500. “There are not many non-cat

stoves out there that are that big—a 3.5 cubic foot firebox,” Cantin says. “Second, this unit is extremely user-friendly. It’s easy to light, not draft-sensitive at all, and very powerful. It is also very clean at 1.32 g/h.”

While the DIY market is still strong, Cantin emphasizes the growing DIFM (Do-It-For-Me) market, which he contends is here to stay. And if dealers hope to maximize the phenomenon, they should offer “turnkey projects and excellent customer service, from research to installation to after-sale support—all of which will attract customers through word of mouth and reviews.”

BAC FIRESIDE GROUP

Aesthetics are always important when choosing a stove, but Jack Cohen, president of BAC Fireside Group (Hudson, New York and Raleigh, North Carolina) has an idea about what is mostly determining the choice to search for a new addition. “Fuel source is the biggest decision in today’s market to start the customer’s buying process,” he says. “Are they willing to put in the work to haul wood and load pellets to save on fuel costs? Or are they looking to

simply flip a switch to turn on their gas stove?”

Eighty percent of BAC’s stoves have already met 2020 regulations, with Cohen reporting “only a few SKUs that needed slight adjustments.” Once the regulators are satisfied, Cohen sees ease of use as persistent considerations. “Gas stoves are becoming more popular,” he says. “The simplification of turning on a stove by way of remote control, or a phone app, continues to improve—which is attractive to the younger generation.”

Ensuring maximum options by offering wood, pellet, and gas remains key to attracting customers and piquing interest when walking into a store. “Focusing on only one fuel will reduce the customer base,” Cohen says.

Clicking “stoves” on the BAC Fireside Group website yields more than 200 different models with a wide selection that dealers can rely on for maximum options. As one example, the Kube stove has classic clean lines, with a number of features such as side windows that fit neatly in the stones without a steel frame. The Kube stove is available with or without side windows, as well as in different heights. “Like all our stoves,” Cohen says, “the

product spotlight



INVICTA model
Nelson from Energy
Distribution 2015



HearthStone's Heritage Tru-Hybrid in Seafoam Enamel with a left-hand side door



The Osburn 3300 from
SBI International



Regency
Cascades
F2500 hybrid
catalytic
wood stove

door is made of high-quality cast iron, which makes it robust and durable.”

PACIFIC ENERGY FIREPLACE PRODUCTS

Current customer demand at Pacific Energy Fireplace Products (Duncan, British Columbia) is strong and Cory Iversen, vice president of sales and marketing, reports that it is showing no signs of slowing. As a 35-year veteran in the stove/fireplace industry, Iversen embraced the challenge of NSPS compliance early on. As a result, the company's current offerings of 2020-compliant, catalytic-free wood stoves, inserts, and fireplaces are resonating with customers.

out of style, and we try to keep this mantra in all our designs.”

When rumors of the new 2gr/hr. EPA emission standard first hit the industry, Pacific Energy tracked the new direction and immediately went to work. “Historically, particulate emissions that low were only obtainable with the addition of catalytic combustors,” Iversen says, “but current options continued to show significant drawbacks.”

Drawing from a history of innovation, Pacific Energy's engineering team embarked on a massive redesign journey touching all core brands to meet and exceed the proposed 2 gr./hr. emission standards—all without the aid of a catalytic converter. After significant

“Our entire solid fuel line was brought in line with the 2020 regulations, and we are very pleased to have not incorporated any catalytic combustors,” Iversen explains. “We find that simplicity and reliability are two design features that never go

investments in research and development, the company presented a completely re-engineered product lineup of “26 solid-fuel products, not including many color variations, to meet the EPA 2020 standards—all catalytic-free.”

HEARTH & HOME TECHNOLOGIES

The Vermont Castings Dauntless Wood stove from Hearth & Home Technologies (Lakeville, Minnesota) is getting positive reviews, with Ken Gross, brand marketing director at Quadra-Fire & Vermont Castings, attributing the reaction to many new features, including the optional cooking grill.

“Consumers also care about fuel source, fuel efficiency, self-cleaning, ease of use, burn time, and aesthetics,” Gross says. “Consumers want products that are easy to use, clean, and maintain while fitting the look they are after. Having a range of looks and styles in both cast iron and steel really makes the difference.”

Karen Smeltz, brand marketing

director at Harman & Vermont Castings, has seen pellet stove consumers, in particular, who are often trading up from a wood stove or older pellet unit. “Ease is a must and is expected with their upgraded purchase,” she says. “That is why Harman has always focused on the easiest user interface, lowest maintenance, and technology that guarantees accurate temperature control.”

The persistent theme of “efficient and clean heat” has been an obsession of the stove industry, no doubt bolstered by NSPS. With that in mind, Smeltz adds, “We tweaked where we needed to,

but spent our engineering time and energy making sure we got all our products certified to the new standards.”

Consumers care about the standards, but ultimately they want technology that is useful and suits their specific needs. Smeltz contends that Hearth & Home has been able to satisfy these demands with new features such as the Harman EASY Touch Control units with a Wireless Room Sensor as a standard feature. “We believe temperature accuracy is important and want every consumer to enjoy the precision and comfort of the sensor,” she says. “This was not a result of EPA 2020 testing, but it is an enhancement made this year.”

Hearth & Home developed the Quadra-Fire burn system the first time that the EPA regulated wood stoves. According to Gross, those regulations spurred “an incredible, clean non-catalytic system that far exceeded what was required and what others offered. That same system was used to get our wood stoves certified to 2020.” ■