

Michael Hewitt looks forward to **buying a talking fridge** to sort out his food and his love life. Cool!

# Cabinet talks



I'll be moving house in a couple of months. My current set of domestic appliances, however, probably won't be. Whenever I've tried transporting them in the past, most have developed some niggling fault within weeks of being installed in their

new location — they were probably pining for their old home, like many transplanted cats and dogs are wont to do. This means I'll be in the market for some new white goods: a fridge, for instance.

**I had been planning** on buying one of those massive American cabinet refrigerators. You know, the sort whose spare chiller compartment you can rent out as a bedsit to visiting Eskimos. But a story entitled "The Fridge with a Brain" in one of the Sunday papers caught my eye the other week. Apparently, a company called MediaCentre which is based in Friedrichshafen, Germany, has invented an artificial intelligence fridge which, when it goes on sale later this year, will be far cleverer than the artificial retard variety, yet will only cost about 30 percent more. It could be worth investigating.

On a basic level, the thing can hazard an educated guess as to whether or not your food bears you any potential ill will. It does this by reading the bar codes on all goods entering and leaving. So, for instance, if you attempt to take a swig from that milk carton you bought last June, an electronic voice will pipe up: "Trust me, you really don't want to do that". Likewise, senescent eggs can be outed before they cause any distress to visiting curates. And, using those same bar codes, the fridge will perform elementary stocktaking functions, advising you that you're running low on certain items, or that maybe you're overdoing it on others, such as the 24-packs of Tennent's Super.

**The intelligent fridge** really shows its mettle, though, where these artificial intelligence functions are allied to comms technology. If you link it to the internet and thence to one of the newly emerging breed of online supermarkets, like Tesco, you can have it automatically order replacement items as and when they run low. Or, if you have a penchant for certain hard-to-get, seasonal foods, the fridge will email your predilections to the store, which will then email back if and when the food is ever in stock.

Menu-planning also becomes easier. Let's say you're in Waitrose, sourcing the constituent elements of a Delia Smith-inspired opus. Do you already have what you need at home, or do you need to buy more? MediaCentre spokesman, Markus Wilks, explains: "You could use your mobile phone to call your fridge from the supermarket and ask it whether it has the ingredients available for the recipe you have in mind." This would be pretty impressive for a PC, but for a fridge, it is really going some. Inevitably, I suppose, you'll get the occasional, "Sorry, I can't talk at the moment — I'm defrosting", but that's a small price to pay for the ability to have an intelligent two-way conversation with a kitchen appliance.

**Even more impressive**, however, is the way in which this refrigerator can help spice up your love life. Markus Wilks, again: "You come home from work and the fridge will suggest a quick recipe for one person, if you're in a rush, or perhaps something more romantic if you are planning to entertain." And maybe some form of relationship counselling, too, if your cookery doesn't come up to expectations. Not that this is likely. If the

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refrigerator has been properly monitoring the hit rate of your candelabra-lit romantic encounters, it should have built up some sort of picture of your culinary (and amatory) limitations. So, if it thinks you really are the sort who is able to burn water at the drop of a saucepan, its door will remain resolutely shut should you attempt anything more complicated than a romantic beans on toast for two.

All technology has its downside, though, especially the cutting-edge stuff. As more people buy these high-tech refrigerators and get onto the internet, they will start to communicate not just with you and with supermarkets but with each other as well. And very soon, no doubt, as other kitchen appliances are endowed with the same sort of intelligence, with them, too.

Mike.hewitt@mjh1.demon.co.uk