

The Secret to Foodservice Design: Follow the Flow of Food

To kick off this column, I thought I would start by giving away the biggest, baddest secret to successful kitchen design. All right, it is right there in the title, but it is certainly worth repeating ... follow the flow of food. By this, I mean that the facility should be designed to handle the events that occur as part of food preparation in sequential order. It sounds simple, but you would be surprised to learn how many foodservice facilities (independent and chain establishments alike) are designed without keeping this key principle in mind. Now, let's look at how this concept is applied to the design of a kitchen.

One of the best ways to consider this approach is to identify a menu item and track its preparation methods. As an example, I will track the production methods for a grilled chicken breast sandwich. The first thing that occurs in the preparation of our sandwich is the delivery of the raw products. Located near the receiving door should be a dedicated receiving area so that the food products can be weighed and checked for quality. Once the product is accepted, it will have to be stored – the chicken in the cooler or freezer, the condiments and bread in dry storage. Already, through this example, we have established that the receiving and storage areas have a critical relationship and should be located adjacent to one another. In a typical design, it would be counterproductive to locate the receiving and storage areas on opposite sides of the facility.

Next, the chicken may have to be thawed, marinated, tenderized, trimmed, etc., depending on the state of the purchased product and desired preparation methods. Bottom line ... the chicken will require preparation work. Our exercise now reveals that the preparation area should be adjacent to the refrigerated and frozen storage areas. Once this work is completed, the chicken can go in one of two directions: back to refrigerated storage for later use or to the hot production area for cooking. You can see that our flow patterns are developing. The preparation area, if located in between the hot production and refrigerated storage areas will support both immediate and long-term production needs.

Continuing our exploration, let's assume that the chicken is grilled and the sandwich is assembled, dressed, and sides are provided in the hot production area. The sandwich, now ready to be served to the patron, is picked up by the server. Thus, the design of the pick-up area and its interface with hot (and cold in the case of other menu items) production is critical. The server should be able to get in and out of the kitchen without disrupting the cooking staff – a separation should exist by design so that the servers and cooks do not hinder one another's efforts.

Your famous grilled chicken sandwich is served and enjoyed by one and all. Now the table is cleared and all wares are dropped off in the ware washing area. The ware washing area, a key component of any kitchen operation, must be strategically located. With both the service staff and the kitchen staff requiring access, there are several critical relationships to consider when locating ware washing.

Ideally, the flow patterns of the service staff and kitchen staff should meet at the food pick-up and soiled drop-off areas, but should never cross. The servers require access to the pick-up and drop-off areas, the service and beverage areas, and the dining room. Likewise, the kitchen staff needs to have access to the storage, preparation, cooking, pick-up, and ware washing areas. Separation of the service and kitchen staff allows your employees to complete their tasks without the interruption that occurs when they are constantly bumping into one another. Additionally, when the service and kitchen employees cross paths, accidents, delayed service, and a greater potential for cross contamination and foodborne illness result.

Take a moment to review your facility and operation. Does your facility accommodate critical relationships established by the flow of food? Or, do your servers have to walk through the prep or production areas to access the ware washing area? Are your servers and kitchen employees able to move freely? Or, are they always engaged in "right of way" debates? When a facility is designed based on the flow of food, the quality of service, risk of cross

contamination, and employee morale all improve. If your facility utilizes this approach to design, you can attest to the results. If not, consider how you can improve the current configuration or operational procedures to better follow the flow of food.