

DISPLAY KITCHENS: A FEAST FOR THE EYES (PART I)

As you enter the dining room, fully anticipating a memorable dining experience, it is not long before your expectations are met. The individual showing you to your table marches you past an extraordinary display kitchen. Flames are flaring, chefs in custom uniforms are bustling about, and the aroma from the kitchen is enticing, to say the least. A true feast for the eyes.

Display kitchens are popular. If properly conceived, they can truly enhance your operation. If designed incorrectly, they can be a nightmare. Don't be fooled however, production in front of the guest has a unique set of requirements. Accommodations in cooking methods, as well as operational procedures, may be required in order to achieve the desired presentation. In this installment, we will look at some of the reasons display kitchens have grown in popularity. We will also look at some of the key factors one should consider when determining whether a display kitchen is the right choice for a particular operation. The next installment (Part II) will address some of the key planning issues related to display kitchens.

Display Kitchen Popularity

Today's dining public is far more sophisticated than ever before. The perceived quality, freshness, and presentation of the food are just as important as how the food tastes. In addition, the atmosphere within which the meal is consumed has a significant impact on the overall experience – either positive or negative.

Display kitchens, when properly utilized, can enhance the overall dining experience.

When food is prepared in full view of the guest, the perception of quality in food and preparation are increased. The guest subconsciously believes that the establishment is so proud of their product and preparation methods, that they are willing to put it out on display. Additionally, food preparation in front of the guest addresses one of the primary concerns of today's patrons ... food safety. Display kitchens offer the guest piece of mind with regards to safe food handling. The

guest believes that when food is prepared in full view, the culinary staff is more conscious of safe food handling practices. In my experience ... the approach works. Display kitchen staff is extremely conscious that their every moves are being watched, and they tend to take precautions that might not be taken in the back-of-house.

Another reason for the popularity of display kitchens, and one the reasons they have experienced tremendous growth, is the element of theater. Display kitchens offer a show for the patrons. It is a form of entertainment that can enhance the overall dining experience.

Factors to Consider

There are a variety of issues that must be considered when determining whether a display kitchen is the right choice for a particular operation. Many of these factors are unique to each individual facility, and can't be discuss in this column. We are going to focus on some of the global issues that affect every facility that is considering the inclusion of a display kitchen.

Display kitchens, by their nature, are in full view. Some of the functions that occur in a foodservice facility are not, shall we say, the most appetizing. I haven't seen too many display ware washing areas recently. The determination must be made as to which components should be in full view, and which components should be concealed. One of the gray areas is preparation (not the hot or cold lines, but the main preparation area). Keep in mind that the culinary team will need easy access to areas that are in full view, as well as those that are hidden. This requirement requires additional planning and coordination.

The aesthetic component is important in display kitchens. When designed properly, even the support equipment and configuration takes into account what the guest will see, and how it looks. Storage areas will have be concealed or kept neat. Built-in equipment may be more desirable than free-standing equipment so that a finished look is achieved. Both the operation and construction budgets can be impacted by decisions made to accommodate the aesthetic objectives.

Speaking of impact on budgets, the cost of the building, per square foot, is typically more expensive in the front-of-house, as opposed to the back-of-house. It is typically more expensive to provide a display kitchen in lieu of a concealed, back-of-house scenario. Display kitchens should be viewed as an investment. The question is ... what is the return on that investment?

Display kitchens often present opportunities for the culinary staff to interact with the guest. Such interaction, if desired, can have an impact on the operation for the life of the facility. The pool of potential employees can be significantly reduced based on this operational feature, as not every available employee is well suited to interact with the guest and convey the image you wish to convey. Don't get me wrong ... it is a fantastic opportunity. The long term impacts, however, should not be overlooked.

In Conclusion

To sum up, display kitchens provide an operation with a variety of unique opportunities. When designed properly, they can truly enhance the patron's experience. They do, however, come at a cost ... or should I say an *investment*. The return on that investment must be determined.