

Jackie Snaith and *Peter Pitham*, both members of the Foodservice Consultants Society International, explore the legal and practical considerations of installing theatre-style cooking stations in restaurants

On with the show

Restaurants and cafés featuring specially themed theatre-cooking stations appear within all sectors of the industry, including healthcare, education, business and industry and hotels.

In its basic form, theatre cooking is about cooking in front of the customer. This can be achieved by opening up the main cooking areas of the kitchen to the full or partial view of customers or by creating small specialist cooking bars within the dining area itself. Be aware, however, that there are areas of a working kitchen that are not suitable for public consumption, such as pan and dishwashing areas and raw meat prep areas, so be selective about what is on display.

Having the cooking process on view raises the customer's awareness that the food is being prepared using fresh ingredients – and freshness of produce and the manner in which it is prepared is important to today's health-conscious customers.

A skilled chef cooking with wok ranges, charrills or wood-burning ovens can create a dramatic experience for customers. It means the chef is on hand to explain the menu, advise on the content of the dishes, make recommendations, deal with complaints, take praise and be part of the selling and PR process. Additionally, they are on hand to replenish display counters or plate and garnish meals, which ensures high standards of presentation.

Certain equipment is associated with particular styles of food and can be used to emphasise a specific theme or create a focal point, such as pasta cookers and pizza ovens for an

Italian style or baking ovens and espresso machines for a deli, pâtisserie or Italian coffee bar.

A facility that caters for a range of customer requirements on a large scale might introduce several different themed theatre-cooking stations into its design, while a smaller venue might have to provide a varied and flexible menu structure within financial and space constraints.

Clever design and imaginative operation can create a theatre-cooking station that caters for all. The use of a range of versatile equipment which meets the needs of different styles of cooking and a menu which is flexible from day to day can allow a small-scale restaurant to have theatre cooking as a focal point of its service.

For instance, a wok range can facilitate styles of cooking including Oriental, Asian, Middle Eastern and Italian, while a charrill or griddle can cope with all those plus Tex-Mex, Asia Pacific, African and various European styles. A rôtisserie might be associated with French farmhouse cuisine, but can also be used for Middle Eastern, Oriental and various European styles, and a wood-burning oven can be use to create Moroccan

and Lebanese themes as well as pizzas, breads and pastries.

An induction hob works for various styles of cooking and can provide a great solution to creating a theatre-cooking station where space and services are limited, as it uses lower levels of power than conventional equipment. Due to the low heat output of induction hobs it is possible to reduce the levels of extract and supply for ventilation purposes. However, this is dependent on the type of cooking: dishes such as stir-fries can create a lot of smoke and, therefore, still require high levels of extraction.

ANCILLARY EQUIPMENT

Standards of hygiene and general working practices must be at the highest possible level if kitchen activities are to be on view to the customer. Essential equipment includes a hand-wash basin and towels – required by law in any area where food is being prepared – plus stainless-steel workbenches for preparation and setting down around the cooking equipment.

Sufficient low- and high-temperature refrigeration must be provided for storage of chilled ingredients directly adjacent to the cooking equipment. If chilled food is put on display, it must be held at the correct temperature and given adequate protection using partial or fully enclosed sneeze screens.

Heated storage should be provided for all dishes or plates to be used for serving and displaying the cooked food. Hot cupboards and plate dispensers should be located near the cooking or display area for ease of use. Where hot food is being



Above: Theatre cooking is a feature of the staff restaurant at the London headquarters of investment bank Dresdner Kleinwort Wasserstein, designed by HAA Coverpoint

Below left: A wok station makes up part of the hot counter at the London office of the Credit Suisse investment bank, whose facilities were designed by GWP





displayed it should be held in a counter designed to provide an all-round heat source of sufficient temperature to comply with food safety legislation.

General storage, in the form of stainless-steel cupboards, wall shelves and drawers, is required for the safe and hygienic storage of utensils, dry ingredients, pots, pans and cleaning equipment. This storage needs to be adjacent to the cooking area for ease of use. Localised specialist storage might be required for items associated with the cooking equipment, for example, water filters for combi-ovens or steamers, baking trays and paddles for pizza ovens, and roasting spits for rôtisseries. Space needs to be allocated for such items if the cooking station is to remain presentable and easy to clean.

Because theatre cooking is open to the customer areas, greater emphasis must be placed on certain aspects of legislation.

It's vital that the design and operation of a theatre-cooking station protects both staff and customers from any danger. The

equipment selected must meet with all necessary approvals, such as the CE mark and BS standards, be easy to maintain and clean, and be regularly serviced by suitably qualified engineers. Small details, such as ensuring that all glass used in the design of the equipment is toughened and/or laminated and that all stainless-steel equipment is free from sharp or rough edges, are all essential to create a safe working and eating environment.

RIGHT IMPRESSION

High standards of hygiene, working practices and personal cleanliness and the ability to work in a clean and tidy manner are important, not only to ensure compliance with regulations but also to create the right impression for the customer.

The space and equipment must be designed to assist staff in maintaining high standards. The right choice of finishes for walls, floor and ceiling will ensure that staff can clean effectively; and providing mobile equipment, wherever

practical, allows staff to gain access to all the hard-to-reach nooks and crannies for cleaning. Where it is impractical to provide mobile equipment it should be fully demountable or sealed to the walls and floors to stop any ingress of dirt or pests.

Ventilation system standards were developed to protect staff in commercial kitchens against risks associated with carbon monoxide, legionella and carcinogenic fumes. In a theatre-cooking environment you are also responsible for protecting the customer, so it is essential that the ventilation system meets the required standards.

The stainless-steel ventilation canopy can be integrated into the interior design of the facility by fabricating it into a special shape or particular colour. It is even possible in certain circumstances to build the ventilation system into the counter or cooking suite top and dispense with the canopy.

Theatre cooking where there is no physical barrier to the seating area of the restaurant can create concerns for the fire

authorities. Unlike traditional kitchens, where it is possible to provide a fire-rated wall and doors between it and the customers, we are opening up the space and treating it as one.

The fire officer might insist that localised fire enclosures such as fire-activated roller shutters are necessary around the cooking station to isolate it during an emergency, or they might be happy to accept the restaurant as a single fire compartment.

Installing chemical or water-based fire suppression into the ventilation canopy in order to give immediate coverage to the cooking equipment will often convince the fire officer that localised fire enclosures are not necessary. However, this is not guaranteed.

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