



Decent Exposure: Looking to build an exhibition kitchen? Take these tips from the experts or you may expose more than you mean to.

Exhibition kitchens bring the inside out, allowing customers to view traditionally secret back-of-the-house dynamics while dining in your restaurant. Overall, the movement toward open kitchens has been positive, creating excitement in the dining room and often among the cooks.

The arrangement has its down sides, however. When the back of the house actually is seen out front, the effort has to be made to ensure that it looks good. Piles of stained plastic crates, chefs yelling at cooks, the ugly oven that cooks so evenly . . . they've got to go. Equipment must be shiny and attractive, and, in addition, safety systems often have to be upgraded just so diners won't see or smell anything unpleasant.

"Form and function have got to be in a happy marriage," insists Walter Staib, president of Concepts by Staib Ltd., of Philadelphia. "You can't build a great ambience that isn't functional, and you can't build a kitchen that's entirely functional because that will look like a Walgreen's drugstore counter. You need harmony."

But how? Here are 10 principles of decent exposure suggested by three seasoned consultants:

Turn function into furniture. That stainless-steel worktable may function well, but it's a real eyesore. In open kitchens, cover all workspaces — from countertops to exhaust hoods — with copper, brass or ceramic tile, coordinating with the dining-room decor, suggests Anthony A. Abreau, a design consultant in Pinellas Park, Fla.



"For eye appeal, you need your equipment to look like pieces of furniture," he explains. "It lasts just as long, so the only downside is the initial expense."

Go faux. It may not be practical to actually use a potbelly stove in the year 2000, but that doesn't mean you can't have the look of one. Give standard modern ovens an old-fashioned facade, tying kitchen design into dining-room decor, suggests Thomas Galvin, president of

the Galvin Design Group of Winter Garden, Fla. Or buy colorful equipment. According to Staib, Garland offers a well-priced line of enamel stoves in such hues as cobalt blue. Check out other companies for different color choices and ideas.

Limit the theater. Consider opening only part of your kitchen to the public. "If the kitchen is entirely exposed, you can't have the kind of hourlies who would wear stained aprons or wipe their noses with their hands," notes Galvin. "You'll need a higher-priced person who is well groomed and knows what he's doing because he'll be putting on a show. Exhibition kitchens are theater, after all. If you're not willing to pay for higher-priced employees, open up only part of the kitchen and keep the rest away from customer view."

Be illuminated. Fluorescent lighting may be the most efficient for working and cleaning, but it can destroy an otherwise attractive display kitchen. "Use the lights to create drama," suggests Galvin. "Bounce light around to make the area like a theater." Kitchens at some Hard Rock Cafes, he says, "look almost amber due to lighting tricks. And putting shinier finishes on metal pieces helps create a richer look."

Galvin suggests that the lights even may help increase business. "If your kitchen is highlighted so it can be seen from the road, it will bring people in," he says. "People naturally flow from dark to light areas."

Stock up — or add a door. Incorporate the condiment station into the front counter so diners can see rows of attractively positioned ketchup, mustard and steak-sauce bottles, suggests Staib, adding that it's a good idea to build a beautiful beverage station into the design. However, if that's not practical, he notes, be careful to hide those bottles in the back-of-the-house. In addition, it's wise to have staffers enter through an unnoticed door. And if you do sneak the beverage station into the back-of-the-house, consider putting the point-of-sale terminals there, too. Some things are better done in private. Another discreet door might allow bussers access to the dishroom so they won't have to pass dirty plates over the same attractive counter from which servers take the plates en route to diners. "You need to figure out some way to penetrate the open kitchen to get into the back," Staib emphasizes.

Lose legs. Replace the standard 6-inch legs on kitchen equipment with curbs or bases of the same height. "With legs, the public can see the garbage and lettuce leaves that accumulate during the day," says design consultant Abreau, pointing out that curbs and bases hide all that.

As for casters, it depends on just how open your kitchen is, Galvin warns. If the kitchen is visible through a window, allowing cooks to be visible from the waist up, get all equipment on casters so pieces can be moved around as menu changes occur. If the entire kitchen juts out into the dining room, however, forget about that plan. "When a kitchen is in the dining room, everything has to be precise," he explains. "The casters may not line up exactly, and as guests look down, they'll see that things are sort of out of sync. Of course, you have to order your equipment much more carefully in that case," he stresses.

Emphasize activity. "You want movement, as much as you can get," Staib says. What moves? Open flames, spinning rotisseries, chefs stir-frying in woks. "Get the grill to face the customer so he's not looking at the cook's back," he suggests. "The more activity that's going on, the more your kitchen will excite people."

Do exhaustive research. No one cares much when standard kitchens get a bit smoky, but that's not the case with open ones. Smokiness and off odors simply should not be allowed to reach the dining room. If they do, that room will be empty night after night in no time at all. To guarantee fresh air, build the exhaust system at a minimum of 12 inches around the cooking area, Abreau insists. The traditional 6-inch perimeter is just too risky.

"If the heat goes into the dining room, the first couple of rows of tables will be unusable," Staib notes. "And be sure to put enough buffers into the system so customers won't hear a lot of noise. There is nothing worse than extractors that are so loud you can't hear yourself talk."

Turn on the water. Chemical fire-protection systems are fine when the back-of-the-house is really in the back. But when your kitchen is out front, it's best to install a water fire-protection system that can be turned off easily, Abreau suggests. The water systems emit a fine mist, he explains, which smothers the fire. In addition, you won't have to explain to customers what happens after chemicals rain on the kitchen.

Remember, (food) safety first. If you've got a dessert counter with an ice cream cabinet out front, remember to build in a dipping well with circulating water. "Where's the sink for the salad guy to wash his hands? Where's the equipment to wipe down the skillet?" Staib asks. "Work with the health department before the eleventh hour to make sure these necessities are built in."

When designing an open kitchen, you have to use the right finishes, the right equipment, the right lighting and the right ventilation, Galvin emphasizes. "You can't skimp at all on any costs, and the kitchen will cost much more than a traditional one. But you'll be able to dictate a higher price per plate if you get the right chef in there."