

Restaurant Equipment: Keeping It Safe, Efficient, and Profitable





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If your staff doesn't have the right tools, they can't do their jobs efficiently.

Whether it's getting a mandoline for your produce prep-work, organizing your walk-in, or replacing your constantly failing older oven, it's critical to provide the restaurant equipment your employees need to be efficient. It helps get dishes properly cleaned right the first time and give the guests a better experience. The right equipment also relieves a lot of headaches for your staff, keeps them happy, and keeps their effort optimized for your restaurant's profits.

In other words, the right restaurant equipment makes a world of difference, and nowhere more than in the kitchen. The heart of your operation, your restaurant's back of house is a treasure trove of options when it comes to deciding on, purchasing, and maintaining the equipment that will drive your revenue night after night.



When looking at the coolest upgrades, be sure to think about how they can contribute to efficiency.

So, where to begin?

While exploring new equipment for your restaurant kitchen can be exciting, resist the urge to go for the trendiest option or anything that doesn't answer a particular need. It's important to think of these purchases as long-term investments in your business, that you hope not to replace in just a few years. When looking at the coolest upgrades, be sure to think about how they can contribute to efficiency, food quality, service quality, and overall customer satisfaction.

And in terms of types of equipment, they can be looked at in terms of the three stages of your staff's work process: prep and storage, cooking, and cleaning. Each area is flush with appliances and tools that can improve your efficiency and service, but also can be a drain on your bottom line if not properly maintained.

In the following chapters, we'll look at each area one-by-one, starting with **Prep and Storage** — featuring your knives, slicers, can opener, refrigerators, and freezers.



Chapter

Prep and Storage

The decision about what restaurant equipment you'll use to prep and store food at your establishment can seem pretty simple — at least compared to all the choices involved in your actual cooking equipment.

However, there are many questions to ask when it comes to picking the right restaurant equipment and keeping it well-maintained over time. Are you choosing the right types of equipment for the food your staff is preparing? What restaurant equipment is the best investment for your kitchen and your overall bottom line? And how can you balance that with a sustained focus on safety and sanitation?

In terms of restaurant equipment for prep and storage, there are several key areas to address, from knives and slicers, can openers, and storage bins, to the biggest investment of them all: refrigerators and freezers.

Knives

What kinds of knives should I have?

Knives are arguably the most crucial tool in any kitchen, commercial or residential. Some of your cooks might bring their own knife kits to work, but you should still provide knives for your kitchen staff to use regardless.

A sharp knife is going to create more precise cuts, which will help your cooks avoid unnecessary prep waste.

There are a few specific kinds of knives you should have stocked to accommodate the different types of prep done for your menu. The chef knife is the main tool in your cook's arsenal, but paring knives are great for maneuvering small cuts. A boning knife is frequently used for protein prep, including deskinning fish and trimming off fat from beef. And a serrated knife is most often thought of for slicing bread, but it's also handy for slicing produce that bruises easily (like tomatoes).

Why is upkeep important?

It comes down to safety and precision. A sharp knife is going to create more precise cuts, which will help your cooks avoid unnecessary prep waste. A sharpened knife is also safer, believe it or not! When you get cut with a sharp knife, it does less damage to your hand than if you're cut with a dull knife.

Keeping (non-serrated) knives sharp means honing them on a honing steel at least a couple times a shift, and actually sharpening them only a couple times a year. Serrated knives are not honed at all and have to be specially sharpened

tooth-by-tooth so as not to wear down the many individual edges.

For these knives — or if you don't want to worry about sharpening your knives yourself — investigate options for getting them professionally sharpened. Be on the lookout in your area for cutlery shops, kitchen supply stores, and cooking class shops. Many of them even have sharpening services in-house.



Some restaurants and butchers also advertise sharpening services, but it's becoming more and more common to see businesses that only do knife sharpening. Rates vary, but the average kitchen knife can fall somewhere in the \$5-12 range per sharpening.

And one more tip: Consider sending them off to be worked on the day before you go on vacation or on a business trip and pick them up when you get back. That way, you don't have to worry about spending a couple days without one of your most trusted kitchen tools.



Also be aware that in many municipalities and organizations, wearing cut gloves is required when handling knives, but even for those where it is not required? A cut glove can offer a higher level of safety against cuts and nicks regardless of being officially required.

Slicers

Why are they a good addition to the kitchen?

If your menu has lots of sandwiches and other deli items, having a slicer for your meats and cheeses is essential. It allows you to order full cuts of meat and blocks of cheese instead of the more expensive pre-cut product.

Ordering full cuts of meat also keeps the product fresher for longer. The slicer also helps your cooks do more precise prep work, slicing the meat and cheese exactly the same thickness each time for consistent plating and cost management.

Along those lines, investing in a mandoline to uniformly slice vegetables can also help keep your produce prep running efficiently.

What should I look for in either new or used?

Buying used is an option for slicers, but if you're going to go with a used slicer, make sure it's gently used. And if you do buy a used slicer, it's probably a good idea to replace the blade with a brand new stainless steel one.

Investing in a mandoline to uniformly slice vegetables can also help keep your produce prep running efficiently.

No matter what kind of slicer you get, make sure to get one with a safety guard, since the slicer blades are incredibly sharp. The same goes for any mandoline you purchase for your kitchen workers. Safety must come first.

Why is upkeep important?

Cleaning your slicer properly is going to protect your meats and cheese from getting contaminated by leftover bacteria, which is critical to your kitchen's sanitation and avoiding the spread of foodborne illnesses. General ongoing maintenance is also important because a broken slicer can be far



more expensive to fix or replace than to keep maintained on a regular basis. A good rule of thumb is to carefully follow the instructions that come with the slicer. It should tell you the specific ways your slicer can be cleaned and any maintenance that needs to be periodically done.

Can Opener

What should I look for in a can opener?

It might seem like a no-brainer to just buy a can opener, but consumer can openers can cause a lot of strain — on the opener and on your staff's hands — when used on multiple cans or the much larger cans of product you'll find in professional kitchens. A heavy-duty restaurant can opener that attaches to your work table and uses a handle, can help avoid the strain of a consumer can opener. And when your cooks are opening several big cans of products as they prep the food for their shift, the professional can opener will be so much quicker. That being said, having a reliable handheld can opener on hand in case the other one breaks isn't a bad idea, either.

Why is upkeep important?

As with your prep tables and other restaurant equipment, make sure your team is wiping down and sanitizing your can opener as a regular part of their cleaning duties. Oftentimes the product from a can will splatter or drop on the can opener — or dirty the cutting blade — and you don't want cross contamination of old product with the next can you're going to open.

Plastic Storage

What types of plastic storage should a commercial kitchen use?

There are two types of plastic storage you'll commonly find in professional kitchens: polycarbonate and polypropylene.

You'll recognize polycarbonate because it's clear. These containers often have liquid volume measurements listed on the side, making them great for storing sauces and soups, among other items.

Polypropylene is white or translucent. The plastic is durable and stain resistant, but it's largely used for dry ingredients or prepared food. For instance, rolling storage bins for flour and grains are made out of polypropylene.

Why is upkeep important?

Both of these types of plastics are made to last, but they still need to be properly cleaned and sanitized in between uses. You don't want your products to become contaminated. This goes especially for any containers you use to prep raw meat. Just be sure to follow the specific cleaning and sanitizing instructions for your plastic storage products. If you have a question about what products are safe, contact the manufacturer.

Refrigerators/Freezers

What type is best for my restaurant?

In many ways, coolers and freezers are some of the most important restaurant equipment in your kitchen. They're a crucial part of maintaining your safety procedures as well as overall product quality. The type of refrigeration you invest in really depends on the size of your restaurant's food production.

If you have a large restaurant designed to serve lots of guests during any given shift, you should invest in both a walk-in cooler and walk-in freezer, provided you have enough ingredients to warrant that much space — and enough space to warrant the purchase.

If you have a smaller space serving fewer guests each shift (and a kitchen too small to install walk-ins), you can opt for a reach-in cooler and freezer. And if you use very few frozen ingredients, you can always have a larger cooler and a smaller freezer. Just make sure your reach-in is a commercial model designed to work in a professional restaurant; consumer refrigerators don't have the same space as those meant for pro use.



Be sure to follow the specific cleaning and sanitizing instructions for your plastic storage products.



If, say, your cooler breaks down in the middle of the day, your team can maybe take action to quickly use up what product you can and find an alternative cooling source for the rest. It will still slow down service and put stress on your staff, but there's some salvaging possible there.



What should I look for in either new or used?

While you might find a good deal on a gently used cooler and freezer, investing in a new modern unit could be well worth the money. For one, it starts you off on the right foot and you don't have to worry about a seemingly "gently used" unit, which could present problems for you sooner or later. In addition, modern models are designed to be more energy efficient, which will help not only conserve electricity, but also potentially help you keep your utility bills low.

Why is upkeep important?

A broken cooler or freezer can cost you — in more ways than one. First of course there's the actual cost of getting it fixed. And if it can't be fixed, the cost of getting it replaced. But a broken cooler or freezer also means all your most perishable ingredients are quickly in danger of being kept at an unsafe temperature.

But what happens if your cooler or freezer breaks in the middle of the night? You walk in the next morning to product that's been at unsafe temperatures for hours. You have no choice — you have to throw everything out. And while neighborhood power outages and other emergencies are largely out of your control, these breakdowns can be otherwise avoided if you keep up with proper maintenance.

Next up, we look at the literal heart of the kitchen — **your cooking equipment:** commercial ovens, ranges, fryers, and exhaust hoods.



Chapter

Cooking

Unless you're a completely raw food restaurant, your commercial kitchen will need cooking equipment. And depending on your menu, you might need several kinds of equipment to properly prepare your dishes. How do you choose the right commercial oven? Do you need multiple fryers? Are gas or electric appliances going to work better for you? There is no single right answer to these questions, because so much of your decision making comes down to the specific needs of your restaurant.

Here are some things to keep in mind as you choose commercial ovens, ranges, fryers, and exhaust hoods — the key equipment you need to get cooking in your restaurant.

Commercial Ovens

What kinds of ovens should I have?

While your restaurant will probably have at least one radiant (standard) commercial oven, there are a few different kinds of specialized commercial ovens on the market. Whether or not you invest in that specialized equipment comes down to your menu's needs:

Convection

Convection ovens are all about air circulation. Fans inside the oven circulate the air, helping avoid uneven temperature spots during cooking. This makes convection ovens especially good for breads and pastries.

Salamander

Like a broiler in a standard oven, the salamander (usually installed above the main oven for easy reach) is great for finishing meats, browning or caramelizing dishes, and melting cheese toppings. But salamanders get very hot very quickly, so chefs need to keep an eye on whatever item is placed inside to ensure it doesn't burn.



The advantage of buying a commercial oven new is that it's almost guaranteed to be more energy efficient.

Cook and Hold

Cook and hold ovens essentially do the job of a slow cooker and a warm box. At its low temperature, the slow nature of a cook and hold oven is good for roasting meat while avoiding shrinkage. It can also be used to proof doughs. If your menu features slow cooked items that need to be kept warm during service, this could be a good oven for your kitchen.

Conveyor

Conveyor ovens are probably going to be used the most in fast casual restaurants, especially sandwich-focused lunch places that need to toast and warm items quickly.

Depending on the use, conveyor ovens are powered by forced air, radiant heat, or infrared.

New or used?

The advantage of buying a commercial oven new is that it's almost guaranteed to be more energy efficient given current standards in the marketplace. Also, consider your need for a warranty. Setting up a warranty for any piece of new equipment, especially commercial ovens, provides a certain amount of protection for a certain amount of time. If you buy your commercial ovens used, you likely will not have that protective option.

Why is commercial oven upkeep important?

Unless you're a raw-only restaurant, cooking your items is a crucial part of your business. So if your ovens break, your whole kitchen is in trouble. Even one oven not working can throw off an entire shift.



And don't forget to maintain a regular cleaning regimen. A dirty oven is not only a food contamination issue, but it can also lure in pests or be a safety hazard.

Ranges

Gas or electric?

There's been a push in recent years for restaurants to move over to electric appliances, especially ranges. In some ways, it makes sense. Electric is generally more efficient. It also cooks more evenly. And electric also avoids both open flame and the gas itself, which reduces the likelihood of a fire or gas leak in your kitchen.

However, electric ranges have limitations that could cause huge problems for commercial kitchens. For one, electric ranges heat up very slowly, while a gas range springs to life with a turn of the knob. If you need to get a pot boiling for more pasta in the middle of the shift, for example, an electric range will be far too slow.

It's also much harder to precisely control the heat for an electric stovetop — once it gets hot, it'll stay hot for a while even if you turn it down. On the other hand, a gas range flame can be fine-tuned so you're getting just the right heat on the pan.

And as gas ranges are not electrical, they give you much more room to maneuver your menu in case of a power outage. Ultimately, while there are several types of electrical kitchen equipment that might benefit your business, it's a good idea to employ some gas appliances where it makes sense.

Electric ranges heat up very slowly, while a gas range springs to life with a turn of the knob.

Fryers

What should I look for?

There are many different sizes for commercial fryers in the restaurant industry. Choosing the right fryer for your business is really about what's on your menu. Chicken and fish can both change the flavor of the oil it cooks in (and then affect the food cooked in that oil after it). If you're planning to fry chicken or seafood, you'll need different vats for each type. If one of your items is frozen and then flash fried,



be sure to taste your fried food every day to determine whether your use lines up with the manufacturer's expectations.

Exhaust Hoods

What should I look for?

There are two kinds of exhaust hoods — grease and heat.

Grease exhaust hoods vent smoke, but they also collect grease and oil. Grease exhaust hoods need to be installed over cooking equipment like fryers, ranges, and griddles.



you'll need a larger vat so that the oil can recover more quickly from the dip in temperature.

The fryer you choose also depends on the quantity of fried items you go through in any given shift. For instance, if fries are the main side offered for all of your entrees, you'll need enough fryers to keep up with the demand.

Why is upkeep important?

Keeping your fryers clean is largely a safety concern. The potential for a grease fire in your kitchen gets way higher when there's a fryer involved. Along with safety concerns, having very old oil in your fryer isn't good for maintaining the clean taste of the food you're frying. That doesn't mean you have to change out the frying oil constantly — look to the owner's guide that comes with the fryer and it will tell you best practices for maintenance and cleaning. And then

Heat exhaust hoods vent fumes from high heat cooking equipment without needing grease collected. You'd likely install heat exhaust hoods over pizza ovens and convection ovens that won't give off a significant amount of smoke, but may produce steam and excess heat.

As you're researching, make sure to investigate the local municipal codes and ordinances for exhaust hoods in commercial



kitchens. For example, your exhaust hood should be large enough to fit all the equipment needing to be placed underneath it. That might mean purchasing an extra-long hood or multiple hoods to accommodate your other equipment.

Why is upkeep important?

Over time, oil, grease, and grime can collect in your exhaust system, forming a greasy sludge where bacteria grows. This build-up can potentially make its way into the food (a major sanitation and taste problem), and will make it harder for your exhaust to properly filter out smoke.

On top of that, grease buildup is a major fire hazard. Commercial exhaust hoods need to be cleaned by commercial cleaning professionals periodically, but also regularly cleaned and maintained in between those appointments. Always follow your hood model's instructions for how to do so. The life of your hood depends on it, as does the life of you and your employees!

Speaking of grease, our next chapter narrows in on the equipment your restaurant needs to keep service going hour-by-hour and night-after-night: cleaning equipment like commercial sinks, dishwashers, and other sanitation supplies.



Chapter

3

Cleaning

One of the most important elements to running a successful restaurant kitchen is food safety. Failed health inspections have serious consequences, pest infestations are a nightmare, and beyond that, you just don't want to expose your customers to foodborne illness. That's why you need to have the right cleaning regimen — as well as a combination of commercial kitchen sinks and dishwashers — to keep your kitchen up to code and your food safe.

Commercial Kitchen Sinks

What material should the sinks be made of?

The standard for commercial kitchen sinks is stainless steel. It's durable, easy to clean

and keep sanitized, and resistant to high temperatures. This is also why restaurant prep tables are made from stainless steel.

What types of commercial kitchen sinks should I have?

Scullery Sinks

A three-basin scullery is there to ensure all three steps of the cleaning process can be completed easily for your various plates, utensils, and pots. One end will be for washing, the middle will be for rinsing, and the last will be for sanitation. Having some kind of metal dishtable (either separate or part of the scullery sink) to put the clean dishes on is also important.

Also keep in mind that even if you decide to invest in a commercial dishwasher for your restaurant, you still need the scullery sinks. For one, your cooks might need to quickly clean a knife or pan on its own. They might not have the time to run a load in the machine when they can easily clean it by hand. The scullery sinks are also your back-up if your commercial dishwasher breaks down in the middle of a shift!



Prep Sinks

Prep sinks are all about preventing contamination. You don't want food prep done at the scullery sinks or handwashing stations, so this is where your cooks will go to perform prep tasks such as draining orzo, rinsing leeks, and scrubbing potatoes.

Some commercial kitchen sinks used for prep include drainboards — attached tabletops you can set items on — allowing any dripping water to flow into the sink instead of onto the floor.

Handwashing Stations

It's very important to have separate commercial kitchen sinks for handwashing, for prep, and for cleaning. Health codes require handwashing stations in professional kitchens, and they should be placed close to your work stations; if you put it at the far end of the kitchen, you cause extra steps and time for your chefs away from their work area when they need to clean their hands during their shifts.

Make sure to check your local health codes so you're following all the rules to the letter when it comes to this station and how many handwashing stations there should be in your kitchen.

Bar Rinse Sinks

If you have a bar in your restaurant, you'll need an underbar sink system. Fitting underneath your bar countertop, these sinks allow your bartenders to easily wash glassware, rinse off dirty glasses before sending them to your back-of-house dishwasher, and get rid of any overpour while making drinks. Depending on the size of your restaurant and bar, you could have one underbar basin or several. You might also look into a model with an ice bin area and drainboards.

If your restaurant specializes in beers, you might consider investing in a star sink. This is the glass rinser you'll see bartenders use right before pouring beer; the glass is flipped upside down and a mist covers the inside of the glass for a couple seconds. This is used for beer glasses because it cools down a freshly cleaned glass and gives the bartender a cleaner, more even pour.

Dishwasher Machines

Door Dishwashers

A very popular type of commercial dishwasher, the door model has a level that lifts up the doors of the washer so you can slide the racks of dishes in. Then pull down on the lever to close the doors and start the wash cycle. Door dishwashers are usually paired with dishtables at both sides of the dishwasher to make it easy to organize the line of racks.



Undercounter Dishwashers

If you're lacking the kitchen space for a full door dishwasher, an undercounter dishwasher is a more compact unit that is still appropriate for commercial use. If you have a smaller kitchen (or a restaurant with less table turns, thus using less dishes), then an undercounter model could be the right cleaning appliance for you.

Conveyor Dishwashers

On the other end of the spectrum is the conveyor model. Like the name implies, the conveyor dishwasher uses a conveyor belt to move dirty dishes through without

having to start and stop the process to switch out racks. This is best used for cafeterias, banquet halls, and other spaces that go through a large number of dishes every shift.

Glasswashers

Glasswashers, as the name suggests, are specifically for glassware. They have a low-pressure spray compared to other washers in order to minimize glasses breaking. If your restaurant features wine glasses and other more delicate glassware, this could be a good investment.

But why does my restaurant need a dishwasher?

A big reason to buy a commercial dishwasher for your restaurant is efficiency. Washing dishes by hand takes time, and it's so easy for dishes to pile up during your busiest shift. You need to hire more dishwasher employees to keep up the same workload.

But washing dirty dishes, utensils, and glasses by hand isn't just time consuming. Not only do piles of ignored dirty dishes make your kitchen unorganized and potentially risk you running out of clean dishes, but they're also a serious sanitation issue. Dirty plates mean leftover food particles, and leftover food particles attract pests.

Plus, when your dishwasher employees are rushing to get all your dishes cleaned by hand, it's much more likely that those dishes won't get properly scrubbed and sanitized. It's pretty unappetizing for a guest to be served their entree on a plate with crusty food bits still on the edge.

Investing in a dishwashing machine might streamline the cleaning process and allow you to have less dishwasher employees for any given shift, but that doesn't mean you can bypass hiring dishwashers. Dishwashers (the person, not the machine) are the ones to properly scrape off any food and spray them, organize and run the dishwashing machine, and neatly put away the clean dishes. For a busy kitchen, that's a busy job and it's a mistake to leave those tasks for your servers or cooks to get around to.

Sanitizing Products

What do I use sanitizer for?

Sanitizer is not just for your dishwasher or your commercial kitchen sinks. Your cooks will also use sanitizing solution to periodically wipe down their prep areas and their cooking stations. While cleaning surfaces with soap and water gets rid of any leftover food particles, sanitizing combats unsafe pathogens that may still remain and fester on those surfaces.

Your kitchen should have special separate containers specifically for your cleaner solution and your sanitizing solution.

Your kitchen staff should get used to cleaning and sanitizing every few hours — and in fact, have a proscribed schedule per shift to make sure it gets done — but also whenever switching from one task to another to avoid contamination.

The most obvious example is finishing cutting raw chicken and then moving on to prepping vegetables for the salad. You must completely sanitize the area before you work on the produce.



What kinds of sanitizer should I get?

Most kitchen sanitizers are either iodine solution, quats (quaternary ammonium compounds), or chlorine-based. No matter what kind of solution you choose, make sure to carefully read the instructions on how to use it and any hazards. Your employees will be in direct contact with these chemicals and you want to ensure their safety.



Conclusion

Is your equipment actually costing you money?

Environmental sustainability is one of the top trends in the restaurant industry today, extending from menu planning to operations. But it's about more than being green. Inefficient energy use when dealing with electric and other utility bills is a hidden cost for your restaurant, and not an insubstantial one.

Your equipment could be significantly driving up your costs without you even knowing. Many older appliances and kitchen equipment use up larger amounts of energy than the newest models available today in the market that are rated by manufacturers for their energy efficiency.

What can you do with those older models to make them more efficient? Should you upgrade? How can you make these changes on your budget? There are four possible paths to take to maintain efficiency and keep your costs low.

1. Cut down your appliance idle time.

So much of the energy used in kitchens come specifically from your appliances just being on. You'll probably need most of your equipment on throughout service hours, but chances are, you don't need all



of your appliances turned on for all hours of your shift — particularly during kitchen prep work and end of shift clean-up. By assembling a plan for startup/shutdown of all equipment (excluding refrigeration, of course), you can ensure your equipment is only on standby for shorts amount of time, saving energy and money.

Discuss any changes with both managers and chefs alike to coordinate the best times to turn equipment on and off for the day. Your entire kitchen staff should be trained to follow the plan. If you really want to consistently reduce your energy use, stress the importance of conserving energy to your staff by integrating it fully into your training plan.

2. Keep up maintenance on current equipment.

Consistent, planned maintenance can help prevent a variety of problems, including wasted energy issues. For instance, an

ill-maintained fryer won't cook food properly while still using up more electricity, which means lower food quality, slower cook times, and higher energy bills.

Take care of repairs as soon as possible. While it might be tempting to ignore faulty and broken equipment or leaky pipes whose repairs don't seem necessary to handle right away, even a brief delay can lead to more damage and much larger utility costs that ultimately outweigh the cost of repairing the damage immediately.

3. Retrofit your old equipment.

If you're hesitant about changing out your older, but still well maintained, equipment models for brand new ones, there are still ways for you to upgrade parts of them to be more energy efficient. Some kitchen retrofittings can be lighter on your budget, and can also make a difference on your bills.





4. Invest in energy-efficient equipment.

While retrofitting can work for some situations, sometimes an older piece of equipment is so old — or just sucking up so much energy — that it just simply needs to be replaced.

It's an investment that can really pay off in the long run— saving you from 10 to 70 percent by replacing outdated ovens and equipment with energy-efficient equipment.¹

But it's not just ovens, fryers, and other cooking equipment that you should evaluate for energy-efficient replacement. Heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems make up nearly a third of the energy bills for an average restaurant. Modern manufacturers have developed energy-efficient exhaust hood and HVAC options specifically for the restaurant industry.

Investing in these innovations and replacing your old units can mean major savings down the road — protecting your profit and promoting efficiency for your restaurant.

Endnotes

“ENERGY STAR for Small Business: Restaurants” – Energystar.gov



“Any place can help build a restaurant the way they want it, but I want to build my restaurant the way I want it ... and Rewards Network played a big role in that. They helped me buy new equipment, new tables, new chairs, and a new stove.”

— David Dashi, Chef /Owner
Amici's Italian Restaurant, Melbourne, FL
Rewards Network client since 2014

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