

## KITCHEN EQUIPMENT



GASPRETT HOWLAND

Form and function coexist in the kitchen of Single Thread in Healdsburg, California.

## The Art of Kitchen Design for Restaurants

DESIGNING A RESTAURANT CAN BE LIKE PLANNING A WEDDING; PUTTING THE NEEDS OF OTHERS BEFORE YOUR OWN CAN CREATE A LOGISTICAL NIGHTMARE. HERE'S HOW THE PROS MAINTAIN THE DELICATE BALANCE OF FORM, FUNCTION, AND FEASIBILITY.

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Stick six chefs into a room to plot the perfect kitchen and prepare to watch the budget blown before you even hit the essentials. But it's not the pipe dreams of a flashy \$17,000 combi oven or blast chiller that delivers the biggest hit.

"Most of the money that people spend, you can't see," says Jimi Yui, a James Beard Award-winning designer and founding principal of YuiDesign in New York who has designed kitchens for everyone from Thomas Keller to Masaharu Morimoto. "You spend \$1 million or \$10 million, and the biggest chunk of that expenditure are things behind walls, electrical, plumbing—nothing to do with what the public cares about. That's where a lot of projects struggle, because the cost of the interior finishes that you touch—the furniture, fixtures, and kitchen equipment—is a relatively small part of the budget."

No matter if a concept is starting from scratch or taking over an existing space, designing a kitchen is a delicate exercise in achieving balance. Beyond overcoming the obvious infrastructural challenges like intrusive beams, walls, and space limitations, anything and everything can pose a new set of pricey obstacles. That's where kitchen designers become every operator's best friend, navigating the logistical challenges that keep the kitchen flowing through the hectic daily grind and meeting building codes and space constraints—all while sticking to that pesky little thing called a budget.

"Depending on how you manage the infrastructure, recognizing the cost of the mechanical plumbing systems is really impacted by that decision. Which is why, when you go to a restaurant, you wonder why the interior package is so sparse. How did they wind up with cheap chairs? How did they wind up with painted walls with no direction? It's because they ran out of money before they got there," Yui says.

What's the best way to triage a logistical headache? Start with a solid concept, designers say. A pizzaria determined to churn out wood oven-fired pizzas might need to scout a location that can handle the ventilation and building code requirements of a wood-burning oven. If a duct system is too low, for example, it can add a costly obstacle for exhaust systems.

Open kitchens can be a pricier expenditure than one hidden away, making sure that functionality matches a stunning front-of-the-house interior. Customers might see a slice of the behind-the-scenes action, but those pragmatic theatrics shouldn't include the less savory back-of-the-house aspects like cleaning dishes or processing receivables.

"Operators should be certain they are considering their product and its operational and service needs thoroughly for a designer to be as helpful as possible," says Kristina O'Neal, a principal at James Beard Award-winning design and hospitality firm AvroKo in New York, which has designed concepts from Chicago hotel restaurant Somerset to Denver food hall Denver Union Station. "A good designer will also be able to help an operator spend where there will be the most impact. This can shift drastically based on region, concept, and space."

After figuring out the nonnegotiables, it's time to settle on a location. When Yui steps into a new space, he's already looking for the back door. Weird geometry can be tackled with crafty solutions, but if the back door is misplaced for receivables or the freight elevator is a mile away from the kitchen, the project is already a nonstarter.

For The Blue Box Cafe, a tiny standalone island restaurant centered on the fourth floor of luxury jeweler Tiffany & Co.'s flagship New York location, Yui had to figure out how to position a busy, functional open kitchen within the delicate retail location. The solution: Two kitchens and a freight elevator. The freight elevator sends items from the hidden prep kitchen to the island where chefs can finish the plate and serve.

Maintaining the zen of an open kitchen proved less of a problem than unwise initial investments for award-winning independent designer and restaurateur Demian Repucci, who designed his own New York City restaurant, Bruno. Repucci made the costly mistake of losing focus of his original vision after seeking the advice of his opening chefs, who encouraged the purchase of a combi oven to help with labor that proved ultimately unnecessary for the pizzeria concept.

"I wanted to be a good operator and give a team what they need and the resources to do good stuff, but I made the mistake of letting my original concept come unfocused," Repucci says. "So, I was trying to think, 'How am I going to find the funds for the Pacojet or the space to get the combi oven in?' When all was said and done, the original team left or were fired, and then I went back to the original concept. It was like, why did I waste that time and money allowing all these people weigh in?"

Even if a piece of equipment is priced for peanuts, the long-term expenses and time commitment can add up. Repucci spent nearly a year jumping through hoops and navigating through city departments to meet frequently changing requirements for a wood-burning oven at Bruno.

A perfect location that houses such an oven and stays up to code still requires other considerations, like where to buy and store wood, not to mention the labor issues of finding talent capable of operating it. Yui says the handful of projects he's overseeing at a new Hudson Yards development in New York City all wanted to incorporate wood-burning ovens, and after assessing all the logistics and costs, every single client pulled out of the equipment investment.

"You really need to think through as far in advance of what your concept is and what is going to work with your concept and reinforce your concept, and don't let a bunch of voices water that down," Repucci says. "It happens with wedding planning, too. Everyone tells you what you need and then it turns into something that you didn't envision and is way more than what you wanted."

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