

## Restaurant Display Cooking Trends

### *Enhancing the Overall Dining Experience*

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Open display kitchens in restaurants continue to gain prominence not only because they offer a way to express a restaurant's concept, but they also attract the customer's interest in the cooking process. We can likely thank the popularity of the Food Network and local television cooking programs for this trend that provides an entertaining element to the overall dining out experience.

#### Display Kitchen Popularity

Often the idea of an open kitchen or display kitchen is categorized as a trend in kitchen design. In fact, it is a trend in restaurant concepts. And by "restaurants" we mean almost every location where customers gather to select and enjoy food; therefore traditional restaurants, food courts and institutional venues are all included.

So what inspires the decision to use an open or display kitchen? In many cases, the concept is motivated by the increased customer demand for fresh preparation. When food is prepared in full view of the guest, the perception of quality ingredients and made-to-order freshness is greatly increased. The guest subconsciously believes that the establishment is so proud of its food products and preparation methods that it is willing to put them on display.

Food preparation in front of the guest also addresses one of the primary concerns of today's patrons – food safety. Display kitchens offer the guest peace of mind regarding 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. Employees are more conscious that their

every move is being watched, and they tend to take precautions that might not always be taken in the back-of-the-house.

Another reason display kitchens have experienced tremendous growth is the element of "theater" they provide. Display kitchens offer a show for the patrons. It is a form of entertainment that can add to the overall dining experience.

Display kitchens are popular with guests for three main reasons:

- ★ They provide a certain level of action and entertainment. People tend to be more comfortable where there is activity and display kitchens offer the sizzle of the steak and the flame of a grill.
- ★ Guests like to know where their food is coming from; having the kitchen open says the restaurant has nothing to hide;
- ★ Food consumed away from home is not just about eating it's often more about a whole experience and an open display kitchen offers both entertainment and a culinary experience.



#### The Blue Flame Takes Center Stage

There is no doubt the "wow factor" of an open display kitchen can be a vital part of a restaurant's overall appeal. Using natural gas equipment in that venue can be a key ingredient in adding to that "wow". The highly visible blue flame shows that things are really cooking – patrons can see the energy as they watch the cooking process.

Many pieces of natural gas equipment can be easily adapted to a display kitchen. Some look better than others or provide a cooking process that is especially

pleasing to watch. A few of the natural gas equipment types that tend to be ideally suited for exhibition cooking include: pizza ovens, rotisseries, ranges and island suites.

★ **Pizza Ovens** – While it may look like wood is the fuel source, an increasing number of pizza ovens are gas-fired. Real wood ovens are becoming less popular largely because of increased fire and exhaust emissions regulations. Most “wood-burning” style gas pizza ovens are dome shaped and typically have a massive stone hearth, firebrick sides and can weigh as much as 3,000 pounds. The bulk of stone and brick is the key to the oven’s most important feature – its ability to store heat. Recovery time when doing high volume is generally not an issue. The ovens are also surprisingly energy-efficient with sizes available to fit most any situation.

★ **Rotisseries** – There may be no better way to merchandise many menu items than with a gas-fired rotisserie. The aromas and the eye-catching array of succulent foods rotating on spits as they cook is simply irresistible. Whole chicken is by far the most popular rotisserie cooked food today, however, manufacturers are now promoting other foods to broaden the use of gas rotisseries. In addition to the typical skewer spit, some equipment makers produce several types of baskets and other devices to hold various products. For example, several manufacturers make narrow baking pan attachments and promote the baking of pastas and casseroles in the rotisserie. Others have baskets to hold items such as fish and vegetables. On many models of gas rotisseries you can merchandise several products simultaneously.

★ **Ranges and Island Suites** – Ranges of all sorts can be used in a display kitchen lineup. Some units look better than others and the way the cook line is arranged will greatly affect appearance. Island range suites make an especially attractive cooking display if you have the necessary space. These cooking batteries have only recently made an impact on the American dining scene but will become more popular in coming years. The great thing about an island cooking arrangement is that it merchandises well, and when operated properly with trained staff, can help put on a tremendous show.

An island suite is essentially a two-sided equipment battery with every needed cooking appliance mated together in one piece without walls or tall range flues between. The functional advantage of this arrangement is that it allows food product to be passed around the battery during the cooking process. Chefs can communicate back and forth better than in

the traditional line cooking battery.

Just about every type of cooking equipment can be built into a gas-fired island range suite including open burners, fryers, griddles and broilers. Even the ever so versatile gas salamander can be fitted exactly where needed for a particular menu. These special suites are custom made, which explains the higher cost over a traditional range lineup. Island suites are also more costly because they often incorporate special finishes such as brass trim, side rails, or other features to provide an impressive appearance.

## Show or No Show

Some of the functions that occur in a foodservice facility are not the most appetizing. Have you seen many restaurants displaying their warewashing areas recently? Since display kitchens are in full view, the determination must be made as to which components and processes should be in full view and which should be concealed. One of these “grey” areas is preparation – not the hot or cold lines, but the main prep area. It is important to keep in mind that the kitchen staff will need easy access to areas that are in full view as well as those that are hidden behind the scenes. This requires additional planning and coordination.

The aesthetic component is especially important in display kitchens. To design properly, the configuration of the main equipment and even the support equipment must take into account what the guest will see and how it looks. In some designs, built-in equipment may be more desirable than free-standing equipment so that a more finished look is achieved.

When selecting display cooking equipment of any type, there is a wide range of costs. Even if your budget is small, there are options that can enhance your restaurant and the food you are trying to sell. Check with your local equipment supplier to determine the best scenario for your establishment.

Incorporating a display kitchen into your restaurant can provide you with a variety of unique opportunities. This is an investment in your restaurant’s future, and when designed properly, it can truly enhance your guest’s experience. Including natural gas equipment into that mix will not only make the entertainment more visually enjoyable for your customers, but also with the lower operating costs of gas equipment it will provide a better bottom line for you!

*To learn more about how natural gas can put on a show and benefit your foodservice operation, visit the Gas Foodservice Equipment Network website at [www.gfen.com](http://www.gfen.com).*

