



Five Culinary Cleaning Issues to Avoid

Maintenance missteps can cause serious issues in commercial kitchens

By Erin Brereton



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With the risk of trips, drips, and the chance of things catching on fire, commercial kitchens can be a hazardous place to work—and a challenging area to maintain.

“Without a question, commercial kitchens are one of, if not *the*, most difficult spaces to clean,” says James Epperson, owner of Texas-based commercial vent hood, daily and periodic kitchen cleaning provider Halo Restoration Services. “It requires a specific skill set.”

Mistakes can be costly. For example, scratch or discolor a US\$2,000 fryer that you didn’t realize was partially made of aluminum, instead of stainless steel, and you could face a \$1,000 repair bill.

Fail to disinfect a surface, and diners’ health could be at risk. Research from the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) indicates foodborne illnesses cost the United States an estimated \$14 billion a year, and according to the 2014 Surveillance Report

from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than half of those outbreaks stem from food prepared in restaurants.

Kitchen Concerns

Commercial food preparation can involve workers moving at a frenetic pace, sometimes from early morning until late at night. Workers may easily overlook spattered ingredients, oily residue, and other issues.

Because food prep workers are focused on getting dishes fully cooked in time to be packaged or served, it’s the cleaning team’s responsibility to identify and defuse hazards that can cause significant damage and expense, such as:

1. Using the wrong chemicals and cleaning methods. With contamination threats like listeria—a bacterium the CDC estimates causes approximately 1,600 illnesses and 260 deaths

annually in the United States—effective kitchen disinfecting is crucial.

As a result, some cleaning professionals reach for strong chemicals. However, if surfaces aren't properly rinsed off, chemical residue can be transferred to food, giving diners stomach issues, according to Joseph Moreno, corporate advisor for the 9,000-franchisee commercial cleaning company Jani-King.

"Harsh chemicals like bleach will kill contaminants, but can get transferred from stainless steel to food products," Moreno says. "I'd recommend a neutral cleaner with enzymes in it that's biodegradable."

Other problems can occur if staff does not clean kitchen equipment often enough—for example, wear in a commercial oven that wasn't properly maintained, according to Keith Turner, vice president of support and technical services at commercial kitchen cleaning provider HOODZ.

"Little pieces of oven parts that have broken and fallen off can end up in food products," Turner says. "Customers can bite into things and need to have dentistry work done."

In addition, he says layers of grease and carbon that accumulate inside an oven over time can alter its temperature.

"Black carbon absorbs a lot of heat," Turner says, "which takes away from the cookability of the product."

To avoid issues: Jani-King confirms approved cleaning practices and products with manufacturers, particularly for new kitchen jobs; its cleaning professionals also refer to a detailed checklist during each shift.

"Just like anything else, it's repetition; when you're doing it night after night, you tend to forget things," Moreno says. "We teach [staff] to go back through to make sure every aspect has been touched."

If issues arise, a checklist can also provide a record of when specific items were cleaned.

"Bacteria will grow within a matter of hours," Moreno says. "If an inspector says some stainless steel has been contaminated—but at 11 last night, it was clean—we can't really be responsible at 11 a.m. since the kitchen has already been used."

2. Grease buildup. High temperatures can cause grease to liquefy, leak back down the vent, and contaminate food being prepared below, according to Moreno.

If it builds up on the hood's fan, which is meant to draw out smoke and heat, the motor can burn out, according to Michael Bunga, owner of Austin, TX-based commercial kitchen cleaning provider Pro Hood Cleaning—causing \$200 to \$400 in repair costs.

Grease can also trigger both a fire and the kitchen's fire suppression system, Moreno says, once it reaches a certain temperature.

"A flash fire could put you out of business, not including what it costs to recharge the fire suppression system," he says. "It could be 24 to 72 hours before you're open again."

Rooftop grease spills, with the potential byproduct of grease getting into the ductwork and exiting via the roof exhaust fan, can also cause serious damage.

"A lot of times we find extensive damage from grease eating away the membranes of the roof," Turner says. "In a number of cases, the restaurant has to replace the roof, it's gotten so bad."

To avoid issues: Bunga usually quotes three-month hood cleaning intervals. However, he says restaurants that don't do much cooking, such as ones that primarily serve salads, may be able to stretch that time to six months.

Encouraging kitchen staff to remove and rinse filters nightly can also help reduce fire risk. "Cooks may wait until the hood system is cooled down in the morning, then come in, forget all about it," Bunga says. "[But] some take my advice and run them through the dishwasher."

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