A kitchen by any other name may not smell as sweet in the long run

By Foster Frable Jr.
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When planning new or renovated foodservice facilities, operators and designers often distinguish between kitchen types. Thos distinctions can affect construction costs, code compliance and, most important, the usefulness of a given foodservice area.

The term "production" or "service" kitchen normally assumes full food preparation and service. A typical kitchen includes cold food storage, a prep area with at least one sink, full cooking capability – usually with a hood and fire protection – and a clean-up area that has a three-compartment sink or dishwasher and a single scraping sink, when permitted by local codes. A full kitchen generates substantial amounts of wet garbage and trash if one assumes that some of the ingredients need to be peeled, trimmed and cleaned.

Production-kitchen cooking equipment often includes ranges, gas ovens, fryers, griddles and similar finishing equipment that operates at high temperatures and produces substantial heat, grease, odor and other products of combustion. Reference to a finishing or satellite kitchen usually assumes that food has been prepared else-where and is just warmed, reheated and plated in that area. Food warming usually takes place between 200 and 300 degrees, versus cooking, which can be at 400 to 500 degrees. A finishing or warming kitchen can use electric heated ovens and warmers, which in many areas do not require a rated grease hood or fire protection system. Warming food that's cooked in another facility utilizes an enclosed box or cavity like an oven that doesn't produce much external grease or heat.

Producing grease is the key distinction between cooking and warming. When grease is produced, an operator will be required to have a commercial grease hood, fire protection and a substantial grease trap. Those three items can add $15,000 to $20,000 or more to the cost of a kitchen, not including the impact on the building's basic mechanical systems for exhaust ducts and fans. Finishing or warming kitchen equipment may include small electric ovens, toasters, sandwich grills, microwaves, low-wattage portable electric burners and small, countertop steam kettles or soup warmers.

Hotels and conference centers often use finishing kitchens for final service or remote meeting, conference and banquet areas. School districts whose central kitchens ship warm or chilled prepared food to individual schools' remote facilities for reheating or finishing also use them. In the last 20 years we have seen many foodservice systems move into a centralized mode for cooking centrally and rethermalization locally. That has introduced a wide range of electric ovens, rethermalizers and other warming systems to those facilities. Many such systems weren't even available 30 years ago, when the majority of the codes currently affecting commercial foodservice first were adopted.

In a finishing kitchen, ware washing may occur on site with plates cleaned and stored in the kitchen, or they may be returned with empty food containers to be washed and

sanitized at the central production kitchen or commissary. Finishing kitchens still produce trash and garbage but usually at a lower volume than that of a production kitchen.

Code compliance has a great deal of impact on deciding what to call a kitchen. Savvy fire marshals and health code officials often know that owners and operators tend to change menus and operating practices on a regular basis. The countertop oven purchased just to bake cookies and brownies may be used the following year to bake chickens or pizza, producing grease and heat, even with and enclosed oven. Local code officials increasingly are subscribing to the philosophy that if food is heated and proportioned in a space, it is considered a kitchen even if the floor plan or permit application calls it a pantry or finishing kitchen. Hoods, fire protection, grease traps and so on are required in order to secure an operating or building permit.

New ventilation and air-quality codes are coming on line in many areas that require hoods over all equipment or a certain BTU or wattage, meaning even larger toasters and sandwich grills, and most electric ovens need to be installed under an exhaust hood. In those areas there is little or no distinction in code compliance between the full and finishing kitchen classifications.

Owners who are able to cheat the codes and put finishing ovens, warmers or toaster units into an area and call it a pantry may find that in doing so they create serious odor issues in nearby offices and public spaces, particularly when food accidentally is overheated or burned. Grease-laden air from sandwich grills, small kettles, and finishing ovens or salamanders stains ceiling. When the air-conditioning systems pick up the air, the grease moves downstream, clogging air filters and leaving a greasy film on glass partitions and windows.

Eliminating a grease trap doesn't stop someone from pouring leftover grease from the bottom of a pan brought from another kitchen where food was cooked into another kitchen's sink. Given enough time, you could clog a building's main sewer pipes, creating a messy backup that would force the closure of the whole business.

In planning any foodservice facility, a savvy operator needs to look into the future and consider the likelihood that the way food is processed now may change significantly over the next 10 to 20 years. Items like hoods and grease traps can cost three times more to install than when they are included with original construction or renovation. Therefore, if you think you might expand the types of preparations or menus you now are offering, calling your kitchen a pantry or a finishing kitchen really won't ensure the long-term savings or value you are trying to achieve.