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PULSES RATE

A SPOT ON THE MENU

*capture and use
the numbers*

*pig parts
we're eating them up*

dessert goes viral



American Culinary Federation
The Standard of Excellence for Chefs

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

WITH AN OPEN KITCHEN, INTERACTION
IS PART OF THE MEAL.

BY KAREN WEISBERG

Joseph Stromer says it's weird for him to think about designing restaurant kitchens that aren't open. Even private homes are rarely designed with a formal dining room and separate kitchen these days.

"People are working in the information age and becoming more aware of food. They want to see it being prepared and not hidden behind a curtain," says Stromer, whose firm, Joe the Architect, based in Somerville, Massachusetts, has seven architects on staff. "And thanks to the influence of the Food Network, etc., people want to be a part of the meal."

DESIGN CHALLENGES

He says the first challenge when designing an open kitchen is to understand that it requires two separate but parallel design lines of thinking: the staff experience and the guest experience.

For staff, Stromer's intent is to optimize movement and functionality. "It's thinking about steps of service. Everything is repetitive motion 200 times a night. If I can shave steps or motions, it adds up to real time." And if servers have everything they need in one circulation path, they have more time to provide better service for guests, he adds.

When designing for the guest experience, he begins by speaking to the client to understand what he or she is trying to achieve. Is a buffer area between the kitchen and the guest optimal, or will guests and staff be having a conversation? Then there's the question of lighting.

"For guests, you may want mood lighting, so you don't want task lighting spilling over into the dining area," Stromer says. "It's all in how you articulate light design, perhaps creating lighting in a soffit around the kitchen ceiling." The finish of materials also affects lighting. "White or light-colored tiles will reflect all the light in the kitchen, but dark grey will absorb that light and won't bounce it back. If the open kitchen is there to be a showpiece, you may choose to spend more on finishes that won't dent or chip but will stand up over time."

A new challenge Stromer is increasingly seeing is the popularity of open-air dining rooms. "Now if there's an open kitchen on premise, local health departments are more often requiring



PHOTO CREDIT Melissa Ostrow

Jeff Pond's Area Four location in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was designed by the firm Joe the Architect.





air curtains at the front doorway of the restaurant to keep insects out,” he says. “That means another piece of equipment has to be designed and installed. So it’s becoming part of the overall conversation regarding the whole open kitchen.”

At some point, if cost is a factor, he adds, the client may have to decide between an open kitchen and an open-air dining space.

HOSPITALITY 101

In 2013, Tom Borgia joined the Grafton Group as executive chef at Russell House Tavern in Cambridge, Massachusetts, moving to Boston in 2015 as executive chef of the group’s State Street Provisions. The restaurant, where the menu celebrates the traditional ingredients of New England, accommodates about 150 guests indoors and 220 on the patio.

Borgia finds there are more positives than negatives to having an open kitchen. “We feel a connection to the guests that you just don’t in a traditional kitchen,” he says. “It’s nice to look out and see everyone enjoying themselves. And my staff likes to be hospitable.”

Because he can easily see the flow of the dining room, he doesn’t need to rely on the hosts for updates. “We can spot VIPs, media folk and even problem guests, and tailor our approach accordingly,” he says.

With guests typically within earshot, watching one’s language is important, not always easy given the frenetic pace of most kitchens. “All my reactions and feedback to the kitchen team has the potential to cross over to the dining room,” Borgia says. “Usually, this isn’t an issue, but it is difficult to work around when we’re having a particularly bad night and I’m moved to supply motivation that’s often filled with choice expletives in multiple languages.

“The same can be said for the team’s facial expressions when, for example, we receive a note that someone has a shellfish allergy but still wants to order the clam chowder. We’ll work around it, but depending on what else is happening, our immediate reactions aren’t always what we want guests to see.”

ABOVE: At Cattivella in Stapleton, Colorado, a chef’s counter seats 26 and wraps around the kitchen, which is visible to all guests who are dining.
 OPPOSITE, LEFT: Area Four Boston’s dining area.
 OPPOSITE, RIGHT: The open kitchen at Mountain Standard, Vail, Colorado, was designed by Semple Brown Design, Denver.

CENTER STAGE

About five years ago, Stromer’s company was hired to design Jeff Pond’s Area Four location in Cambridge. Although guests at the restaurant can choose “thoughtful” salads, house-cured and smoked meats, and handmade mozzarella and sauces, it’s Pond’s acclaimed wood-fired pizzas that have those in the know singing his praises.

When Pond and restaurateur Michael Krupp found the Cambridge space, it was actually two separate businesses. They realized they could have a cafe as well as a restaurant, with seating for about 120 and 50-60 seats on the patio. “We ripped it all down and moved the kitchen to the main dining room toward the back,” Pond says. Although the cafe is in the front, guests there also enjoy the bustle of the kitchen.

Having had input in the design of other kitchens, Pond suggests starting with the menu. “Do you want a wood fire/brasserie? Well, that drives the choice of equipment. The seating and counter heights—that determines what people can see or not.” Pond, who is 5 feet, 10 inches, tall, designs his counter to be a little higher than the norm—48 inches on the dining room side and 38-40 inches on the prep side.

For efficiency and logistics, Pond finds that not everything can or should be done in an open kitchen. “Downstairs, there’s a prep kitchen, where, at nighttime, I roll out my dough and prepare other products for service the next day. So the open kitchen is where we’re roasting meats and plating food.”

Building the energetic, personable vibe that Pond wants in his open kitchen is ongoing, and includes hiring more for personality and less for skill. And he spends time with staff clearly discussing what he expects. “It’s situational. I tell staff to be polite, say ‘hi’ and make the guests part of the experience,” he says.

He’s enthusiastic about building and working in an open kitchen. “I would absolutely do it a hundred times over. People like to see what’s going on, and they’re taking pictures of the food. The more people are talking, the better. It’s entertainment.”

WRAP AROUND

At Cattivella in Stapleton, Colorado, a chef’s counter seats 26 and wraps around the kitchen, providing an unobstructed

PHOTO CREDITS: Above: Maria Keown Photography; opposite, left to right: Melissa Ostrow, David Lauer



view of the wood-fired pizza oven/wood-fired grill. Some guests overlook the pasta table or the butcher's corner.

"The entire kitchen—except for the dish area and my own little office—is visible to guests, including the 74 not actually seated at the chef's counter," says Elise Wiggins, executive chef/owner. "I wanted to make sure there was no dead space where guests couldn't see the kitchen area.

"We like to spoil people who sit at the counter by giving them little tidbits to sample—like a grandmother would—and individual staff get a following, a positive reinforcement to get them to perform even better."

Early on, experts told Wiggins that the more walls in the space, the higher the cost. She also found that a closed ceiling was beyond her budget, as was a wood floor—the noise-absorbing wood was \$30,000-\$40,000 more expensive.

"Because we're 75% surrounded by hard glass, plus an open ceiling and cement floor, sound abatement was a huge challenge," she says. Wiggins found an unexpected solution when she chose solar shades with perforations to cut sun glare. She loved their clean, modern, unpretentious look. And because of the perforations, noise has been cut by 50%.

Of necessity, there's a wall (with a dish room behind it) that's required by fire and health codes. "We had to have it cleanable around the cooking area. Without a wall, you'd have a floating stove and gas lines, and grease could go everywhere," Wiggins says.

Ever alert to guest vibes and responsive to feedback, she has instructed her multilingual staff to speak only English to each other when close to guests, "to avoid any guest ever thinking we're talking about them," she says. "I'm proud of the mix of cultures I have in my restaurant, but I have gotten the occasional complaint in the past."

The atmosphere in the kitchen and, by extension, the restaurant, starts with hiring the right people. Wiggins aims to choose those who are social rather than egotistical, and she usually asks applicants to do a cook-and-serve for her. "This way, you see if they can take feedback," she says. "I intentionally critique in a constructive way because I want to see how they take it. If you teach them something, can they follow it?"

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Cattivella was designed by Semple Brown Design, Denver. "The larger the restaurant, the more you need to activate. You don't want to feel it's a large seating area without activation," says Sarah Semple Brown, principal. "Especially now, people want an active space, and watching people prepare your food is exciting."

Addressing the challenges of lighting—sufficient for staff needs but not obtrusive for guests in the dining area—Semple Brown associate Leila Schwyhart often suggests dropping the ceiling to control light. She also aims to design the ceiling in such a way that it captures some of the noise.

"In another restaurant, we're using cleanable Newmat, material that's almost a stretchy vinyl fabric," says architect Haily Tweedie. "We're able to put fiberglass insulation above the Newmat to absorb sound. In another sound abatement effort, we specified a thin rubber-mat coating underneath countertops to mitigate the sound of plates hitting the counter."

Accommodating health department requirements means not only designing for the inclusion of hoods, but also for a cleanable ceiling. "I really like what we call a 'hard ceiling'—a non-institutional looking grid," Brown says. "The one Haily described is nice because it looks good, performs well and meets health department parameters depending on regulations."

Reflecting on the popularity of open kitchens today—and their steady growth since she started designing them about 20 years ago—Brown concludes that people have changed over time. "I think people have short attention spans and they're not used to having conversations," she says. "An open kitchen provides a layer of interest and more stimulating action."

Tweedie believes it's simply that people are more interested in their food than they used to be. And, she says, "There's something reassuring in seeing the food being prepared that they're about to be served." ■

NEW YORK-BASED AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST KAREN WEISBERG HAS COVERED THE ISSUES AND LUMINARIES OF THE FOOD-AND-BEVERAGE WORLD—BOTH COMMERCIAL AND NONCOMMERCIAL—FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS.