



A GOOD COOK IS ALWAYS LEARNING™

# CHEF TRAINING

& KITCHEN MANAGEMENT

BY STEPHANI ROBSON

## More With Less

### Five Ways to Make a Small Kitchen Work for You

If you are like most chefs, you work in a kitchen that is smaller than you'd like it to be. Do you feel like you are cooking in a closet? Do you hire your line staff based on how thin they are so that they'll be able to work in your space? You're not alone. Most start-up restaurants try to make do with the smallest kitchen space possible because kitchens are expensive to build and expensive to maintain. But you can learn to love your small kitchen if you plan it well.

First, small can actually have its advantages. A smaller kitchen means fewer steps to get what you need, and maybe better turnover of ingredients because you lack the storage space to hold items for more than a few days. A small kitchen, if well managed, is less likely to accumulate clutter and is probably cheaper to equip and to maintain than a more generously sized space. You'll probably spend less on utilities if your kitchen is small, too. Fewer lights, fewer water lines and lower requirements for heating or cooling. In fact, in many ways having a kitchen that is slightly undersized is better than having one that is substantially oversized. Small makes you think carefully about how you operate and forces you to make choices that can end up helping your business.

But a too-small kitchen can work against you. Smaller spaces increase the potential for cross-contamination of food products because there is rarely enough room to separate the prep of proteins from that of produce. If you have too many people trying to work in a small space, they not only get in each other's way but also are more

likely to inadvertently cause accidents, often in the form of burns or cuts. Using every speck of floor space to accommodate supplies makes movement difficult and will probably cost you money because of damage to inventory not stored effectively.

How small is too small? There's no hard-and-fast rule for how large a kitchen should be; it really does depend on your menu, production methods, staffing, frequency of deliveries, and even your plating style. In general, all back-of-house spaces — spaces that your guests are typically not encouraged to enter, like storage rooms, prep areas, ware washing and waste handling — should collectively be around 30 percent to 40 percent of your total space, but there are all kinds of examples of great food served from tiny little kitchens. Maybe your operation is one of those. So here are some tips for making the most of whatever space you have to work with.

#### Tip 1: Think Like a Wardrobe Consultant

You might have seen or heard about those style experts who go through your closet and tell you what to keep and what to pitch. Usually, they all give the same advice: If you haven't worn it in a year, toss it. You can apply the same principle to things in your kitchen: If you haven't used an item in the last 30 days, either get rid of it or store it elsewhere, either off site or in a remote part of your operation. You can only afford to have the items you really use close at hand when your kitchen space is tight.

You can even take this analysis a bit further. Once you have cleared out any items that you rarely if ever use, take a look at what's left. Which items do you use every few minutes? Things like sauté pans, tongs, knives, cutting boards, sheet pans and clean kitchen towels should be stored right at your fingertips in the areas where you work most. Items that you use once or twice during service can be stored a bit further away, whereas those things that you need to access only once a day can be stored anywhere that you have room, not necessarily right at the point of use. For example, I see lots of operations that store multiple boxes of paper cups right by the coffee machine because that's where they use them. That's fine if you have plenty of room for big boxes. But if your kitchen is really tight, a smarter approach is to stock the coffee area with only the number of cup sheaths that you think you'll need during service on that shift or that day, and keep those big boxes somewhere else so they aren't in the way. It's easy to have someone restock between shifts; much easier in fact than navigating around those huge boxes when the morning coffee rush comes.

### Tip 2: Think in 3D

Space over and under your equipment should be put into service whenever possible. When planning wall-mounted shelves, decide in advance what you'll keep on each shelf and then design the shelf spacing accordingly. Consider again the example of the wardrobe consultant and her old trick of tucking a dresser or shoe rack underneath shorter items hanging in a closet: smaller items like spices and oils should be grouped together on one shelf so you can mount the next shelf that much closer and gain that much more wall space for storing other items. Bulky but light items like boxes of cups or toilet paper can be stored way up high, perhaps even along the top of your walk-in box as long as they don't block your air-cooled compressor. Use the wall space above your pot sink or clean dish table to store chemicals and cleaning supplies, but use solid metal shelves here to protect items below in case of spills or leaks.

Got plastic cutting boards? Have your local metal fabricator weld a pair of L-shaped slides underneath your countertops so you can tuck your boards right under the work surface when not in use. (Make sure he makes the sides of the L's long enough so that the boards easily clear the turned edges of your table.) This frees up space on the shelving below for bulkier items. Try to buy smallwares that nest or tightly stack, or at the very least find something to put in that space inside the big stockpot that you only use on Sundays. Another good prep area trick is to choose tables that allow a garbage can to fit comfortably underneath, out of the way of circulation. The tall, skinny waste receptacles now available in various sizes are a better choice for tight kitchens than round cans even if the round ones do hold more, because skinny bins can often be slid into nooks and crannies between pieces of equipment when not in use.

Lastly, use air space over work surfaces for storing items that you have to grab quickly. The old-fashioned ceiling-mounted utensil rack is a great way to make use of space that would otherwise be empty.

### Tip 3: Go With Versatility Over Volume

Every square inch of space on your cooking line is precious, not only because you may have very little space in a tight kitchen but also because much of that equipment needs to be under an exhaust ventilator, one of the most costly elements of your kitchen design. So you'll want to carefully calibrate your menu to the equipment you have, and vice versa.

Equipment that can do more than one thing is usually preferable to specialized equipment, with the exception of fryers, which are hard to beat when it comes to batch cooking of deep-fried items. A good-quality range with an oven base and a charbroiler mounted above can cook just about anything in 36-54 inches of space. Avoid buying ranges that have storage bases; that empty space under the cooktop is almost useless except for stacking pans, so you may as well order an oven base to give yourself the option of baking or roasting in a hot oven or storing your pans in a cold oven. And if you





have the budget for it, consider a small combi-oven that can bake, roast, steam or do a little bit of all three. These items are expensive and can be a bit finicky from a maintenance perspective, but their ability to turn out high-quality product in a small space is unmatched.

### Careful planning, rigorous editing and practical operational strategies can let a good chef work effectively in any size of space.

A lot of cooking equipment comes in narrower sizes. If you have a small space to work with, choose the narrowest grill you can buy and you'll still have enough room to cook eight chicken breasts at a time. Of course, if grilled items represent the majority of your menu choices, you'll want to either go larger on the grill or skimp elsewhere, or rethink your menu so that you aren't putting so much demand on one piece of equipment. With fried items, consider whether you really need to offer fried seafood as well as French fries, because if you do you'll definitely need two separate frypots to avoid flavor transfer. A fry pot is typically about 17 inches wide, so offering deep-fried seafood once a week means you need about another two feet of cooking line and ventilator to support just that item. Can you do the fish in some other way?

Think also about menu items that can be assembled quickly from a carefully curated mise en place. The classic mom-and-pop Chinese restaurant in just about any American town is a great example of this principle in action: Almost every dish on the menu is cooked in a wok from a bank of precut or pre-assembled ingredients and premixed sauces, with the result being incredibly fast production of a wide range of menu items in a small space. Cross-utilization not only of product but also of shape and form of product will help cut down on space needs on or near the line, as well as reduce the need for prep space.

Speaking of prep space, a tiny kitchen often calls for innovation when it comes to finding room

to prep before service. I know many operators who slap an inverted sheet pan over their cooking equipment or (clean, hopefully) pot sink to prep in the morning, saving the cost and space of a dedicated prep table.

### Tip 4: Downsize Your Plating Ambitions

A hot restaurant trend of late has been to use uniquely shaped smallwares to highlight specific dishes. Rectangles, squares, triangles, ovoids and slabs of natural materials like stone or bamboo are all very nice and I have nothing against them in principle, but in a small kitchen getting too creative with your plating is asking for trouble. The more sizes and shapes of smallwares you have, the more space you'll need for storage and for plating on the line. Granted, four-sided plates are a great way to use the plating counter with maximum efficiency, but this only makes sense if you plate a lot of dishes at the same time. Try to resist the urge to stock a broad range of service ware. Stick to just three or four sizes of one shape. This allows you to stack plates on the line and in storage areas more effectively, and helps to keep your backup inventory down. You'll also make your dishwashing crew and your accountant happier, because some of the more unusual plate styles don't fit well in dish racks so those racks end up going through your machine only half full, wasting time, water, energy and money.

### Tip 5: Use the Great Outdoors

Many of the big chain operations have moved their walk-in coolers to the outside of their buildings by breaking through an exterior wall so that staff can access refrigerated products without having to leave the kitchen. If your restaurant is on the ground floor of a building that has the room for this option, it's a great space-saver. But don't stop there. Storing items like backup chemicals and recyclables in locked outdoor cabinets frees up floor space and removes these potentially hazardous items from your busiest areas.

Careful planning, rigorous editing and practical operational strategies can let a good chef work effectively in any size of space. Just be prepared to winnow your needs to what is really important for turning out great meals in the time frame your customers demand.

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