



## Designing the Perfect Deli or Sandwich Station

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**T**he deli or sandwich area is a key station in almost any cafeteria, snack bar, and in most hotels and casual restaurant kitchens. In cafeteria and walk-up locations the deli station often has the longest lines and creates the greatest frustration with misorders or items not properly prepared. It is also a high-risk area from a food safety perspective.

We have seen many changes in deli menus and presentations, yet sandwich stations often follow designs and equipment layouts developed in the 1940s and 50s, when a sandwich was two slices of bread filled with meat, salad and cheese. Designs fail to accommodate the special additions of sub sandwiches, panini, roll-ups, wraps, and their variants, plus the ever widening variety of bread and rolls that customers demand.

### Planning the Layout

Since they are very busy stations, a preparer in a walk-up location is under a lot of stress during peak periods. It is important to provide good communications with the customer and reduce unnecessary movement from preparation to service. The first step in planning a good deli station is to have the preparer face the customer, or at minimum, stand no more than 90 degrees from the point of service.

The layout and equipment need to be very carefully planned for optimal ergonomics. Along with adequate preparation and assembly areas, the layout must include safe refrigeration, for ingredients, that is easily accessible. Refrigeration should be balanced between a cold rail immediately accessible from the assembly/cutting area, and backup storage under and behind the workstation. Ideally, backup refrigeration should include a mixture of drawers (for quick access without bending), and doors for bulk items or bottles and jars that won't fit into drawers.

Food stored on the refrigerated cold rail is often exposed to air movement, which dries out deli meats, cheeses and creates a skin on sauces and dressings. Placing a hinged or sliding cover over the open pan restricts air movement and retains cold

temperature, but in a cafeteria or walk-up setting, it also reduces the customer's vision of the ingredients. Customer preference for food visibility is so high that some food court operations like Bain's Deli go to extremes to place the cold rail at an angle tilted toward the patron rather than the sandwich preparer.

### Maintaining Safe Temperatures

Maintaining safe food temperatures for cold food rails is a major issue with most health departments. In order to achieve NSF Standard 7 approval, all food stored in open refrigerated pans must be kept under 41°F. There are four commonly used methods:

1. Recessed Rail- Pans are set 4 to 5 inches below top of recessed well. Often referred to as a "Bloomington Rail", this assembly can be mounted flat or at an angle. The recess makes it more difficult for the sandwich maker to access ingredients and takes away visibility from a customer. To compensate, operators often pile food above the "load line" which defeats the system's capability to maintain safe temperatures. The exposed frosted band at the top of the wells is also considered objectionable by some operators.

2. Horizontal Air Curtain- Pans are recessed 1-2 inches and a gentle stream of super cold air is circulated over top of the food pans. This system is better suited to operations with fast product turnover, or buffets or salad bars where food is located in bowls or crocks where it is protected from drying out on the surface.

3. Iced Displays- Placing food on flat slabs of conductive materials like china platters or granite slabs, and recessing them into beds of ice. A cost-effective approach that can make a great presentation, it requires regular replenishment and rearrangement of the platters as the ice melts. The amount of food that can be displayed is more limited than with pan systems.

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## Stations, continued

4. Chilled Rails Surrounding Each Pan- This approach, introduced by Kairak about 10 years ago replaces traditional adaptor rails with welded stainless bars with super cold refrigerants circulating through them. Delfield introduced a variant of this concept, which surrounds the pans with circulating eutectic fluid, this year. Both systems allow food displayed at counter height with no obstruction or cover or risk of drying out open foods from cold air curtains.

A deli sandwich doesn't necessarily mean cold. Some classic ingredients like corned beef or pastrami should be held in humid cabinets or deep wells with covers designed specifically for this purpose. Unless there is a separate hot deli planned, a sandwich station layout today should provide at least two drop-in hot wells on the side or rear of the work area for items like meatballs and sausage.

### Storing the Bread

The first item most deli customers want to select is the bread. They expect and demand an ever-widening number of options—hearth breads, flat bread, rolls, bagels, baguettes, pitas, etc., yet this tremendous variety needs to be kept fresh, protected from both sneezes and breezes, and be readily accessible to the deli person. This is no small challenge considering all of the choices available.

An ideal way to store bread is on an angled wire rack, equipped with a clear plastic hinged or sliding lid to keep the product fresh. The rack may be mounted on a wall or parked on the side of the preparation area. In larger operations, you can locate two work stations on either side of a rack. Another option to consider is tilted plexiglass bin systems that hang from the ceiling in a similar manner to cigarette bins in convenience store cashier areas.

Some sandwich makers like Wall St. Deli and Au Bon Pain put bread display on mezzanine shelves integrated into the sneeze guard/ protector case. The shelf should be just high enough to provide full vision of the chilled ingredients below. This approach makes a great visual presentation, and allows those with limited communication skills to order by just pointing at the various ingredients.

### Considering Sanitation

At one time almost every deli station had one or more slicers located next to the food display. To improve speed of service and portion control, most operations have opted for pre-sliced products, either from the kitchen or purveyor. If a slicer is provided, it is usually located on a rear counter to allow the deli attendant to slice additional bulk products during slower times. A busy hot deli requires a slicer if meat is displayed or held in brisket or bulk after baking or roasting.

Nothing is more unsightly in a walk-up deli station than piles of meat and bread trimmings on the side of the cutting area, or a view of overflowing trash cans in the work aisle. Any deli station open to the public should incorporate a com-

## A Well-Planned Deli Area Needs the Following Components:

- Refrigeration and work area appropriate for the menu items and the volume of service. Provide refrigeration under work area for backup. Select drawers or doors based on menu and volumes served.
- An open bain marie with a refrigerated base for ingredients and toppings. The design must be able to hold product at no more than 41 F. The best configuration for the bain marie places the food closest to the surface using a horizontal air curtain or refrigerated rails that surround the food pans. Older recessed rail systems put the food out of view of the customer and provide a challenging reach for the deli person.
- Product **MUST** be clearly visible to customers in a walk-up or display setting. Don't use a sandwich refrigerator with product rail tilted toward sandwich makers or with a stainless cover that must remain in position in order to maintain safe food temperatures.
- Ideally the refrigeration compressors should be remote or away from the working environment. This also provides more accessible storage space for the person working the station.
- Wells or warming cabinets for hot meats like pastrami or corned beef, or sub ingredients like meatballs or sausage.
- Counter space and ample power nearby for toaster(s), microwave, and panini grill or other sandwich warmers.
- Adequate space for displaying, storing, toasting and cutting of bread and rolls. In walk-up facilities, bread choices should be on display to the customer.
- Easily-cleaned flat cutting boards for sandwich or plate assembly.
- Storage for plates for dine-in and wrapping papers and film for take-out.
- Holding and pass area for finished orders.
- Handsink with soap and paper towel dispenser.
- Trash containers that are invisible to customers.

ination of smaller scraping pans and larger built in trashcans. A recessed pullout crumb pan, built under a floating cutting board for toast or bagels, is a great way of controlling some of the debris that quickly builds up.

In cafeteria settings, operators often want to display daily specials on a show plate at each station. Ideally, this can be accommodated into the design of the protector case if the requirement is confirmed early in the design. The configuration and location of the service pass to the customer is also a critical element since any pickup station or pass must be accessible for those in wheelchairs. Orders can be passed under a protector case if it has an open area on the bottom, or a 14- to 18-inch open area should be provided next to each station, preferably where sandwiches are cut, plated, or wrapped.

### Additional Equipment

Many operators want or need to offer customers a variety of options for toasting, roasting and steaming sandwiches. A pop-up toaster should be provided for sandwich bread and a conveyor toaster for rolls. A contact or panini grill allows toasting open-face sandwiches. If bagel sandwiches are offered, a separate bagel toaster is usually required. The equipment complement for high-volume deli stations may include a bun slicer if buns are freshly baked on-site or delivered unsliced, and a salamander for melting cheese on open-face sandwiches. A pump or drawer-style steamer is the best choice for corned beef sandwiches or for steaming tortillas for wraps, but a microwave oven will often suffice. A drawer or niche should be provided nearby for knives, spatulas, and other tools. If disposable gloves are used, a drawer or built-in dispenser manages the clutter.

Most deli stations lack space on the front counter for all of this support equipment, so a well planned layout will include a perpendicular or parallel counter that provides counter space or shelves for the equipment as well as additional storage, sinks and other support items.

A deli providing take-out items to go should have a separate wrapping area or counter located away from the assembly and cutting area. Automatic wrap dispenser/cutters should be provided directly above the work area, preferably mounted under an overshelf. The over-shelf should have dividers to organize the variety of containers used for takeout. A shelf with a spring-loaded roller should be provided under the work surface for pre-cut foil and paper wrap. A dedicated drawer or row of bins should be provided for scissors, marking pans, sealing tape, labels, string and other support items.

Often customers want fries or chips with their sandwich so providing a warmer for fries and a display rack for other sides increases grab-and-go sales. Adding a reach-in refrigerator or ice pan for prepackaged deli salads, pickles, etc. next to the waiting area speeds service and makes it easier for a customer to assemble a complete meal. A busy deli station some distance from a grill or kitchen may warrant its own small counter top fryer. While adding the burden of an exhaust hood and fire protection system, the increase in sales and operational efficiency may warrant the investment.

With all of the choices and possible combinations available on a deli menu, receiving and confirming the order can take a lot of the sandwich preparer's time and attention away from sandwich making. It is also difficult to work on the next order while waiting for the first one to be toasted or warmed. A solution that both speeds service and reduces errors is the use of a remote order entry system. Most quick and full-service restaurants have always had remote printers and video displays to relay orders from the order taker or server to the deli station.

### Modernizing the Deli Station

New technology systems allow customers in cafeterias and other retail settings to select and pre-order deli sandwiches and wraps from a remote terminal. One of the more popular systems are remote order kiosks or customer order terminals (CAT) with touch screen displays that allow customers to select their choice and size, as well as all the sides and condiments. After entering the order, the customer is now free to pick beverages, salad, dessert, or even complete their transactions. They can then return to pick up their deli item at the time indicated on the printed order slip.

Progressive operators are implementing remote order systems on office, college and hospital computer networks or Web sites so staff can order directly from their work area or nursing station. The design of any deli station in a larger facility should at least consider one of these systems, and at minimum provide a location, power and empty conduit for a printer or display device and the control unit.

Last, but certainly not least, the design of any deli station needs to include easily accessible handsinks and a trash receptacle for paper towels. In walk-up and display deli stations, these items should be integrated into the work counters. Handsinks require soap and towel dispensers, which are often vendor-furnished. These dispensers can be unsightly, so you may want to add a shield or cover to hide them from view.

Made-to-order deli or sandwich stations continue to be one of the most popular and important stations in cafeteria and casual dining settings. Since deli areas are one of the highest labor and food cost areas of a foodservice operation, any design must reflect the best possible operational efficiency. With all of the new types of sandwiches and breads, almost any operation can benefit from a reorganization and improvement of this station. □

### About The Author

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