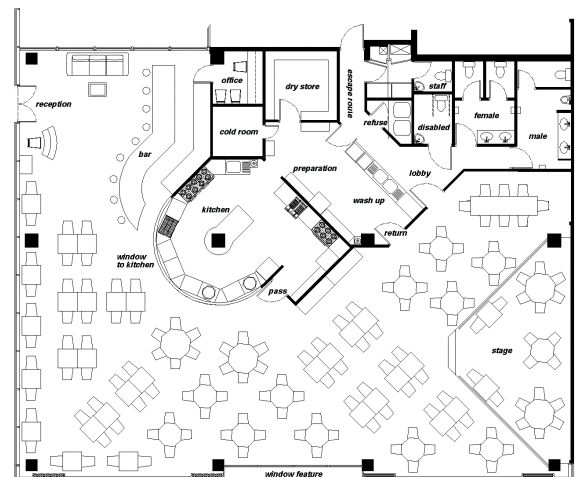


Plan for success

Nigel Withams discusses how to lay out your back of house to make the operations of your restaurant more functional.



Recently I had the restaurant designer's dream job. A brand-new large, fresh restaurant in a new location to plan. Such projects are always most welcome in our office so I set about the task with a new colleague, Sanjay an architect and Vatsu consultant all the way from Gujarat, with relish. I had to explain to Sanjay, who was helping me design a large restaurant for the first time, how the space should be planned.

I have always assumed that all restaurateurs know how to lay out their restaurants but I have daily enquiries from inexperienced, first-time restaurateurs so I hope those of you who are more experienced will forgive me for tackling this basic subject.

Firstly, good space planning is essential to success. By this I do not mean squeezing in as many covers as possible. This will not help if customers are cramped, or service is difficult. All good designers know that form should follow function. Put another way, although it is crucial for a restaurant to be attractive in appearance it will soon lose its allure if it is inefficient.

For this reason back of house planning is just as vital as front. Your dining room is your salesroom, your kitchen is your production line and everything should be geared to running the two together as sweetly as possible so that food arrives to the right table, at the right time, at the right temperature and with the minimum disturbance to other diners.

I explained to Sanjay, we must always start planning at the back. Remember, function then form.

It helps if you consider a restaurant as a production line in which each stage of the operation has to be laid out in the correct efficient order. If possible food deliveries should be made at the back and refuse collected from there. Accordingly, the dry, refuse and cold stores should be near the rear exit. Next inside should come the preparation room. A prep room normally has no cooking equipment just preparation benches, sinks, benches, juicers, peelers, dough makers, racks and so on). The dry and cold stores may be within the preparation room or between the rear exit and preparation room, either will work. For the sake of good hygiene the refuse store should outside in a yard or be between the prep room and final rear exit, off the main corridor or escape route and separated by a fire door.

In some cases the restaurant will be on more than one floor so back of house areas may be on a different level from the dining room and bar. The same principles apply though.

You will require a staff toilet, or two if you have a very large restaurant with separate male and female facilities and separate or unisex customer toilets. It is illegal to discriminate against the disabled so you should also provide a lavatory for wheelchair users unless wheelchair access is completely impossible. It helps to place the toilets near the kitchen since the kitchen will require heavy-duty fume extraction and the toilets can then share the same ventilation duct runs and ceiling voids.

I always advise that independent professional advice is sought about ventilation generally, if you take advice direct from a supplier rather than an engineer make sure that they have designed the



system properly and not just to suit your budget. Your money will not be well spent if the heating and ventilation doesn't work properly; customers do not like smoke, fumes, draughts, cold or too much heat.

The next stage in the production process is the main cooking-off kitchen. The kitchen will include all of the heavy cooking equipment like ranges, fryers, grills, griddles, tandoors and other ovens. There will also be more tables or benches, a large sink and perhaps fridges or freezers in which prepared food is kept close at hand for cooking-off. There should be a separate hand wash point in every main room.

It is best if all the heavy cooking equipment is arranged so that it is close together near to the final pass point to the dining room. All of the heavy cooking equipment must be located under fume extraction canopies. If the heavy cooking

equipment is divided you will require separate canopies but generally it is best to try to locate everything under a single canopy.

The next stage in the production line is assembly. Once the food has been cooked the dishes must be assembled and any sauces and so on added. Usually, there will be a bench or a hot cupboard in the kitchen between the cooking off area and pass door or hatch for this purpose.

Now the food is taken to the table and is served. Once it has been consumed the process reverses. Dirty plates are returned and there should be a 'dirties dump' inside the return point next to a large sink and a line of washing up equipment. Often this equipment is lined down one wall of the prep room with all the prep equipment on the opposite wall. In this way the prep room serves a dual function as a wash up room, but a separate wash up room is better if there is space. The refuse store should be close to the wash up area to facilitate the quick disposal of food scraps. The last piece of equipment in the production line will be a plate rack where all the clean plates are stored and possibly a rack for large utensils.

So that is back of house, if it is planned well it will run smoothly, require fewer staff and there will be fewer accidents and spillages. Once you have that right, the dining area entrance and bar will be simple and you will have gone a long way to creating a successful business.

My last piece of advice is plan well in advance on a drawing board or computer. It really is much better than trying to plan in the moment when the builder is waiting to know what to do.

Things to consider when laying out your back of house:

- Plan your space wisely
- Food deliveries and refuse should be collected at the rear of the restaurant
- Preparation room
- Toilets should be near the kitchen so they can share the same ventilation duct
- Main cooking-off kitchen
- Assemble the prepared plates of food to make it easier for waiters to carry dishes to customers