Patient care meets diner delight: A guide to healthcare foodservice equipment and supplies

Healthcare foodservice is changing – here’s how to adapt your operations.
Before you buy, read this.

Healthcare system administrators are feeling the pressure more than ever. Implications of the Affordable Care Act, industry consolidation and increasingly discerning patients (with plenty of healthcare options) are the perfect storm for cutthroat competition. Foodservice operations can play a huge role in a healthcare system’s success, but only with a smart strategy in place.

So when it comes to an upgrade, remodel or new location, it’s important to remember some NEW rules for healthcare foodservice equipment and supplies purchases.

In this buying guide:
1. Food Preparation Equipment
2. Primary Cooking Equipment
3. Refrigeration and Ice Machines
4. Serving Equipment
5. Smallwares, Cookware and Kitchen Tools
6. Storage and Handling Equipment
7. Tabletop and Servingware
8. Warewashing, Janitorial and Safety Equipment
9. Furnishings, Décor & Custom Fabrication

Happy shopping!
Chapter 1: Food preparation equipment

Blend, slice, dice, chop, mix and knead

Rule 1: Prep for more prep.

Are the time and resources spent on your operation’s food prep on the rise? It could be a sign of the times. Today’s health-conscious, gourmet-minded patients, visitors and employees expect more and more menu items to be fresh and “homemade.” These inclinations toward freshness, authenticity and personalization all mean more prep work – and perhaps more prep equipment. When it comes to food prep equipment purchases, here are some tips to help you work smarter – not harder:

• **First, take a long, hard look at your menu.** Chances are, you know what types of food prep equipment you’ll need based on your menu. But do you have a good handle on utilization/demand on those items? If you have multiple salad bar items that constantly need to be sliced/diced/prepped and restocked, for instance, you may need more prep equipment to accommodate that. What’s more, how many people will be prepping at a given time? Be sure you’re covered in terms of quantity and prep space.

• **Consider food allergies.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), food allergies are on the rise. Even consumers without life-threatening allergies expect individualized prep. If your operation deals in dough, you might see the need to buy two sets of prep equipment – one dedicated solely to gluten-free patrons.

• **Stay sharp.** When it comes to slicing and dicing and blending, look for multipurpose equipment and don’t skimp on quality. The best food processors and blenders, for example, are those precise enough to make coarsely chopped salsas without compromising yield, but powerful enough to blend and puree. In general, the higher the RPM, the less precise the cut, so consider the speed settings and your application before you buy.

• **Prep more, work less.** Some equipment – such as a vegetable washer that eliminates manual work – can pay for itself in labor savings.
Rule 2: Seeing is believing.

Looks matter — especially with today’s trend toward open kitchens and assembly-line style ordering. And healthcare retail operations are no different. This not only calls for aesthetically pleasing ingredients, but good-looking prep equipment.

What’s more, as many healthcare facilities become outposts for preventative care and community health outreach/communication, spaces for cooking demonstrations and classes are increasing in popularity.

A general rule: Put the prep equipment you use for the more appealing tasks front and center. For example, prep fruit and ingredients for fresh fruit smoothies out of site, then blend the final product in view of patrons. When it comes to the equipment itself, look for designs that are sleek, modern and easy to keep clean.

Rule 3: Aim for easy cleanup.

Kitchen cleanup is mission-critical in any equipment and supplies category, but there are special considerations when it comes to prep work. Consider the ease of cleanup when comparing products including blenders, food processors, slicers, juicers and cutting board surfaces. Look for equipment with easy to remove attachments and fewer crannies to navigate.
Rule 1: Save your energy (and your space).

As the focus on energy efficiency intensifies, and more grants and incentives become available to healthcare facilities that focus on sustainability, purchasing new equipment can be more confusing than ever. Sure, choosing ENERGY STAR-certified products is an obvious tactic, but that’s far from the silver bullet. While the vast majority of energy-efficient equipment should perform better than predecessors (and may deliver higher long-term ROI), it’s important to compare specs.

When you do succeed in energy-efficient kitchen design, space savings are often a happy side effect. Combi-ovens are just one of the many examples of this. Here are some tips to make sure you achieve energy efficiency and productivity:

- **Prioritize upgrades.** If you aren’t starting from scratch, overhauling your whole kitchen at once is not only cost prohibitive, but also can be unnecessarily overwhelming. Focus first on replacing equipment types that are typically the biggest energy users: older broilers and ovens, for example, may be a good candidate for replacement.

- **Think about heat and ventilation.** Manufacturers are developing ever-more efficient gas broilers, which not only save in energy during operation, but also create less radiant heat and contribute to A/C savings. Meanwhile, smart ventilation systems use photoelectric smoke or heat detection to “decide” when and at what speed to run exhaust fans for big savings. These systems may not be right or necessary for every operation, but they’re something to consider.

- **Rethink your recipes (or at least your cooking methods).** Bigger energy savings might require outside-the-box thinking. For example, switching to a cook-hold system for meats (versus cooking and then transferring to holding equipment) can cut energy use for that application in half. Induction technology, meanwhile, enables clean, compact and eco-friendly cooking.

- **Get smart.** The aforementioned smart ventilation system is one example in a larger trend. Equipment manufacturers are developing technologically advanced systems that are a boon for energy savings: cook-and-hold technologies that can be programmed to automatically switch to “hold” mode after cooking, and record cooking times for easier food safety documentation; and cutting-edge conveyor belt ovens that sense down time and lower the temperature and belt speed accordingly.

Learn more about the latest in energy efficiency here.
Rule 2: Labor-saving technology is king.

Labor issues are high on nearly every operator’s list of concerns — but can be particularly challenging in the healthcare. Not only are budgets being squeezed and scrutinized more than ever due to consolidation, implications of the Affordable Care Act and more, but foodservice directors also face challenges in attracting and securing employees. According to FoodService Director magazine, the stringent hiring process that healthcare workers (even foodservice employees) face often deters applicants and cuts the labor pool down significantly.

Equipment can help in this regard. Conveyor ovens are a perfect example of longstanding cooking equipment that can be used in new ways (instead of grilling for instance) to reduce labor. Modern equipment technologies are even enabling operators to combine service and cooking labor. In healthcare retail applications, more compact, “cleaner” technologies (ventless fryers, induction cooking) mean that the order taker also can be preparing the food. This setup plays into the transparency that customers crave — letting them see the ingredients and food preparation process.

Speed is important, too — the faster the prep/cooking, the faster the throughput and lower the labor cost. High-powered combi-ovens and blast chillers are just two examples of many — in fact, new technology and design is enabling increased speed across a variety of products.

Rule 3: Balance flavor and health.

Strides in flavor, variety and healthfulness in healthcare foodservice are nothing new, but there are realities that are upping the ante. This emphasis spans far beyond rising consumer demand for ethnic choices, healthy and sustainable ingredients and bold flavors.

In the years since the Affordable Care Act came into play, it has become clear that patient satisfaction scores and readmission rates (which impact reimbursements and revenue) can be tied to onsite dining experiences. In fact, almost half of hospitals surveyed in FoodService Director’s 2016 Healthcare Census Report make menu changes based on Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) surveys. What’s more, consolidation, growth and innovation among healthcare systems are ratcheting up competition — forcing administrators to find ways to differentiate and boost revenue. This means offering more of what patients, visitors and staff are demanding — or risk losing them.

It all boils down to keeping a good mix of traditional staples (broilers, grills, fryers, etc.) with specialty equipment that allows for more authentic ethnic cooking. Vertical spits, smokers, woks and tortilla presses are examples of tools that not only enable you to keep in line with flavor/cuisine trends, they excite and delight when in view of customers. Back to the fryer mention: while many healthcare facilities are eliminating high-fat, high-sugar and overly processed foods from their menus, others continue to offer patrons the choice of comfort foods like fries and grilled cheese sandwiches.
Chapter 3: Refrigeration and ice machines

Chill and freeze

Rule 1: Fresh is best.

Fresh and healthy isn’t a mandate in all healthcare environments, but rather is becoming a customer demand. And with the call for more fresh fruits and veggies and from-scratch cooking might come the need for more cooler space. Still, freezers are a necessary element of many kitchens — and that’s where a combination walk-in might come in handy. For the right applications, these units offer both functions in one package.

Meanwhile, blast chillers, a piece of equipment already employed often in the healthcare foodservice segment (particularly in central-kitchen setups) is an unexpected tool to help maintain “fresh” appearance and taste. If you plan to move food from cooking equipment with a rack system, look for a blast chiller that aligns with that for easy transfer. You can even put your blast chiller in your walk-in to save space. Like many other types of equipment, some blast chillers feature smart technology — from data collection (for monitoring food temperatures) to automatic start functionality.

Rule 2: Let them grab and go.

Grab-and-go is hot — and it makes perfect sense in healthcare — particularly hospital environments. There, grab-and-go is the perfect antidote for hungry, hurried staff and tired (often stressed) visitors looking for quick and easy sustenance.

Healthcare foodservice directors looking to increase profit from grab-and-go should take note: Those who choose open-front, easy-to-access, grab-and-go display units may boost sales by as much 50 percent, according to Foodservice Equipment & Supplies.

Be sure to keep space in mind when making purchase decisions — refrigeration equipment suited for grab-and-go has to be properly located (not too close to windows and doors, away from heat sources, breathing room around the condenser, etc.) to work efficiently.

Rule 3: Remember regulations.

In 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced new rules that delist certain refrigerants. While this regulatory burden falls mostly on the shoulders of manufacturers, foodservice directors buying new refrigeration must adhere to the rules. When looking for refrigeration equipment that fits the bill, be sure to scrutinize the total cost of ownership — and check with your electric company to see if you qualify for rebates thanks to compliance.
Rule 1: Make room for room service updates.

For increasingly discerning patients and visitors, a hotel-style room service model can be a boon for patient satisfaction ratings. There are benefits to the bottom line, too – thanks to reduced food waste, for one.

Switching fully to a room service model may require foodservice directors to rethink their serving equipment. For one, offering a greater variety of menu items may require additional types or quantities of equipment and supplies. Quiet carts, for instance, are a must; since the frequency of meal delivery will expand with the room service model, it’s especially important to minimize disruption to patients and visitors.

Rule 2: Supercharge their salad.

The salad bar is a healthy staple in many healthcare foodservice settings, but the bar has been raised in recent years. Consumers expect a variety of options (several types of lettuce, vegetables, proteins, pre-made salads, dressings and toppings), which can impede the flow of traffic during busy lunch periods. Explore ways to move people through more quickly (double-sided bars with the same offerings on each side, for instance). And as with buffets and salad bars in any other foodservice operation, aesthetics matter.
Chapter 5: Smallwares, cookware and kitchen tools
Supply, outfit, stock and serve

Rule 1: Know your quantity.

The basic rules of cookware and smallwares haven’t changed in a while — aluminum is still great for conducting heat; cast iron is still durable and naturally non-stick; stainless is still low maintenance and easy to clean. But when it comes to menu changes, expansions or remodels, it might not be the types of smallwares that are stumping you, but the necessary quantity.

Below are the basic guidelines for several different types of operations; given the fact that modern healthcare foodservice concepts run the gamut (from restaurant-style retail to catering and banquet operations) these numbers can provide a baseline for a variety of applications.

- Cafeteria
- Deli
- Restaurant

Rule 2: Little updates can make a big difference.

A trend toward healthcare system consolidation means bigger and more complex foodservice operations. And with this comes an even bigger emphasis on efficiency and cost control. Mergers also mean that foodservice directors are in greater competition with other departments for a piece of the budgetary pie. And on a large scale, small changes in smallwares can make a big difference. One anecdote we’ve heard involves a simple pan switch in a buffet line — from a large buffet pan to individual servings — that resulted in less food waste and huge cost savings.
Rule 1: Rethink holding.

Remove the taboo of hot holding. With new technologies and features, hot holding equipment can help foodservice directors save time, labor and money and maintain consistency – without any degradation to the quality or taste of the food. Pulse heat technology, which uses low-intensity heat at a high volume, makes it easy to hold food for longer periods without drying it out. Humidifying technology is another option for some types of food that need to stay moist.

Heated and cooled food wells/prep tables are another consideration. With the increase in assembly line concepts, foodservice directors must find ways to efficiently keep food, hot or cold, in a very visible way. This means storage and handling that offers the flexibility for hot and cold and aesthetic appeal.

Rule 2: Farm-to-table storage.

The trend toward fresher ingredients may require a slight shift in storage equipment. Experts recommend clear storage bins, for example, particularly for more perishable produce and grains. This allows for easier visibility to monitor freshness. Storing the produce in the boxes straight off the delivery truck is a no-no; clean things immediately and transfer them to sanitary storage. Specialty storage bins – such as those with drainage to wick away moisture from fruits and veggies – also are available. Take stock of your ingredients and look for storage best suited to maintain their integrity and freshness.
Rule 1: Up your tray presentation.

As mentioned, room service is elevating the dining experience in many healthcare facilities. But the menu and on-demand service isn’t the whole story. Foodservice directors are paying attention to detail — making sure the trays, servingware and other elements are modern and appealing. Presentation matters, and tabletop and servingware manufacturers offer an array of durable, cost-effective solutions that still raise the bar on aesthetics. Consider added touches — like linen napkins — that can take the experience up a notch. The same concept applies for retail and cafeteria applications.

Rule 2: Rethink reusable.

For healthcare foodservice operators who have a choice between disposable and reusable servingware, the decision often comes down to long-term costs, and several variables factor in. But while disposable servingware may seem like the easier option, reusables can save money, and the planet, in the long run. While operators must factor in the upfront cost of warewashing equipment, reusables often offer long-term savings. Those that need disposables for grab-and-go options may still want to consider reusable cutlery for the remainder of foodservice.
Chapter 8: Warewashing, janitorial and safety equipment

Clean, disinfect and protect

Rule 1: Watch your water.

The EPA asserts that hospitality and foodservice operations make up 15 percent of the total commercial and institutional water use in the United States — the majority of that coming from the kitchen. In fact, by 2019, all prerinse spray valves must allow a max of 1.28 gallons of water per minute, down from 1.6. The aforementioned valve change may save an estimated $500 over the life of the part, according to Foodservice Equipment & Supplies. When shopping for dishwashers, new features include dual rinse zones and heat recovery systems that save water and energy.

Rule 2: Vent smart.

Several equipment types allow you to eliminate or reduce ventilation, but what about the ventilation itself? And the whole HVAC system, for that matter? Smart ventilation systems can decide when and at what speed to run exhaust fans, saving significant amounts of energy.

Another way to save money on ventilation is to streamline cooking operations/techniques. Multipurpose equipment, such as a combi-oven, can reduce the amount of linear hood you’ll need — saving in equipment and energy costs. Finally, don’t let all that heat generated in the kitchen go to waste in the winter time: Heat recovery systems recycle it for use in other areas of the building, reducing heating costs significantly.
Rule 1: Rule with retail environments.

Retail foodservice is an agreed-upon area for growth in healthcare, according to FoodService Director’s 2016 Healthcare Census Report: 69 percent of respondents say that this portion of their business has grown in the last two years. Lunch and breakfast are seen as the two biggest opportunities; other services, including catering, cooking demos and coffee kiosks, also are on respondents’ list of offerings. Some even cite full-service, in-house restaurants as a way they’re ramping up dining options.

To pull this off in a way that’s attractive to staff, visitors and even patients, healthcare facilities have to emulate surrounding restaurants and cafés. That means everything from mixed seating options (booths, tables and lounge furniture) to more on-trend décor. Consumers appreciate foodservice design that is a nod to the local culture, people and history. In this vein, quality matters. Choose solid, quality décor that looks great and will stand the test of time, even if it means spending more upfront.

Rule 2: Liven things up.

Healthcare facilities, by nature, must be clean and sterile. Still, foodservice directors can liven things up and lift moods with strategic décor choices. Bright colors, wall art and thematic designs can encourage patronage and increase patient and visitor satisfaction. Outdoor seating, when possible – or leaving windows free of drapery to let in natural light – is another way to brighten up days.
There’s more where that came from.

If you’re overwhelmed with foodservice equipment and supplies purchasing decisions, or simply want to see everything that’s out there in one convenient trip, make time for The NAFEM Show, Feb. 7-9, 2019, in Orlando, Fla. It’s the one place where you’ll have access to all of the industry’s leading equipment and supplies manufacturers.

About The NAFEM Show

The NAFEM Show is a biennial experience brought to you by the North American Association of Food Equipment Manufacturers (NAFEM), a trade association of 500+ foodservice equipment and supplies manufacturers providing products for food preparation, cooking, storage and table service.