

Counters and Serveries

Counters and serveries are different types of the same thing. They are merchandising units which allow food to be kept at the right temperature for best taste and food safety, in good condition and looking tempting to a customer. There is some blurring of interpretation of what is the difference between a counter and a servery, but a widespread understanding is that counters are fixed and serveries are mobile.

Fixed countering

This is what is used in self-service traylines as in cafeterias, staff restaurants or motorway service areas. It combines units for everything from tableware to hot food, chilled food and a paypoint. There are two types of construction process. Bespoke is where everything about the countering is designed specifically for the installation by a kitchen designer, either one of the manufacturer's design team or a specialist commercial kitchen designer.

Modular construction is where the final appearance of the countering looks bespoke, but has been built mainly from standard units, which are fitted together. Modular is much cheaper than bespoke and can provide every item of countering needed, but it will be using the manufacturer's designs. However, there are still lots of design variations to choose from such as colour schemes and surface materials.

Mobile serveries

These are at their most useful in situations where serving space is limited, in multi-use or if food and drink service is only needed at one period in the day and the space needed for another function at other times. Examples of this might be in a hotel needing extra service area for breakfast, a hotel conference suite for lunch or dinner service, schools where the dining area has to meet other needs outside lunchtime, hospital sites where there are separate wards or accommodation units or a pub where there is a need for a lunch counter, but the same area is needed for bar area in the evening.

The versatility of mobile serveries is their main advantage. They can be configured, linked or connected to provide all the features of fixed serveries.

Tableware dispense points and ambient countering are quite straightforward, but where heated and chilled service points are to be installed there are some important considerations.

Heated dispense points

There are three main display heating systems. Where dishes of food contain fried foods or pastry goods where crispness needs to be maintained, under-dish heating is usually done through dry heat contact plates. These can either be built into the countering with tiles, toughened glass or ceramics, or on independent heated trays. The advantage of under-counter heating is that it allows for serving dishes of different sizes to be easily moved about on the heated surface. Smaller serving dishes containing other foods such as vegetables are also suitable for this style of heating.

“Wet” foods with a high sauce content such as curries, pasta sauces and boiled or steamed vegetables are best kept warm in the gentle heat of a bains-marie containing very hot water, which will have the added advantage of surrounding the foods with a gentle steamy atmosphere, helping prevent drying out and skinning of sauces.

The third way of holding food hot is by use of overhead quartz lamps. This is normally used in conjunction with a gantry for individual servings of main course dishes such as lasagne and cottage pie where there is rapid throughput of dishes and good presentation and portion control is needed. It is also a popular way of keep roast meats hot on a carvery unit.

Refrigerated units

These are needed for items which for enjoyment of eating or drinking and food safety reasons the food has to be kept chilled. There are three systems of refrigeration which can be incorporated into servery display units.

- Dole-well – This is static chilling where there is a recessed area in the counter with a steel base which has under-counter refrigeration. Their main use is for chilling soft drinks and for short-term chilling needs such as lunchtime salads. Refrigeration tends to be restricted to the lower part of the item.
- Gravity chilling – This is most often seen as upright cabinets holding items such as sandwiches and pre-portioned salad plates. Cold air comes out of vents in the top of the cabinet and because cold air naturally falls, the food is kept chilled. It works best with enclosed display counters incorporating glass doors.

Blown air chilling – This gives a very even spread of chilling. It is the preferred method where chilled foods are being put on display over a long period of if the foods have associated food safety issues if displayed at incorrect temperatures. Examples of this are foods containing eggs, dairy products, cooked meats and rice. Because the chilled air is being blown, chilling is very even and thermostatically controlled.

There are some key design elements of counter and servery design. These include eye contact between chefs and customers is important, don't have chefs obscured by gantries and holding cupboards. Chefs also need to be able to hand plates across to customers easily.

It is important that different sections look different so it is clear to customers where to go to for what they want. Separate out drinks and snacks from main courses so those just wanting a drink are not held in a queue behind those buying a full meal. Customers buying drinks get impatient if just before the cashier they are held up by someone buying a meal. Alternatively, have the drinks dispense the last service point before the cashier so those wanting just drinks can go straight to the end. Have cutlery, serviettes and condiments in a freestanding dispense point after the till to avoid hold-ups.

If the servery is only in use for part of the day, say lunchtime in a pub, then a fixed servery takes up customer drinking space in the evening and looks dreary. Opt for a mobile servery.

Look after it!

There may be almost no moving parts on counters and serveries, but there are still things to go wrong if they are not looked after properly. Hot counters often have a bain marie system

powered by electric elements. A common cause of element damage is running the unit without enough water in. There may be a thermal cut-out connected to the heating elements, but not all have them and if it is not working properly, then running low or without water will be costly.

The water is almost always a manual fill from the mains hot water system or from a water boiler. The hot water mains are unlikely to have water treatment fitted – this usually comes with each individual unit in the kitchen. Water boilers should have a water treatment system fitted, but may not.

Either way, there is the strong possibility of scale build up on the heating elements. This causes the elements to work harder than designed to and is poor energy efficiency. Simple manual addition of water treatment tablets or loose salts occasionally will help prevent this problem.

Tiled surfaces on serveries are not as popular as they once were, but are still around. The problems with tiled surfaces is that grouting can become discoloured and both look off-putting for customers and raise eyebrows of environmental health officers. Keep the grout clean and use a proprietary grout cleaner to bring back the whiteness.

Tile cracking is not caused by heat from containers as sometimes claimed, but by banging heavy pots down on the tiles. A cracked tile must be replaced immediately for food safety reasons and can be a costly repair.

Serveries in the kitchen often a glass gantry with heat and light lamps shining down. The glass is toughened, but not indestructible. If staff continually slam plates down on the gantry there is the risk of damage and loosening of the fastening bolts.

With refrigerated counters care should be taken that the vents blowing out the cold air are not obstructed by dishes or bottles. This will force the compressor to work harder than it needs to and cause unnecessary wear. With upright chiller serveries that have plastic curtains on, ensure the curtains are clean, in good condition and free to sit snugly to avoid excessive loss of cold air. As with cabinet refrigeration, the use of a vacuum cleaner with appropriate attachment can be used to clean dust from the vents and the area around the compressor.

In brief

Do

- Keep scrupulously clean
- Ensure refrigeration vents are not obstructed
- Clean inside motor housing
- Check any grouted tiled surfaces for wear
- Watch out for limescale build-up on water heating elements

Don't

- Clean stainless steel with abrasive scourers
- Leave doors open
- Allow bains marie to run dry of water

- Obstruct air circulation vents
- Move a mobile serveries without checking it is not plugged in

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