

The Wok Way

An Asian wok station can be one of the most popular, and flexible, stations in an onsite dining venue. Here's some advice on creating one that's authentic and efficient.

Thu, 2012-03-01 12:00

[Food Management](#)

Albin Khouw



The emergence of action stations in onsite dining venues has opened the door to many cooking practices that were once reserved for professional chefs and restaurateurs. One such practice is the art of wok cooking, a technique has been around for more than 2,000 years. It dates as far back as the Han Dynasty when woks made of pottery

were used over open fires.

One thing is certain: Chinese and other Asian cuisines are here to stay. Wok cooking is now prevalent in almost every corner of the globe, including venues on college campuses, in hospitals, schools and corporate dining facilities.

What makes wok dishes so popular? One reason is that they are perceived as healthier and lighter alternatives to traditional fare such as pizza or burgers. (Although some argue that Chinese food is high in fat and cholesterol, that can be reduced by using mono or polyunsaturated oil for cooking.)

Another is that at many wok stations customers can customize meals, choosing from a variety of sides, meats, sauces and vegetables and having them cooked to order. Finally, wok station techniques can be fairly easily taught to front line employees, providing customers with live culinary action at modest labor costs.

Key Equipment

The equipment requirements for a wok station depend largely on its application and purpose. Production volume, available space, desired station sophistication all can vary. This affects wok equipment specs, which can range from a very compact induction wok unit to a heavy duty gas fired wok range.

For maximum versatility, a wok range is essential. These come in different configurations, from a single chamber unit to those with multiple chambers and various accessories. It is critical to specify the chamber size and burner requirements carefully.

For high volume stir fry production, an 18- or 20-inch diameter chamber should be used. A smaller 13- to 16-inch chamber can accommodate hand held wok units more suitable for preparing shallow fry products. Burner types vary from the traditional three ring burners used in large chambers to specialized

jet tip or shield burners used where high-Btu heat input is required. It is common to specify a mix of burner types on multiple chamber wok ranges to ensure maximum flexibility.

Especially for shallow frying or deep frying, very high heat input is required to keep cooking time to a minimum. This maintains nutrient content and ensures that vegetables remain crispy.

A wok is a versatile vessel that can be used for deep frying, stir frying, blanching, braising and even steaming. (To use one for steaming, as they do for traditional dim sum, the bottom is filled with water and large covered bamboo containers are set or stacked across the bowl so steam rises through them).

You can even use a wok to prepare desserts. Chinese restaurants offer items like fried bananas, prepared by mixing a scoop of sugar with a small amount of oil for caramelization, then use this to finish off banana slices that have previously been coated with flour and deep fried.

In Chinese restaurants, all of these techniques are used. In Cantonese-style cooking, foods are generally shallow fried or flash fried quickly to maintain a light taste as well as texture and flavor. This is the practice used to prepare Szechuan food (also known as Hunan or western-style cuisine).

Other equipment that can support an Asian station may include a deep fat fryer (for eggrolls, spring rolls, etc.), a rice cooker, a rice warmer, convection steamer and a stock pot range. A convection steamer can be used in lieu of a rice cooker to cook large batches of rice. The stock pot range is commonly used in Asian restaurants to keep broth stocks warm for stir fry dishes and soups. How critical these pieces of equipment are to the operation will depend on menu, available space and the proximity of a kitchen that can provide additional production support.

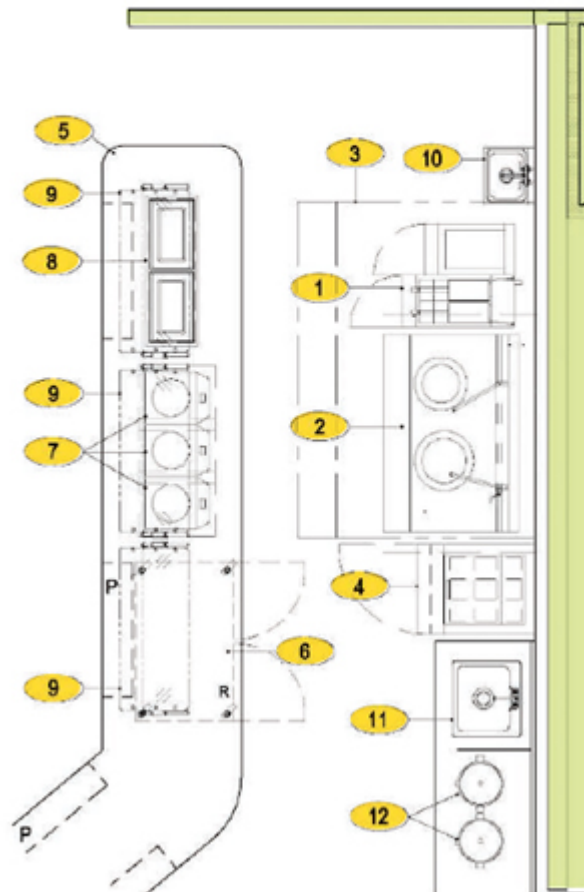
Other Design Considerations

A wok range is a very high heat and high grease-producing piece of equipment. Exhaust hoods with adequate capture space to ensure smoke and grease are contained in the cooking area are a must. Hoods should be equipped with water wash and UV light features that help minimize grease build up in the exhaust plenum and ducts. It is best to have the hood manufacturer engineer the exhaust system in accordance with national standards and code requirements.

A wok range can be fired either by natural gas or liquid propane. It is important to identify the type of gas available before ordering the equipment so burners can be specified to match.

ASIAN WOK STATION

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Fryer w/ Dump Station (QTY 1) | 7. Wok Induction Warmer (QTY 3) |
| 2. Wok Range (QTY 1) | 8. Drop-in Hot/Cold Unit (QTY 1) |
| 3. Exhaust Hood (QTY 1) | 9. Food Guard (QTY 3) |
| 4. Mobile Refrigerated Prep Station | 10. Hand Sink (QTY 1) |
| 5. Front Counter (QTY 1) | 11. Prep Counter w/ Sink (QTY 1) |
| 6. Undercounter Refrigerator (QTY 1) | 12. Rice Cooker (QTY 2) |



Some wok ranges are equipped with a cascading water spray feature to keep the range cool and easy to clean. If you're considering this feature, ensure that a drain line is available near the range and that a grease trap will be connected to it.

If you intend to cook rice in a steamer, a potable (food safe) steam source is necessary, often not the case in on-site venues. The alternative is to specify a built-in steam boiler along with the steamer as part of the basic station design.

Operational Issues

Despite its rising popularity, you shouldn't assume Asian-style cooking will automatically be popular in a given venue. Careful research should determine that there is a demand for it. This can also help you identify favorite items customers buy at local establishments and guide menu development.

Understanding the eating habits of customers in a particular venue and being able to rate and prioritize desired menu options can also help you build management consensus for and acceptance of a particular concept.

In high volume environments, it's also important to ensure that selections can be easily prepared while maintaining consistency in quality, taste and value. Asian stations are generally open for lunch and dinner service. To minimize down time, some operators combine this station with others to form an international station cluster.

These can include a Mongolian grill, a sushi bar and/or a flat top Hibachi grill in addition to the wok cooking area. The benefits of co-sharing a cooking platform are many, including an increased flexibility to meet changing demands for menu rotation, increased labor efficiency (by cross training staff to operate various pieces of equipment) and the ability to utilize the station all day long.

Batch Cooking vs. Cook-to-Order

Two levels of production and service are typical. The first is batch-style cooking in which food is cooked in larger portions and moved to pans on the serving line. This is common in high volume venues or in restaurant buffet lines. Efficient operation requires that cooking staff gauge ongoing demand for specific items and adjust production to match, as some offerings will require more frequent replenishment than others.

The second style of service is a cooked-to-order scenario. This is more prevalent in commercial restaurants. Again, a smaller, hand held wok over a 13" or 16" diameter chamber is more conducive to individual portion cooking.

Planning a successful Asian station concept also requires careful thought as to how key ingredients will be prepped in advance and stored for ongoing use. Fresh ingredients sliced or cut into bite size portions are essential to achieve authentic results and this adds additional labor costs to the mix.

Adding a fully equipped Asian station will cost about \$80,000. It's usually a good investment considering the wide range of menu choices one of these stations can generate.

Albin Khouw is Senior Vice President of Design and Operations for Porter Khouw Consulting, Inc. a foodservice planning and design consulting firm based in Crofton, Maryland.

www.porterkhouwconsulting.com

APPROXIMATE COSTS

ESSENTIAL ESSENTIALS

- Single chamber wok range (\$4,400-\$9,000)
- Double chamber wok range (\$6,200-\$10,000)
- Refrigerated ingredient station (27-32" wide unit, \$2,000-\$3,200)
- Rice cooker (40-50 cup capacity, \$250-\$500)
- Exhaust ventilator with fire protection system - varies with size of cooking line (approximately 12" long with MUA (\$10,000-\$15,000))
- Hand sink (\$700-\$1,200)

OPTIONAL

- Fryer battery w/ filter (2 fryers w/ heated dump, \$13,000-\$28,000)
- Reach-in refrigerator (\$7,000-\$12,000)
- Convection steamer (5 pan electric counter unit, \$5,000-\$7,500)
- Rice warmer (23 cup capacity, \$200-\$400)
- Hot Well for self serve sides & appetizers (\$2,000-\$3,000)
- Under counter warmer for ribs & pot stickers (\$5,000-\$7,100)

Source URL: <http://food-management.com/station-concepts/wok-way>