

The Future of Fresh-Air Kitchens

Foodservice in the gaming sector continues to evolve, pandemic or not.

Some dining adjustments made to cope with COVID-19 may be abandoned once public life returns to normal, but others will become permanent fixtures in American lifestyles. One of the habits with staying power: three-season outdoor dining.

10 Tips for Outdoor Kitchens

- 1** Start with the menu. “Success in outdoor dining begins with compelling menus and recipes that speak to people who want the excitement of outdoor barbecuing and grilling, but in a safe way,” says Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, of New York-based Arlene Spiegel & Associates.
- 2** Have a plan if you want to do open-flame cooking. You won’t have a Type 1 hood over cooking equipment used outdoors, but the design team may still need to find a mechanical solution to divert smoke away from diners, whether it’s a chimney, flue or fan.
- 3** Consider using holding equipment instead of cooking. “Many health departments, building departments and fire departments really do not want open-flame cooking,” Spiegel notes. She suggests using electric grills or induction cooking. Or, she says, “Charring and flaming can be done indoors in the kitchen, and the food rolled out in fully enclosed holding units to be finished with some flair in front of guests. There’s so much mobile controlled-vapor heat-and-hold equipment that’s also ventless; you can wheel out all kinds of goodies — offer them from tableside carts.”
- 4** Incorporate a mobile hand sink. Mobile sinks with a self-contained water supply are a handy alternative.
- 5** Think about how to use outdoor counter surfaces. Counters can be used for vendors to set up marketing materials, or as a beverage or champagne station.
- 6** The surface underfoot is important, too. You need to follow the food code when doing outdoor flooring.
- 7** Efficient, sanitary service depends on a well-thought-out food ordering and delivery system. “People are still looking for safety first, so you have to make it easy to order food and get it from the kitchen to the plate,” Spiegel says. “What has been working well is mobile ordering through a QR code that guests scan on their phone from a menu pop tent on the table. The order goes wirelessly to the kitchen prep area, then gets put on a tray with a plate cover to be delivered by a server.”
- 8** Make a detailed plan, then talk to the health department before proceeding. The biggest challenge is the fact that the health codes don’t really address requirements for outdoor cooking and serving.
- 9** A plan that involves a permanent structure calls for a building permit. Temporary structures in privately owned suburban parking lots and strip malls usually will not require permitting, so operators in those types of locations have more flexibility, as long as the landlord agrees.
- 10** Consider a food truck and/or mobile kitchen. Food trucks and enclosed mobile kitchens (fitted into trailers or shipping containers) offer ready-to-go alternatives for preparing and serving food to those dining outdoors.