

“The Importance of Preventive Hood Cleaning and Maintenance: Don’t Play With Fire.”

I. Intro

Most Facility Managers have a basic understanding of why hood cleaning is important, but we should go beyond the basics to really understand the reasons why this is such a crucial part of facility maintenance for businesses with kitchens. As you will see, there is more to this than shining the visible parts of your hoods.

A casual Google search of the term “restaurant fire” calls up an endless string of local affiliate news stories all over the country that briefly describe a restaurant fire with no clear cause. Try it for yourself if you’re curious. As many restaurant fires as can be directly linked to an issue with the hood, ductwork, or exhaust fan (through the research of NFPA—the National Fire Prevention Association), there are plenty more that aren’t encompassed by a report or study. In the case of more destructive fires especially, it may also be particularly hard to identify an exact cause.

II. The Hazards of the Kitchen

Kitchens, especially high-volume kitchens, have all the necessary ingredients for a potent mix of fire hazards. There are a myriad of electrical systems and appliances, in addition to grease, carbons, water vapor, flour, and seasonings—amongst other things. Let’s not forget open flames or cooking surfaces supplied by a network of gas lines.

Heat, fuel, and oxygen makeup the Fire Triangle, and Kitchens have ample sources of all of them. For this reason, accidents can happen in even the best-intentioned, most well-run kitchens.

The Hoods above cooking surfaces in tandem with exhaust fans provide an essential bit of forced ventilation that sucks grease-laden smoke and fumes out of the kitchen. When these, in addition to the filters, are cleaned regularly and functioning properly, they provide both safety and cleanliness.

III. What could go wrong?

The hood sucks the smoke up through the filters, into the ductwork, and the exhaust fan on the roof finishes the job by pulling it up and blowing it out through the filters on the roof. However, as all that smoke travels upward it leaves a residue of grease (and particulate matter that adheres to it) all over the hood, filters, inner walls of the ductwork, and on the exhaust fan itself. As you can imagine this accumulation can easily become a fuel source over time and in unfortunate scenarios provide a direct, flammable pathway from a fire in the kitchen to the roof—aiding the spread of the flames through parts of the building that don’t have fire suppression systems.

A fire is, of course, the worst-case scenario. However, unmaintained filters, hoods, duct work, and exhaust fans will increasingly lose efficiency as they get clogged until they barely function at all. This will shorten the lifespan of your equipment and increase capital expenditures over time.

Also, the inefficiency of grease-clogged equipment can lead to all sorts of ambient grease in the air, which creates a film on everything, discolors ceilings, and leaves lingering, unpleasant odors that escape

the confines of the kitchen. Fully functioning and regularly cleaned hoods can be the difference between a kitchen that appears clean and professional and one that appears messy and unprofessional. This is not the impression you want to give guests considering whether they want to eat your food.

As the general manager, facilities manager, or owner of a business with a kitchen it always behooves you to do everything possible to limit the number of these controllable instances so that you keep your equipment, employees and guests safe. Working with a trusted partner to schedule regular preventive cleaning of the hood, ductwork, exhaust fan, and the roof surrounding the exhaust fan is the best way to ensure this. Neglecting this regular part of your facilities' maintenance is to, quite literally, play with fire.

IV. What to Avoid (Pro Tips)

Don't Skip Cleanings

You don't want to gamble with fire hazards or even messy, smelly kitchens. The longer you go without regular, preventive cleanings the more your hoods and exhaust fans are strained by clogging. The reduced efficiency and strain can shorten the life of your equipment and ultimately create a potential fire hazard in your establishment. Frugality is important, but not when it comes to protecting property and potentially the safety of employees and guests, as well.

V. What should you do?

A nightly discipline in the kitchen should be the cleaning and soaking of the hood filters. These are the first line of defense against grease accumulation in the ductwork and exhaust fan. Beyond that, seek out a trusted partner that can provide regular, preventive cleaning, and maintenance. They can help you determine the most ideal frequency of service for your establishment based on the type of equipment you have, the types of food prepared, the type of fuel used, the volume of your business, and your budget.

Working closely with a partner can also provide you the certainty of knowing exactly what is going inside your ventilation system and ductwork—rather than having to guess.

On that note, make sure to find a company that ensures a thoroughly completed job by providing detailed reports and photographic documentation afterwards. This is also essential for providing evidence to any internal shareholder or outside party who might walk into your establishment to inspect your kitchen.

Work with a Partner that ensures properly completed work

As the title suggests, hood cleaning is more than cleaning and polishing the visible areas. There are several steps to ensure it is cleaned effectively and thoroughly, throughout.

Firstly, the technicians need to be inspecting, then shutting off the exhaust fan. At this point they would be making note of any issues with damaged parts, other areas of concern.

Then, they would need to prep the kitchen by unplugging and shutting off pilot lights, appliances, and gas lines. Then all equipment would need to be covered by using ample plastic (taped and/or clamped) to ensure that none of the cleaning water splashes onto anything in the kitchen or runs down behind ranges to damage electrical outlets.

As the ductwork is physically scraped clean, then sprayed from the roof-down with a cleaning solution, all this drips down the ductwork, through the affixed plastic, and into a large trash can or another vessel. This water shouldn't be flowing directly into your floor drains, as you can turn this above-ground grease issue into another invisible, below-ground grease issue in your grease traps and plumbing. Make sure you work with a vendor who disposes of this off-site.

Once this is completed and the exhaust fan is secured back in place all the visible parts of the hood and filters should be cleaned and polished, all of the plastic should be taken down, and any small residual mess should be cleaned before they leave.

All equipment at this point would be cleaned, connected, turned on, and inspected again for any issues.

The technicians should then update the service tag on the hood and provide digital photographs of the cleaned equipment.

I know what you might be thinking— “This seems pretty straightforward. Did I need to read 1100 words to understand this?” Maybe not. But what I want to emphasize is that working with a trusted vendor partner to help determine the correct technicians and the appropriate cleaning frequency for your establishments will help you focus on other things; set it and forget it, to some degree. Maybe set it and maintain it is the more appropriate way to think of it.

That's really the goal—to create a preventive cleaning schedule that removes any uncertainty in this matter. Allow yourself the peace of mind to focus on other, more pressing matters.