

## We Need To Talk.....About Your Grease Trap Maintenance

### I. Intro—We Need To Talk

There is nothing glamorous about this, and it may even be something you are putting off, but we really need to talk about it—your Grease Trap maintenance program, that is.

Let's be honest--this isn't clean or enviable work. It isn't necessarily the first thing on the mind of a restaurant general manager, facilities manager, or owner. You may also have noticed that the subject of grease trap maintenance is curiously absent from the recent wave of chef-as-celebrity, docu-short TV narratives that have emerged in popular culture over the last few years. Whether as a facilities manager or a guest--we often want to look at and think about our food-service establishments in a more favorable, or even sometimes glamorous light. However, restaurants and businesses with kitchens absolutely have to keep up on their Grease Trap maintenance. Let a Preventive Maintenance program allow you to the peace of mind to focus on the more central aspects of your brand.

### II. The Tendency To Ignore Grease Traps

The cleaning and maintenance of these interceptors isn't something that everyone will want to roll up their sleeves and try for themselves. And even though this vast, largely invisible network of pipes flowing through, under, and out of your property into the byzantine network of the municipal sewer system can get clogged, they are largely out-of-sight-out-of-mind until they cause a problem.

The tendency for general managers and facilities managers is to focus on the food, the front of house, the ambiance, and ultimately the customer experience. This is understandable—these are the fun, glamorous, and central aspects of the business. The Facilities Manager might also be focused on larger scale projects. However, not putting thought into regular cleaning and maintenance of your grease traps can lead to serious and long-lasting issues that take time, energy, and money away from your main business.

### III. The Context

Any restaurant that cooks with meat, poultry, butter, margarine, lard, cooking oil, or dairy needs to implement consistent, preventive maintenance and regular cleaning of their grease traps. There are simple reasons for this, and there are far-reaching consequences if ignored.

Fat, Oil, and Grease (FOG) congeal once they cool, attaching to other bits of solid matter and forming hard blockages throughout the pipes leading from your establishments to the municipal sewer system. You've probably even heard of these "Fatbergs" that have made news in recent years by causing significant blockages in the sewer systems of cities like Melbourne, Baltimore, New York, and London. Even a small area like Stafford County, Virginia pays over 1.6 million dollars a year in maintenance fees to remove FOG from their municipal sewer system! This context is really important for understanding why regulations get tighter and tighter, why municipalities take this as seriously they do, and ultimately why they will quickly levy fines.

Consistently implementing best practices to minimize the amount of FOG and solid food particles that make it into your pipes or grease traps in the first place, is key. However, and even if all best practices are implemented, FOG will still accumulate in your grease traps, grease interceptors, and drainpipes. This is an issue beneath you and your patrons' feet that you cannot ignore.

#### IV. What's the solution?

The best preventive maintenance for grease traps and grease interceptors is to regularly schedule pumping and cleaning with a trusted partner. The partner should pump it out, removing all liquids and FOG. They should scrape and clean off all the interior surfaces of the grease traps, checking all T's and parts for cracks or breaks. They should also hydro-jet all the pipes leading to the grease trap, and the ones leading out of the restaurant towards the municipal sewer lines, as well. This is crucial to ensure that FOG doesn't slowly accumulate in the pipes over time--reducing the overall efficiency of the plumbing system and ultimately leading to clogs and possible backups.

#### V. What can happen if you don't

I know Halloween was a few months ago now, but I am here to scare you. Just a little. Here's what can happen if you aren't scheduling regular preventive maintenance:

#### **Foul Odors**

Accumulations of used FOG smell bad. There is no better way to say it. Whether these odors are noticeable behind your establishment, as customers pull into your parking lot or drive-through, or emanating from the kitchen, it's gross. Impressions about your brand can be formed in a matter of moments, and foul odors won't ingratiate guests to your brand.

#### **Clogs**

Skipping regular cleaning, maintenance, and especially hydro jetting can lead to plumbing clogs over time. As the FOG cools it will slowly harden around the inside of the pipe, decreasing water flow and efficiency over time. Eventually this will lead to clogged pipes. From here, nothing good happens. Clogged sewage pipes will start to backup--into the municipal storm drains, onto your property, or even into your restaurant in bathrooms and floor drains.

From here, you are facing a myriad of fines, municipally-mandated cleaning protocols (sometimes even being held responsible for cleanup miles downstream), expensive plumbing costs, facility closure (including lost revenues), and possibly a tarnished customer reputation if any guests are privy to an incident.

### **Fines and Expenses**

We just alluded to this, but municipalities (large and small) take this even more seriously all the time. Due to the huge costs they incur keeping the sewer system clean and berg-free, they are eager to pass those additional expenses on to residential and business customers alike. Identifying a business that clearly violates FOG policies is an easy way for them to offload some of this cost. In New York City business owners can incur fines as large as \$10,000 a day for each violation, for example. Add those sorts of fines to a potentially large plumbers' bill and cleaning protocol (depending upon how extensive the dispersal is), and combine these with the cost of lost revenue if you have to shut down.

### **Closures and damaged reputation**

In an era of Yelp reviews and instant, user-submitted feedback on any number of platforms, customer perception is huge and can spread instantly. As we mentioned earlier, foul smells, unexpected closures, or in a worst-case scenario, sewage backing up into your establishment can damage perception in an instant, and that perception can be shared as easily as hitting post, submit, record, or Go Live! Remember, just as important as the music, the interior design, and the food itself are the maintenance issues beneath your feet.

## **VI. The Benefit of Working with a Trusted Partner**

Despite all the complexity of understanding how grease traps work, not to mention the patchwork of municipal legislation that governs disposal of FOG, rest assured that regular preventive maintenance from a trusted vendor is the easiest way to have peace of mind about your grease traps and interceptors.

While it is important for key-stakeholders and management to understand how grease trap maintenance works and the importance of it--there is something profound to be said about the peace of mind that comes with regularly scheduled cleaning and maintenance. A quality vendor will also maintain all necessary documentation relative to cleaning, maintenance, and condition of the grease traps, as well as the proper disposal of the FOG itself. The vendor can either keep those documents on-site or maintain them in their own system.

This is important because if someone walks into your establishment to audit your grease trap compliance, the ultimate peace of mind is being able to show them documents for regularly scheduled cleaning and maintenance. Trying to plead a case for the efficiency of regular self-inspection with a sludge stick and only calling a vendor "when necessary," will be more time-consuming, frustrating, and might not prevent fines or further inspection. Instead, play it safe—schedule regular grease trap cleanings and get back to focusing on the more central, and visible aspects of your business.