

What's Next?

restaurant
development+design

By Amelia Levin

after a year of challenge and upheaval it's a good time to take a deep breath and ask "What's next?"

Kitchens need to better handle high-volume production.

When dining rooms closed, many operators were forced into takeout only, which became either a burden or a ripe opportunity to expand menus and try out virtual concepts. What started as an effort to keep doors open turned into test runs for long-term, successful business models.

These secondary, virtual concepts have had — and will continue to have — a direct impact on back-of-the-house design, says **Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, founder and president, Arlene Spiegel & Associates.** While kitchen designers know the challenges of having to fight for every square inch of kitchen space, architects might be more inclined to make more space in the back of the house (while potentially shrinking the front) to make more room for expanded takeout and delivery-only concepts that will need to operate like high-production commissary kitchens right inside traditional restaurant operations.

"It's all about the fight for yield management" says Spiegel. "Take an airline jet, for example. The goal is to have someone in every seat, but not everyone pays the same fare. Restaurants have always wanted all of their seats filled. But it's better to think of a kitchen as a production facility that serves not only people sitting inside but also eating the food elsewhere. You have to be able to cook larger volumes of meals, and safely chill and freeze food while maintaining the same quality. Add to that the growth of meal kits and even cocktails to go. As long as you have the right equipment and the right operational structure, you could literally be running 24/7."

Given those changes, Spiegel has seen tremendous growth in the interest of sous vide machines, blast chilling equipment, more flexible pieces like combi ovens, and even processing and packaging equipment for fulfillment and distribution from both restaurants and ghost kitchen operators.

"Restaurants might need to create a new position: logistics manager," she says.

Retail space will open up additional revenue streams.

One fun surprise we saw during the pandemic — and what became another crucial source of revenue for restaurants — was the addition of pop-up markets or retail spaces within restaurants that not only sell the restaurant's menu to-go but other grocery items and even essentials.

"Remember that term 'grocerant'? I'm seeing more restaurants turn into mini groceries, rather than just the other way around," says Spiegel. "These are lifestyle concepts that can cater to everyone from single young professionals to married couples with three kids or office workers. These kinds of hybrid suppliers, I find, are in the best position to have longevity and the flexibility to not miss a beat if some- thing like a pandemic hits, when indoor dining is not going to work."

This is also how the meal kit phenomenon made its imprint during the pandemic, Spiegel believes.

"Restaurants are very well-suited to offer meal kits," she says.

Spiegel notes that the meal kit phenomenon could grow along with partnerships between restaurants and chefs and third-party meal kit providers. **"Food preparers are going to become very savvy about different outlets where they can sell their product," says Spiegel. +**