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Aloft-y Expectations

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Smart Kitchen Synergy

The Westin Verasa Napa finds efficiency in two specialized work areas rather than of one multi-use kitchen. BY JANICE CHA

At the Westin Verasa Napa in downtown Napa, California, all of the property's foodservice needs—including fine dining restaurant La Toque, the more casual Bank Bar, banquets, catering, and room service—are supplied through a unique partnership with La Toque Chef/Owner Ken Frank, who serves as the property's executive chef, F&B director, purchasing head, and B&C director.

Frank's kitchen is small (only 2,300 square feet, excluding walk-ins and wine storage) yet so well designed that it cranks out anywhere from 500 to 800 daily covers for the entire hotel. Food flows out in three directions to supply La Toque, banquets, and the Bank Café and Bar. Crossover is minimal, every inch of space is used to the hilt, and with the chef's office placed in the center, it's easy to keep an eye on key production areas.

"We planned the kitchen at the same time the Westin was in design, built simultaneously, and now we operate our businesses together," Frank says of the \$5 million foodservice project that opened in February 2008. "From a guest's point of view, it's all seamless."

General Manager Don Shindle agrees. "The single kitchen creates synergy that extends to all of the food served throughout the Westin Verasa Napa. Chef Frank created and built a state-of-the-art kitchen from scratch, designing it for flow and efficiency," Shindle says. "Because all food comes



Chef Ken Frank's kitchen is small yet it cranks out 500 to 800 covers daily. All action takes place in the space surrounding the chef's office, from which Frank can monitor areas including the pastry station, banquet prep/cookline, café and room service prep/cookline, and warewashing.

from one kitchen, our guests are guaranteed that the food they experience in their guest rooms, during conferences, or in Bank or La Toque was prepared thoughtfully and to the highest level of quality."

The Westin Napa's kitchen and restaurants were created by Frank in conjunction with restaurant consultant and designer Frank Muller, of Minden, Nevada-based Muller Design. Architectural plans were drawn up by San Francisco-based CCS Architects.

Chef Frank had three goals as he sat down with Muller to create the kitchen and restaurants. "First, I wanted to make sure La Toque had its own identity and kitchen so as not

to get lost in the hotel," he explains. "Second, I wanted the hotel kitchen to be located as close as possible to the restaurant so they could share food prep and production, storage, warewashing, and so on. And third, within the kitchen, I wanted a separate prep and cookline area for the Bank Café and room service and another area reserved for banquets and restaurant prep."

Smart kitchen design eliminated traffic crossovers while permitting a product flow pattern that keeps the Westin kitchen ticking.

All kitchen action takes place in the space surrounding the chef's

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office. Starting on the wall shared with La Toque and moving counter-clockwise around the kitchen's four sides, production areas include the pastry station, banquet prep/cookline, café and room service prep/cookline, and warewashing.

Placing the glass-walled chef's office in the heart of the kitchen was Frank's idea. "It's our command center," says Frank, who shares the two-chair space with four other people. "When I'm in the office working, I can still keep an eye on critical food production areas. I could have five times the office space elsewhere in the hotel, but I wouldn't be happy."

Access to the meat-poultry-fish walk-in is to the left of the banquet cookline, and access to the second walk-in, with produce, dairy, and frozen foods is to the right of the café cookline.

"In other hotels, walk-ins are often placed out of the way or down a hallway," says Muller, whose hotel kitchen design roster includes Hyatt and the Ritz-Carlton. "Here, staff can get what they need quickly without entering someone else's area."

Warewashing is located off to the side, away from the main food action yet handy for accepting dirty dishes from banquets, restaurants, and room service.

"Servers from La Toque can drop off a load of dishes, wash their hands, then turn around and pick up

a pastry order before they go back out," Muller says. "They don't have to enter the kitchen at all."

The Westin/La Toque partnership allows smarter use of labor and food sourcing. "We use the same staff for the restaurants, banquets, catering, and room service," Frank says. "And not only does food for all venues come from the same purveyors—saving on ordering times—it's prepared by the same cooks on the same equipment."

The arrangement translates into a marketing perk, since the hotel can advertise that La Toque operates literally all F&B within the property.

The Westin Verasa Napa and La Toque opened for business on the same bleak February day that Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy—or, as Frank puts it, "the day the U.S. economy went off the cliff."

But the partnership has prevailed despite the economy. In 2009, La Toque received a coveted Michelin Star, and in 2010 the hotel and restaurant won national Best of Wine Tourism awards.

Now at four years after opening, "this will be the year we start returning money to our investors," Frank says. "It took a little longer than we expected, but we're here for the long run." ■

Janice Cha has covered the foodservice industry for more than a decade.



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The Westin/La Toque partnership allows smarter use of labor and food sourcing

Hold It Now

Follow these six steps for safer holding.

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Prepare to practice your powers of observation. Proactive management of service transactions and proper holding times are imperative but easy to forget in busy, high-volume production areas.

Time and temperature monitoring and control are particularly important when foods and vessels are residing in ambient air within a kitchen. Your staff must consider their workflow plan for a given set of assigned tasks and make every effort to have the smallest amount of product residing in the danger zone.

I ask that you take some time out of one day during a busy production week and observe the handling of products. Consider these factors when making your observations:

- Is your staff effectively batch-processing items to minimize Time-Temperature Control for Safety (TCS) products residing in the danger zone?
- When you are considering preparation procedures and related equipment needs for a recipe, consider the amount of time the ingredients will need to be in the danger zone as well as the temperatures that must be achieved at each step for safety. Will an equipment change or simple rearrangement minimize out-of-temperature holding times?
- The designs and layouts of production areas should foster practical and realistic flow of products through the processing steps.
- Designs should include temporary

cold-holding areas and, if needed, hot-holding areas for products under process with as short as possible distances to refrigeration and hot-holding. This minimizes the pressures on staff to remove large quantities of products out of refrigeration and bring them into the preparation areas. Large amounts of products in less secure production areas, compared to storage areas, also increases the opportunity for intentional adulteration.

- Holding or in-process times and temperatures should not just be considered for food products. You need to maintain control of equipment and utensils as well. As you observe your production over a longer period of time, consider how long a piece of equipment is "contaminated" before it is washed and sanitized again.
- How are your production utensils being held? Are they contaminated and allowed to reside in the danger zone for extended periods of time only to be "washed off" by manipulating another product? Control the time they reside in the danger zone and switch them out at least every four hours. Utensils on your buffets most likely will need much more frequent change-outs and tighter controls given the number of guests that are potentially handling and/or mishandling them. If you change the utensil, change the utensil rest as well. ■

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