

Hidden Assets: Freshii's Display Kitchen

Limiting guests' view into the display kitchen helps Freshii keep labor costs down and tidiness up.

By Lisa Bertagnoli, Contributing Editor -- Chain Leader, 10/1/2008



Partially obscuring guests' view of the made-to-order salads and sandwiches has helped cut food costs because they can no longer ask for "just a little bit more" of this or that ingredient.

This past spring, Matthew Corrin, founder and president of Lettuce Eatery, opened the 12-unit, fast-casual concept's first location in the United States.

Located in an office tower in Chicago's West Loop, it's called [Freshii](#). Like its Canadian siblings, it offers made-to-order wraps, salads, rice-based bowls and soups. There are no seats, save for communal tables in the office tower's lobby. Most of the food preparation takes place in a display kitchen.

At the Canadian locations, the display kitchen is what Corrin calls "glamorous," complete with custom-made makeup tables and marble counters. From the moment customers fill out their ingredient sheet and place their orders, they can see their food being made. Orders are prepared by personable "ambassadors," who give a running commentary as they load ingredients into salad bowls or sandwich wraps. "It's a little bit of a show," Corrin says.

But glamour isn't cheap, nor is it always glamorous. Expenses and tidiness were two reasons Corrin, a former marketing manager at Oscar de la Renta in Manhattan, retooled the display kitchen before entering the U.S. market. The most important change is a partition that partially obscures customers' view of food preparation. For a display-kitchen concept, that sounds antithetical, but Corrin says it works, and splendidly.

Divide and Conquer

Salads, bowls and sandwiches, be they standard or dictated by the customer, are prepared in Freshii's 200-square-foot display kitchen. A small back of the house is used for prepping vegetables and cooking rice, and dry and cold storage.

Display kitchens have their drawbacks: Because they're so visible, they have to look as perfect as a working kitchen can look. Corrin discovered that at Lettuce Eatery the kitchen was falling short of the tidiness mark, especially during lunch rush. "By 11:15, the place was a mess," Corrin says. The stainless-steel dividers between drop-ins would be covered with food, no matter how hard cooks tried to keep things clean. The mess, Corrin decided, detracted from the display-kitchen concept.



Because customers no longer watch their orders being assembled, they have more time to browse the retail offerings. As a result, retail sales have risen to 15 percent from 5 percent of total sales.

Food costs suffered, too, because customers felt free to urge employees to add a bit more of this or that beyond the portioned scoop, and employees felt obliged to comply.

To solve that problem, Corrin removed a hip-height counter and sneeze guard that fronted a custom refrigerated stainless makeup table with 80 drop-ins for chopped proteins, vegetables and toppings. The makeup table, now a stock product rather than custom item, now runs along the back wall of the display kitchen. A work station with a cutting board and two tiers of salad-dressing pumps is now in its place.

Mirror, Mirror

That work station is separated from public view by a 5-foot-high laminate partition. The partition is topped with a Corian counter that displays baskets of fruit and signage touting Freshii services such as catering.

But the action isn't all hidden. An abstract acrylic mirror suspended above the makeup line lets customers see the staff in action, albeit in a slightly distorted fashion.

"We took the concept from a demo kitchen," explains Ryan Nestor, managing principal at Barker Nestor Architecture + Design, the Skokie, Ill., firm that helped on the project. The mirror, which cost about \$1,500 to make and install, reflects "the energy and the action and the bright colors" of the vegetables, if not the precise movements of the cooks, he says.

The mirror will be a showcase in future Freshiis and will change slightly from location to location to give each restaurant a signature look. Corrin adds that the mirror will most likely become less abstract, the better to show more movement.

Small Changes, Big Results

Hiding the display kitchen and flipping the makeup tables has yielded results so dramatic that Corrin plans to retrofit the Canadian outlets to match the American prototype.

Food costs have [REDACTED], partly because customers can no longer ask for extra toppings and portioning has become more exact. Cooks use gloved hands—the restaurant goes through about 200 pairs of gloves a day—to portion, and are spot- and formally tested regularly on their portion knowledge.



Freshii employees help keep ticket times at around five minutes to seven minutes even during lunch rushes.

Retail items—a collection of 40 to 50 SKUs that includes packaged chips, cookies, ginger chews and chocolate-covered espresso beans—now comprise [REDACTED] of sales, up from 5 percent in the Canadian stores. That's because customers now browse the goods and make impulse purchases instead of watching their orders being assembled, Corrin explains.

Equipment costs have [REDACTED] due to the use of stock equipment rather than custom. The only custom piece is a metal rack that holds salad and soup containers. The rack is positioned on the far end of the makeup line, next to a reach-in refrigerator that holds containers filled with salad bases: lettuce, mesclun, romaine and spinach.



Employees prep vegetables in a small back-of-the-house production area. Chicken is cooked at a commissary.

The design will be adjusted as Freshii expands, to three more Chicago-area units within the next year. Nestor says the millwork is being redone to be able to fit the shells of new construction, which aren't always flat and flush. The front of the house may be reconfigured, too, to add a counter and several tables for seating.

Overall, Nestor says, the Freshii concept of fresh food made to order remains. “We think it's a nice compromise,” he says of the new layout. “It also gives Matthew the capability to get capacity and through-put from his salad-making engine.”



Snapshot

Concept Freshii (Lettuce Eatery in Canada)

Location Chicago

Area 1,000 square feet

Seats none

Opening Date June 16, 2008

Average Check ■

Unit Volume ■■■■■

Expansion Plans 3 by summer 2009