



Counter diners can watch Chef Dennis Leary work his magic at Canteen.

Diminutive Kitchens

*Less is more:
small kitchens
producing big flavors*

Jeffrey Decker

The chefs of today are creating a new standard for kitchen design and restaurant layout. In these times in which extravagance is looked down upon and cost-cutting techniques are highly valued, operational efficiencies have begun to take precedent. Tightened footprints and minimal equipment offer a lower cost model which can in actuality bring out the best in a restaurant. By not only reducing the size of the kitchen but also breaking the barrier to the front of the house, the chef is now holding the reins closer to the breast and is able to assure that every element of the experience is at its best for quality dining.

Redefining restaurant design

As trends go, we have previously seen the incorporation of dining room and kitchen but perhaps the shrinking of the kitchen is the logical next step. In recent years, the chef's tasting menu became prevalent and was a great selling point because it served to put a personal touch on the dining experience. The chef's table was a design element which put a table directly in the kitchen, so the diner could watch the action and the chef could present the food in person. Diminutive kitchens are the next



The Galley Kitchen at Contigo

“The bigger the space, the bigger the mess!”

— Executive Chef Corina Weibel

in line and have taken their place in the repertoire of restaurateurs and chefs alike.

In this format, the traditional organizational structure of the back of house has been challenged and, instead, the head chef has taken back more control by creating a less sophisticated operation. Cutbacks in seats, labor and menu size have been substituted for a refined touch that is translated directly to the consumer.

And while not all spaces have the luxury of a remodel or even the money to do so, we can learn some key elements of efficient design from these new operational cues. Sometimes, a restaurateur will have no choice but to use an old design or layout of a space. If the kitchen was built long ago, there may not be any other options for the layout or allocation of space of the kitchen. But it is the uti-

lization of the key spaces in the restaurant which help to define the dining experience.

Keys to success

Functionality is at the core and minimalism has begun to be incorporated. Less décor is necessary, and a clean approach is taken to accomplish this degree of efficiency. The industry standard for restaurant design accounts for 25-30 percent of the total square footage of a space as “back of the house.” Both *Bix* and *Contigo* in San Francisco are great examples of restaurants that have been able to adopt a new design equation – between 10 and 20 percent of their spaces are “back of the house.”

At *Contigo*, not only is the kitchen incorporated into the restaurant, but a bar sits within the dining room and simultaneously serves as a dining area, waiter station and wine bar. Furthermore, while a walk-in is the traditional option for refrigeration for its cost-saving and organizational purposes, Chef Brett Emerson has chosen to use standing refrigerators which have been placed down one wall of the dining room. This design element surprisingly does not detract from the dining experience but instead is a great cross-utilization of this “public” space.

CLAMS “CAL PEP” STYLE

[Serves 4]

INGREDIENTS

2 lb Manila clams, the smaller the better
2 cloves garlic, peeled
2 oz Spanish jamón serrano, sliced thin
4 T extra virgin olive oil
2 T parsley, chopped
1/2 cup Manzanilla sherry
sea salt (if needed)
black pepper, freshly ground

METHOD

Rinse the clams in cold water. Slice the garlic as thin as possible. Cut the jamón into matchsticks approximately 1/4 inch wide by 1 inch long.

In a sauté pan or Dutch oven large enough to fit the clams in a single layer, heat 2 tablespoons of the oil over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook briefly, then add the jamón.

Cook for about 30 seconds until the garlic and jamón are fragrant and the garlic is light golden brown. Add the clams and stir. Cook for a minute, then add the sherry and cover. Cook just until the clams steam open and the alcohol in the sherry cooks off, about 2 minutes.



Add the remaining oil and the parsley and allow the oil to emulsify with the sherry and the clam juices. Taste and add salt if necessary. Serve with plenty of bread to soak up the delicious broth.

Executive Chef/Owner Brett Emerson

Contigo
San Francisco, CA

At *Bix*, the kitchen is also incorporated into the restaurant; the garde manger is placed at the front of the dining room, allowing for one-fifth of the kitchen to be considered “open.” Food carts are employed, putting some of the burden on the wait staff, which in turn takes pressure off of the kitchen and creates an exciting experience for the diner.

Executive Chef and Owner Corina Weibel opened Canelé, a small neighborhood eatery in 2006 after spending years in some of Los Angeles’ and the Bay Area’s most talked about restaurants. She reminisced about her days in the similarly tiny kitchen of *Bix* stating that “we used to call it the submarine.” Chef Corina’s open kitchen is not only entertaining for guests, but also forces her team to be more efficient; she believes, “the bigger the space, the bigger the mess!”

Versatility yields efficiency

Equipment must be adaptable. Appliances with multi-use features and worktables that can be transformed between prep and service have become highly valued. A high

quantity of equipment such as small wares with unique purposes, can often crowd a kitchen and end up detracting from the operational efficiency.

At *Contigo*, the wood-burning oven – often a single-use piece of equipment, is used for a variety of menu items and not just for a traditional woodburning pizza or flatbread. And while vertical storage has been used in restaurants for years, the design of *Bix* maximizes space in a special way by having custom-made ingredient brackets and rails so the chefs can have ingredients readily at hand. While customization can be an added cost, the utility of items such as a custom-made pot rack at the front of the hood can provide greater returns than the alternative. The price of customization is offset by the efficiencies which are created, greatly affecting speed of service and the ability to assure perfect food. A diminutive kitchen requires that the space be convertible. At *Bix*, the area used for vegetable prep during the day morphs into the pastry station in the evening with the addition of a tabletop freezer. Similarly, *Contigo* intertwines its pastry and savory spaces and allotments for prep.

LAMB SHOULDER CONFIT W/CHICKPEAS, APRICOTS AND ALMONDS

[Serves 4-6]

INGREDIENTS

- 3 lb lamb shoulder, on the bone
- 6 cloves garlic
- 4 T dried thyme
- 2 T black pepper
- 3/4 cup Kosher Salt
- 6 cups vegetable or pure olive oil
- ***
- 4 cups chickpeas
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 onion, sliced
- 2 cups chopped tomatoes
- 3 T tomato paste
- 4 dried chiles, preferably mulato or ancho
- ***
- 2 cups apricots
- 1 cup almonds, toasted
- 1/2 bunch parsley
- 1/2 bunch cilantro
- 4 pieces pickled okra (Taste o Texas brand)

METHOD [2 DAYS AHEAD]

In a food processor, combine the garlic, dried thyme, black



pepper, and salt. Puree with 1/2 cup of the oil until you have a thick and aromatic paste. Slather the paste over the lamb shoulder, cover tightly and refrigerate.

Executive Chef/Owner Dennis Leary
Canteen
San Francisco, CA

See www.culinarytrends.net
for the conclusion of recipe.



The hurdles

There are a variety of obstacles which the chef in a small kitchen must account for differently than in a conventional space. Deliveries can be a nuisance if there is only one entrance and minimal storage space often presents issues. Therefore, deliveries have to be scheduled very carefully. Chef Bruce Hill of *Bix* will always try to get product in as early as possible. Product management and rotation are imperative as always, but prep lists have to be even more detailed and inventorying is crucial for a small operation where every last square inch is in use.

During production, a smaller footprint can create bottlenecks too. If orders pile up for a single item, there may not be room on the stove or in the oven to even cook them. At *Bix*, the sole is one of the menu items which takes extra care and space in producing and therefore the front and back of the house have to communicate to try to control the flow of orders.

The product

In simplifying the back of house, the chef is given license to present a cleaner menu which does not try to over-deliver. In turn, the diner expects that each offering will be among the more tried and true. At *Canteen*, where Chef Dennis Leary presents a more refined menu, he gets the opportunity to shop, cook and prep all items. He presents dishes, on each of which he has put his personal touch.

The next element in the realm of simplification is on the labor side. A smaller work force is the logical fit for production in a smaller space which offers a diminished menu. After working at larger restaurants such as *Rubicon*, Chef Leary opened *Canteen* which seats only 20 – and he is the only person in the kitchen. This restaurant is a particular case, but in other smaller restaurants that have a modest staff, the chef is able to foster a small group, which is much easier to mold and watch over.

CHILLED CELERY SOUP

[Serves 8]

INGREDIENTS

1 bunch celery sliced thin and on a bias
1 large yellow onion sliced thin
1 whole celery root peeled very carefully and cut into chunks
1 small Yukon potato peeled and cut into chunks
fleur de sel and pepper
extra virgin olive oil

For the garnish:

thinly sliced celery
thinly sliced Fuji apple
picked celery leaves
thinly sliced shallot
1 lemon cut in 1/2 for juice
olive oil
cracked black pepper

METHOD

Saute the celery and onion in a scant 1/4 cup of olive oil, add 2 teaspoons of salt and let cook gently on a very low heat. Try not to get any color on the vegetables. When the celery and onion are completely soft, cover with water and add the celery root and potato. Continue to cook over medium heat until the celery root and potato are completely falling apart. Puree until very smooth, taste for seasoning and adjust as necessary, perhaps more salt. Chill the soup!



Photo by Savita Ostendorf

For the garnish, in a small bowl toss the thinly sliced celery, apple and shallot together with a little olive oil and lemon juice. When the soup is chilled, serve in a shallow bowl and place a small handful of the celery and apple salad in the center of the soup. Drizzle with a little olive oil and sprinkle with cracked black pepper.

Chef Corina Weibel
Canelé
Los Angeles, CA



With lessfewer moving parts to control and oversee, the tight team is even more capable of achieving a high level of quality output. A smaller kitchen staff is both minimalist and personable, something that a customer can identify with easily.

Presentation is set on “high” in a diminutive kitchen. Since the layout is more confined and usually customized, chefs do not have far to go in order to reach for a pot or pan. This makes for a smoother and less chaotic operation. A cool ambience will set the tone for dining when there is less running around in the kitchen. When the kitchen and dining room are integrated, the feel of a smaller restaurant and the close proximity to the customers becomes a selling point.

The idea of the “window into the kitchen” is reinvented. Instead, chefs are able to present their culinary ability and efficiency straight to the guest – up close and personal. And in return, the guests can display their excitement to be part of the action. We’re not talking *Benihana* here, but there is added theater to the dining experience. Hopefully, the added anticipation for the guest makes the food taste even better. At *Contigo*, the small, exposed kitchen allows for a personal touch. After people finish their meals, they must pass by the kitchen in order to leave the restaurant, giving guests an opportunity

to say thank you to the chef and the team. For chefs, this is an undeniable plus; after pouring their talent into a meal, they are then able to see, up close, a customer’s appreciation.

Love of the game

In some ways, chefs are taking a cue from the home cook, and for good reason. The gathering place that is the home kitchen stirs a social atmosphere which is both inviting and energetic. Now the restaurant chef has both tightened his cooking space and also embraced the quality of the diner’s experience by inviting guests into his workspace. The professional chef is able to wow the diner not only with exquisite food but also with the most forward-thinking design and most innovative kitchen gadgets.



Jeffrey Decker, a graduate of UC Berkeley, trained as a chef at Spago Beverly Hills and at world-renowned small luxury hotels. He now works as a chef and project coordinator at The Culinary Edge in San Francisco where he consults on concept and menu development projects for the top chain restaurants in the country and develops retail items for commercialization. Contact him at Jeff@TheCulinaryEdge.com.