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A Small Space

SHOWPLACE

The kitchen of Restaurant Charlie at the Palazzo Las Vegas is everything everyone needs it to be, from the financial team behind the restaurant to the chefs cooking in it to the guests looking down on it.

By Derek Gale, Senior Editor

At Restaurant Charlie at the Palazzo Las Vegas Resort Hotel Casino, the story is twofold: The lofted chef's table looking down on the kitchen and the efficient use of space for the kitchen itself.

"The (Charlie) Trotter organization is good at keeping kitchens tight," says kitchen designer Jimi Yui. "Their kitchens are smaller than any other client of mine. They are very disciplined about maximizing front-of-house square footage. The back-of-house kitchen space for Restaurant Charlie is 25% of the gross square footage. This is a really efficient number."

Yui goes on to explain that

most kitchens occupy about one-third of the gross square footage, or even up to 40%, depending on how kitchen-intensive a restaurant will be. For a fine-dining restaurant, "25% is a great number," he reiterates. "(That) is very dense."

He tells of how his initial sketches had kitchens of closer to 30% or 40% of the restaurant's footprint, but that ultimately Trotter himself said the restaurant's culinary team would be able to work in a denser space, much as he has done personally for years at his namesake Chicago restaurant.

So Yui went back and re-studied Charlie Trotter's in

Chicago and considered from where the space savings was coming. "It comes in how you purchase and what's on premise, so you don't have miles of storage areas," he says. "It's like auto manufacturing just-in-time. You could own a warehouse, but why would you if you don't have to? And the cross-use of functional areas—polishing flatware and glassware at one time of day, and at another time of day using the same space for prepping vegetables. Cross-utilizing spaces is very important."

In the end, that was the guiding principle for the design of the kitchen for Restaurant Charlie, where there is one small "walk-in ▶

The kitchen at Restaurant Charlie at the Palazzo Las Vegas Resort Hotel Casino is tight but efficiently engineered to give the culinary team a workspace in which they can cook comfortably while still maximizing front-of-house space.



The lofted chef's table at Restaurant Charlie overlooks the kitchen, making for great drama without interfering with the kitchen space itself. The restaurant architect and kitchen designer worked together to plan the space in a way that would ensure interesting sight lines for guests.

box," and everything else is an open work area with 36-inch (91-cm) aisles and counter-height work surfaces.

The equipment, meanwhile, consists of one cooking suite, a kettle and a combi-oven. "That's it," Yui says. "And they do everything out of it. That is a discipline (the Trotter culinary teams) have perfected. They execute highly complicated cuisine—multi-course meals in one direction, helping out (the bar) and the private dining room—all cooked and plated in one area."

Yui compares this process to a ballet. "If the ballet is orchestrated well with a tuned team, it can occur in 36-inch (91-cm) aisles with three to four people working in tandem, dancing around each other," he says. "We work to create a kitchen where nobody is taking more than a step. A great kitchen is where things are within reach, and nobody is criss-crossing to get tools or ingredients to finish what he needs to finish. Where components get planned within a tight space is crucial."

To get to the final plan for the Restaurant Charlie kitchen, Yui played devil's advocate with Trotter and Chef Matthias Merges, who oversees culinary operations for the Trotter organization. "I test out their requests and say, 'Can we really do that? Will you be OK with an eight-top plating, a full Bar Charlie and banquet room? Are we going to wind up in the weeds?'"

Yui tries to create such operational scenarios, where everyone is eating at the same time

and the kitchen is slammed, to ensure that the culinary team will be able to handle the workload within a particular space.

"Through those conversations, and usually 10 schematic plans, we get to the point to have something tested, and it is our best shot at the most rational compromise of the needs of the kitchen and the front of the house," he says.

A Table With A View

Part of the uniqueness of Restaurant Charlie's kitchen is the mezzanine chef's table for up to eight guests above it (planned by Joshua Zinder Architecture + Design), which allows for maximized kitchen space while still incorporating a chef's table into the kitchen, a signature element of Charlie Trotter's in Chicago.

With a direct, bird's-eye view of the kitchen, "Team Trotter had to be willing to manage the kitchen in a way that the floor stays clean," Yui says. "With most chef's tables, you get to hide a lot—you don't see anything below the counter. There is no hiding when the chef's table is up in the air looking down."

That also meant working hard to keep the sight line as interesting as possible, which involved manipulating where the kitchen's hood could go, Yui says. "Josh (Zinder, the architect) did a beautiful job with the hood and the decorative tile above it," he says. "You see the hood, but when you look down, you see the stove and see the pass."

Yui also made sure the dishwashing area would not be in direct view. "That's not what the kitchen is about—it's about preparation and plating," he says. "So we made sure the view contained interesting activity."

Other details had to be managed as well, such as the kitchen's reach-in refrigerators, which usually would not have "roofs." In this case, they have finished tops.

And then there was the lighting, "which was one of the most difficult things that Josh and I worked on," Yui says.

Because of the multi-story height of the ceiling, mounting all light fixtures high over the kitchen would have been problematic both for work-surface task visibility and for maintenance. The solution came in attaching lighting fixtures with a post to the actual kitchen equipment.

"That way we could illuminate the counters exactly where needed, and could have a space void of dangling light fixtures," Yui says. ♦

Direct comments to:
derek.gale@reedbusiness.com