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Small wonders

Rising occupation costs are forcing restaurateurs to shrink back-of-house areas in order to pack in more covers. *Restaurant* meets three chefs working in tiny kitchens who believe that bigger doesn't necessarily equal better

Words/Ketsuda Phoutinane

In Soho's Kingly Court development, Bea Vo's size zero kitchen serves plus-sized portions to Londoners hungry for authentic US comfort food. The 100sq ft space only has room for three chefs but can knock out up to 400 plates on a busy night.

A large kitchen wasn't an option for the US-born Vo. Eat-in restaurants don't get much smaller than Stax Diner - the space is around 780sq ft in total - so compromises had to be made back of house to make the business viable.

"Having a kitchen that's small allows us to have more seats, which obviously

means more revenue," says Vo. "We've had to make some sacrifices for our 36 covers, though. We don't even have room for a dishwasher so all the plates have to be washed by hand."

Stax (see panel on right) is admittedly an extreme example, but many restaurateurs are now opting to reduce the size of their kitchens in order to squeeze in more covers in the dining room.

Occupation costs in London and other major UK cities are skyrocketing as the restaurant sector enjoys an unprecedented growth spurt. Space is

more precious than ever and it's getting harder and harder to net a decent return on capital with a restaurant that sticks to the traditional 30% back of house to 70% front of house formula.

The sudden expansion of the restaurant industry has also made it tougher to acquire bricks and mortar. This is causing smaller operators, without vast reserves of capital, to take less obvious sites and turn them into restaurants, which often results in small, awkwardly shaped back-of-house areas (the dry store at Stax had to be placed in a metal cage

José

Head chef: José Pizarro

Size of kitchen: 60sq ft

Number of plates served: Up to 200

Maximum staff capacity: Three

Lifesaving kit: The plancha, a flat grill that's popular in Spain. It's multipurpose and largely eliminates the need for pans, which saves on both space and washing up

Principle headache: Being disorganised isn't an option and José is only able to have 14 items on the menu at any one time

José Pizarro claims that the open kitchen at José is one of the most organised in the world. Serving in excess of 1,400 people per week with just three different pieces of primary cooking kit (a plancha, two induction hobs and a fryer), the



Close team: all three of José Pizarro's restaurants have small galley-style kitchens

Bermondsey-based kitchen is just under 60sq ft - only a little larger than a standard disabled loo.

The bustling tapas bars near Barcelona's

famed La Boqueria market inspired Pizarro's inaugural restaurant, and one of the most important aspects it borrows from these iconic establishments is counter seating around the kitchen.

The kitchens at his other restaurants - the nearby Pizarro and José Pizarro, which recently opened in the City - are a little bigger than José but much smaller than most busy London restaurants. They too are open, utilising counter seating and long galley kitchens.

"It's an extremely efficient use of the space. And people love to sit at the counters. It's always nicer and more sociable," says Pizarro. "I don't see myself having a restaurant without a counter and open kitchen."

All sites offer small menus prepared on a handful of cooking appliances.

on the restaurant floor, for example).

"Operators are certainly more willing to take smaller or more awkwardly arranged spaces for their restaurants, which has resulted in some interesting projects for us," says Gareth Sefton, director of kitchen design company SeftonHornWinch. "We have to be clever in the way that we utilise their space and their labour in order to help them achieve what they need to."

Storage is usually the biggest headache for those designing (and indeed working within) small kitchens. "Many don't have the space to store more than a day's worth of ingredients so bulkier items need to be delivered daily, which is often more expensive," says Sefton.

Clever utilisation of storage space is essential to the running of Stax. Shelving runs right up to the ceiling on every wall, holding everything from

consumables to kitchen kit. "The only problem is I'm not very tall so I'm constantly asking my staff to get items down for me, but this kitchen would be impossible to work in without it," says Vo.

When designing a smaller kitchen, choosing the right kit is essential. Sefton recommends equipment that can perform multiple functions such as combi-ovens, which can roast, steam, slow-cook and grill food. He also recommends thinking carefully about

which items need ventilation and where to put them because ducting is particularly difficult in smaller spaces.

Handily, the need for operators to work with smaller kitchens intersects with a trend for tightly written menus and concepts that serve only one type of dish. Last month saw the opening of Balls & Company (also in Soho), specialist meatball restaurant. Its savoury menu is comprised of five varieties of meatballs, four sauces and a handful of sides. Unsurprisingly, the kitchen is the size of a broom cupboard.

Small can be beautiful, it seems, with chefs quick to point out the benefits of working within a diminutive kitchen.

José Pizarro now operates three London

restaurants, all of which have unusually small galley-style kitchens (his Bermondsey tapas bar José is particularly tiny, see panel above).

He believes that, when run correctly,

small kitchens can be more productive than their larger counterparts. "If you're smart and use every bit of space efficiently, small kitchens can be better and quicker," he says. "At some point you can get lost with the orders working in a big kitchen." Small kitchens also limit how much walking chefs have to do. Working in a small space with everything you need at your fingertips is inherently more efficient than working within a large kitchen.

Obsessive organisation is essential.

If you're smart and use every bit of space efficiently, small kitchens can be better and quicker

Stax Diner

Head chef: Bea Vo

Size of kitchen: 100sq ft

Number of plates served on a busy night: Up to 400

Maximum number of chefs in the kitchen: Three

Lifesaving kit: The kitchen has two modes - prep and service. As such, portable induction stoves and other bits of kit that can be moved easily are essential

Principle headache: Stax is open seven days a week, which puts a huge amount of pressure on those doing the prep because once service starts there is no room to prepare anything

"The typical formula for back of house space relative to dining space is 30% to 70%. At Stax, it's more like 15% to 85%," says Bea Vo, the US-born restaurateur behind Stax Diner. "The maximum capacity of our kitchen is three chefs, any more than that and no one can move."

The units at Kingly Court were originally designed for small retail shops but owner Shaftesbury switched the focus of the Soho-based development to food in 2013. Stax Diner is diminutive in the extreme, just 780sq ft in total with a tiny 100sq ft semi-open kitchen (which includes the wash-up area) and a caged storage area right in the middle of the dining area which seats 36.

On a busy night, tables are turned as many as five times and all the washing up is done by hand because a dishwasher would have taken up too much space.

The tininess of the kitchen has also greatly limited the menu choices. The offering at Stax is very tight - burgers, fried chicken and a handful of sides plus a couple of desserts. Vo says that there are lots of dishes she'd like to put on the menu - including slow-cooked dishes such as chilli con carne - but there isn't room on the stove.

"We've also had to take the blooming onion dish off the menu because it took up too much of our frying capacity," she says. "We're looking forward to reinstating it at our next site, which is thankfully going to be a bit bigger."

The 60sq ft kitchen (that's a little bigger than your average disabled toilet) at José was designed for a simple menu of tapas dishes that can be served with minimal fuss.

"You need to write your menu before you design your kitchen. We only have three types of primary cooking equipment at José - two induction hobs, a deep fat fryer and a plancha - which obviously has a significant impact on the dishes we are able to offer," says Pizarro.

Effective time management is important too. Jacob Kennedy runs two kitchens at his Bocca di Lupo restaurant in Soho, a small upstairs open service kitchen and a slightly larger basement prep kitchen (see panel on right).

"There's only room for four chefs in the upstairs kitchen so I spend an insane amount of time tuning the kitchen to make sure it's an efficient workspace for everyone," he says.

With Bocca di Lupo running at capacity seven days a week, Kennedy says that finding space to work is his main challenge.

"We're constantly treading on each other's toes. If I had more space, I'd probably have an extra person cooking during our busiest services," says Kennedy. "If I put them in now, we'd end up in a tangle of arms and legs."

All the 40 or so dishes on offer at Bocca di Lupo are designed to be cooked and served very quickly to maximise volume. "I'm greedy and there are lots of things I like to be available. The serve is very simple and the plating style unfussy, which means I can get away with offering a relatively large menu," he says.

Back at Stax, Vo's small kitchen coping strategy is rather different. Her solution is a much smaller menu that's based around burgers and fried

Bocca di Lupo

Chef: Jacob Kennedy

Size of kitchen: 200sq ft

Number of plates served: Up to 1,200

Maximum number of chefs in the kitchen: Four

Lifesaving kit: A powerful pasta boiler and a grill enable ingredients to be cooked very quickly

Principle headache: The restaurant's 40-item menu changes twice daily, requiring precise time management when planning the rota

Bocca di Lupo's open-service kitchen serves upwards of 1,200 dishes in a single service, a level of output that would be impressive in a kitchen twice the size. Chef-patron Jacob Kennedy says his decision to install a small service kitchen in the upstairs dining room and a basement prep kitchen was partly driven by the configuration of the building - it's by no means a large restaurant so preparing and serving all the food from the basement kitchen would have been challenging - but mostly because he wanted to be able to see and interact with his customers.

The Soho restaurant's menu is divided into small and large plates, with guests typically ordering six dishes each. The service kitchen is split into two sections, one for pasta and risotto, and another for grilled and roasted dishes. Each



is manned by just two chefs on busy nights but the simplicity of the dishes and the team's minimalist plating style means Kennedy and crew can cook for as many as 250 people.

"There's usually just one thing on a plate," says Kennedy. "The cooking here is simple. We use great ingredients so there's no need to embellish or compose our dishes so the plating here is very quick."

With only four chefs working service, the 400sq ft basement kitchen is crucial for prep. Kennedy is continually tweaking his rota and set-up to maximise his small team's output.

chicken. When Stax opened last year, Vo, who is originally from Virginia, yearned to add more US classics such as chilli cheese fries, sloppy joes and cheese fries to the menu, but found that there was simply no room to prepare them.

The kitchens at Pizarro's restaurants and Bocca di Lupo all incorporate counter seating, which further maximises the number of covers. It also adds to the atmosphere. Kennedy opted for an open kitchen with counter

seating because serving dishes from the basement kitchen would have been awkward but also because he wanted to see and be able to interact with his customers.

"The counter seating is popular with solo diners and couples. It's also much more convivial - strangers talk to each other," says Kennedy. "Sometimes guests offer a taste of food to another party they've never met before or a taste of their wine. It's gives the place a little more of a Mediterranean vibe." ■

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