

Has Air Frying Really Taken Hold in the Restaurant Industry?

A Consultant's Deep Dive into the Trend, the Technology, and the Truth

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For the past decade, air fryers have dominated the home-kitchen landscape, reshaping consumer expectations around “fried” foods and lighter comfort indulgence. But the real question for operators—and the consultants who advise them—is whether air-frying technology has crossed over meaningfully into *restaurants*.

The answer: **air frying has absolutely gained traction in foodservice, but in highly strategic pockets rather than as a wholesale replacement for the traditional fry station.** Its adoption curve tells a story not only about technology, but about evolving guest behaviors, kitchen design economics, and the constant pressure to innovate with healthier, more efficient cooking methods.

A Market on the Rise—Now Driven by Commercial Kitchens

Air fryers as a consumer category continue to grow globally, but a more significant shift is the emergence of **commercial-grade air-frying equipment** designed for restaurants, hotels, ghost kitchens, and nontraditional food venues. Manufacturers now offer countertop, high-velocity hot-air systems built specifically for foodservice throughput—with ventless options, programmable menus, and faster recovery times than residential models.

This evolution reflects a broader trend: **operators want lower-oil preparation methods**, cleaner kitchens, versatile equipment with small footprints, and menu language that communicates health-conscious options. Air frying checks all these boxes when deployed intelligently.

Where Air Frying *Has* Taken Hold

1. Fast Casual & Better-For-You QSR Concepts

Fast casual operators chasing a “fried comfort without the guilt” narrative have embraced air frying as a differentiating tool. It allows brands to:

- Offer crisp appetizers and entrées with significantly reduced oil
- Promote “air-fried” items as a premium, lighter alternative

- Reduce fryer oil spend and simplify their grease management routines
- Produce more consistent textures for items like cauliflower bites, tenders, Brussels sprouts, and plant-based snacks

For concepts centered on wellness, transparency, or clean eating, the air fryer becomes part of the *brand story* as much as part of the equipment lineup.

2. Bars, Taprooms, Small Kitchens & C-Stores

One of the fastest-growing air-fryer segments is **operations without full cooklines or hood systems**—places where traditional fryers simply aren't feasible. Countertop, ventless commercial air fryers allow:

- Taprooms to add wings, flatbreads, and loaded fries
- Convenience stores to expand hot food programs without major construction
- Hotel bars and lobby markets to create quick hot offerings
- Mobile kitchens and micro-venues to operate with minimal ventilation requirements

These operators value air frying not because it replaces a full fryer, but because **it unlocks food revenue where none previously existed**.

3. Ghost Kitchens, Delivery-Only Concepts & Virtual Brands

The delivery-first ecosystem prizes equipment that is:

- Fast
- Clean
- Compact
- Multi-use
- Consistent

Air fryers excel at producing crisp textures that hold better during delivery than many oven-baked options. They also allow ghost kitchens to run **multiple virtual brands** off the same equipment, especially those centered on wings, tenders, snacks, or vegetable-based “fried” items.

For emerging home-based or cottage-industry virtual brands, air fryers often serve as the foundational cooking technology.

Where Air Frying Falls Short—and Why It Hasn't Replaced Traditional Fryers

Despite the growth, air fryers are not taking over the fry station in most full-service or high-volume restaurants. The limitations are practical, not conceptual.

Capacity & Throughput

Traditional deep fryers—and combi ovens for that matter—still outperform air fryers for large-volume, peak-hour production. On a Friday night in a busy sports bar, nothing can match the batch capacity and speed of a 40–50 lb. fryer bank.

Signature Texture & Flavor Expectations

While air frying delivers impressive crispness, it still isn't identical to oil immersion for:

- Hand-breaded chicken
- Classic bar fries
- Breaded seafood
- Signature, craveable fried items

Operators often reserve air fryers for *secondary* or *healthy-positioned* items rather than their core menu drivers.

Overlap With Existing High-Speed & Combi Ovens

Modern combi ovens and high-speed impingement ovens already provide air-fry-like results, often at greater capacity. Operators who already own a combi may not see a compelling reason to add a dedicated air fryer unless space, cost, or hood limitations require it.

Operational Realities: The Pros and Cons

Advantages

- **Lower oil usage** and reduced oil management tasks
- **Menu storytelling:** consumers perceive “air-fried” as healthier
- **Ventless options** reduce buildout costs
- **Great for limited-time offers** and innovation testing
- **Ideal for small kitchens, bars, and add-on food programs**

Limitations

- **Restricted batch size** limits menu scalability
- **Non-identical fry textures** for certain signature items
- **Redundant functionality** if other ovens already provide hot-air crisping

- **Staff retraining** required for cook-time consistency

A Consultant's Framework: When to Recommend Air Frying

When advising operators, the decision should be driven by a simple strategic question:

What problem are we solving?

Air frying is a smart investment when it addresses clear operational or branding needs:

- No hood system or limited ventilation
- A desire to add healthier or premium-positioned “fried” items
- A need to expand menus in small or unconventional spaces
- A ghost kitchen seeking versatility and rapid-fire production
- A bar or tasting room adding food without building a full kitchen

It's less compelling when an operator already has:

- A combi or high-speed oven with similar capabilities
- Large-scale volume that demands fryers
- Signature fried items where traditional fry texture is non-negotiable

So—Has Air Frying Taken Hold?

Yes, but not in the way consumers imagine.

Air frying has absolutely established itself in the industry—but as a **strategic tool**, not a replacement technology.

It thrives where:

- Operators need flexibility
- Health-forward messaging matters
- Space is tight
- Oil management is costly
- Crisp textures without deep frying add value
- Food programs must be launched quickly and economically

For restaurants, taprooms, c-stores, micro-kitchens, and virtual brands, air frying represents an increasingly important piece of the equipment ecosystem.

For consultants, it represents something even more valuable: a **high-impact, low-barrier solution that unlocks new revenue streams and broadens menu possibilities without major capital investment.**

In the modern foodservice landscape, air frying isn't a fad—it's a focused, purposeful tool. And when aligned with concept, kitchen design, and brand positioning, it can deliver meaningful ROI well beyond the hype.