

The 10 Biggest Restaurant Equipment Purchasing Mistakes

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Opening or renovating a restaurant is one of the most capital-intensive undertakings in the hospitality industry. Between kitchen equipment, refrigeration, bar buildouts, smallwares, and installation, it is not unusual for restaurants to spend \$150,000 to \$500,000 or more before the first meal is ever served.

After decades in restaurants, distribution, and consulting, I've seen the same costly mistakes repeated again and again. Many operators focus heavily on the food, menu, and concept—but the **equipment purchasing strategy** often receives far less attention than it should.

Poor decisions here can drain capital, slow operations, and create headaches that last for years.

Below are the **ten biggest equipment purchasing mistakes restaurant operators make—and how to avoid them.**

1. Overbuying Equipment

One of the most common mistakes is buying equipment for a restaurant you *hope* to have rather than the one you actually have.

New operators often purchase:

- extra fryers
- oversized cooking lines
- unnecessary specialty equipment
- redundant prep stations

In reality, most kitchens operate far more efficiently when they are designed tightly around the menu and expected volume.

Overbuying equipment leads to:

- wasted capital
- wasted kitchen space
- higher utility costs
- unnecessary maintenance expenses

Smart operators build kitchens based on **realistic production needs**, not theoretical capacity.

2. Underestimating Ventilation and Infrastructure

Many equipment decisions are made without fully understanding the building infrastructure.

For example:

- ventilation capacity
- electrical service
- gas supply
- drainage
- hood systems

A restaurant may buy a beautiful high-BTU cooking line only to discover the building cannot support it without major upgrades.

This can lead to expensive change orders, delays, and redesigns.

Infrastructure should always be evaluated before equipment is purchased.

3. Buying Cheap Equipment Instead of Reliable Equipment

It is tempting to purchase the lowest-cost equipment option, especially when budgets are tight.

However, cheap equipment often becomes extremely expensive over time due to:

- frequent repairs
- downtime
- shorter lifespans
- inconsistent performance

For critical equipment such as refrigeration, ovens, and dish machines, reliability matters far more than saving a few thousand dollars upfront.

A broken walk-in cooler during service can cost far more than the price difference between equipment brands.

4. Ignoring Energy Efficiency

Restaurant equipment runs 12–18 hours a day, sometimes longer.

Energy-efficient equipment may cost slightly more upfront but can save substantial money over time through:

- reduced utility costs
- lower heat output
- less strain on HVAC systems

Many Energy Star appliances pay for themselves within a few years.

Operators who ignore this factor often lock themselves into higher operating costs for the life of the restaurant.

5. Buying Equipment Before the Menu Is Finalized

The menu should drive the kitchen—not the other way around.

One of the most expensive mistakes is purchasing equipment before the menu and production workflow are fully developed.

For example:

- buying a charbroiler when the menu barely uses it
- installing a pizza oven for a menu with limited pizza sales
- designing a large sauté station without sufficient sauté items

The menu, volume projections, and kitchen workflow should always determine the equipment list.

6. Failing to Consider Kitchen Workflow

A well-designed kitchen is about **movement and efficiency**, not just equipment.

Common workflow mistakes include:

- prep areas located too far from cooking lines
- refrigeration placed in inefficient locations
- dishwashing interfering with service traffic

Poor workflow leads to:

- slower service
- staff frustration
- increased labor costs

A kitchen should function like a production system, not just a collection of appliances.

7. Purchasing Everything Brand New

Not every piece of equipment needs to be brand new.

Many experienced operators mix:

- new equipment for critical items
- refurbished equipment for secondary items
- lightly used equipment for low-risk categories

For example, used equipment can work well for:

- shelving
- stainless tables
- sinks
- storage racks

Strategic use of used equipment can reduce equipment budgets by 20–40 percent without compromising operations.

8. Financing the Wrong Equipment

Financing is common in restaurant development, but it should be used strategically.

Equipment that makes sense to finance:

- cooking equipment
- refrigeration systems
- dish machines
- ventilation systems

These items often last 10–20 years.

However, financing small items like:

- smallwares
- blenders
- pans
- utensils

is rarely wise. These items wear out quickly and should simply be purchased outright.

9. Buying Equipment Without Considering Service and Support

A piece of equipment is only as good as the **service network behind it**.

Before purchasing equipment, operators should ask:

- Are technicians available locally?
- Are replacement parts easy to obtain?
- How quickly can repairs be completed?

A piece of equipment that cannot be serviced quickly can shut down an entire kitchen station.

Local service availability should always influence purchasing decisions.

10. Not Working With Experienced Equipment Dealers

Restaurant equipment dealers are more than suppliers—they are often critical partners in kitchen development.

Experienced dealers can assist with:

- kitchen layout
- equipment selection
- installation coordination
- manufacturer relationships
- financing options

Many operators make the mistake of piecing together equipment purchases from multiple vendors online, which can create coordination issues during installation.

A knowledgeable dealer can often save significant money through package pricing and manufacturer incentives.

Final Thoughts

Restaurant equipment purchasing is not simply about buying appliances. It is about building the operational backbone of the restaurant.

The best operators approach equipment decisions strategically by focusing on:

- efficiency
- durability
- workflow
- energy costs
- long-term value

When done properly, smart equipment purchasing protects capital, improves kitchen performance, and sets the foundation for a successful operation.

In a business with thin margins, these decisions can make the difference between a restaurant that struggles and one that thrives.