

# Kitchen confidential

Planning and building a kitchen from scratch is one of those things many chefs fantasise about. We go behind-the-scenes of a recent build to find out what happens when the dream becomes reality.

Not every restaurateur or chef is lucky enough to be able to build their dream kitchen but for those who do it's one of the most important, not to mention expensive, steps in the process of opening a new restaurant. The checklist of things to consider before starting includes the style of food you'll be making, council requirements and Australian standards to be met, floor space, layout and appliances.

Moreover, the sky really is the limit when it comes to cost. Historic Jenolan Caves House in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales recently announced that they are giving their Edwardian kitchen a complete makeover, to bring it into line with the needs of a modern foodservice operation, at a cost of \$900,000.

To find out what goes into creating a commercial kitchen from scratch, *Open House* asked Alex Kearns, chef/owner at Neutral Bay Bar and Dining, which opened in July, and project manager Dean Benchmark from Stainless and Franklin Catering Equipment to talk us through the build. Alex and Dean previously worked on the refit of Alex's other restaurant, Glebe Point Diner.

## Alex

There was nothing here when we

that's available, the type of menu they want, how much money they have to spend... Budget is just as important as the rest of it.

We worked on the project that ended up being Neutral Bay Bar and Dining for about six months. The owners had in mind that they wanted a second restaurant [in addition to Glebe Point Diner] and they went through a few other premises before they settled on Neutral Bay.

I was called in to look at the space once it became available, to see whether it would be suitable to build a commercial kitchen in. There are certain restraints in relation to ventilation and access which make some sites unsuitable. Whether you can meet the Australian standards and comply with council requirements.

Six months is fairly typical, but some of the other teams I've worked with before have looked at premises for a couple of years prior to them setting on a place.

The layout of this kitchen was dictated by the space. It's a long skinny building and the owners particularly wanted a bar up the front, which would drag people through to the dining area, so that's

started. The extraction fan was in which told us where we were going to put the kitchen but other than the space was a blank canvas. It was very exciting.

The first thing we did was work out how big the dining space would be. The leftover space was for me.

Before working on the kitchen's design we had to decide on the concept for the restaurant and what style of food we wanted to do. We also had to work with the shape of the kitchen – it's a galley kitchen with no room for the chefs to cross over so everything needed to be in a straight line. Once we'd decided on the menu and the shape, things slotted into place from there.

The main thing I wanted was an open fire pit and that had to go in a particular spot. I really wanted to go back to old school flavours with the menu and you don't get the same flavour with gas. I don't know if having a fire pit unusual but it wasn't cheap. We had to get a Smog-Hog [ventilation system] installed and the fuel isn't cheap either. We run it on charcoal, which is the most economical, but I've got a couple of bags of hardwood which we're going to try instead.

The final design has the grill at one end, and then it has two sections, repeating itself. Each section has a pasta boiler, Targa top with an oven underneath it, then a two-burner,

why we ended up with a long galley-style kitchen rather than a kitchen at the front of the building or one that goes across the back of the room.

It's a hard layout to get everything in. Because it's a long kitchen all the guys are working side by side, and it's not easy to move around. All the workstations have to be exactly right.

The fire pit didn't complicate the design but it did complicate the ventilation dramatically. There are certain codes that you have to meet to cook on timber or charcoal, so there's a completely separate ventilation system above the fire pit. That in itself probably cost as much as the rest of the system.

We used Italian appliances. It's an open kitchen so they wanted something really nice. There are two styles of appliances on the market – the stuff that comes out of Italy, which is soft and rounded, and the American stuff, which is boxy and covered in cast iron. The European stuff takes up a lot more floor space, which is why it was hard to fit it into the Neutral Bay Bar and Dining. The cooking line is a lot longer than if we had used American appliances. 🍳

a deep fryer, a little bit of bench space, and then a Rational six-tray oven. It goes grill, main course, hot entrees, and finally, down the other end, desserts.

Since opening we've only made a few minor changes to the kitchen. There hasn't been a major overhaul, or any "I can't believe we forgot that" moments. The biggest issue for me has been working with computerised dockets. I've never worked with computerised dockets in over 10 years of cooking. I think you lose the personal touch – the ability for a waiter to tell you that a customer wants their steak a little bit under medium rare, or asking if can you hurry a particular table along, for example.

This place is like chalk and cheese compared to Glebe Point Diner. Here, we have a 100-seater restaurant with a bar for 40 people; Glebe is a 40-seater restaurant. In Glebe there was a little kitchen already there; it has an eight-burner stove and two ovens and we pump the food out. At Glebe we just did a few cheap, cosmetic changes, but here we spent a lot of money getting the kitchen we wanted.

## Dean

The design of a kitchen hinges on a number of things – the space