What Restaurant Owners Need to Know About Hood Cleaning for Restaurants

Running a commercial kitchen means you have a lot on your plate. Between managing staff, keeping customers happy, and controlling food costs, the exhaust hood above your cooking line might not get much thought. But that hood and the ductwork running through your building are one of the most critical pieces of equipment for kitchen fire safety. Without regular hood cleaning for restaurants, grease buildup turns your ventilation system into a serious fire hazard. I have seen kitchens where the grease was so thick you could scrape it off with a putty knife. That is a fire waiting to happen.

The National Fire Protection Association sets the standard for fire safety in commercial kitchens through NFPA 96. This standard covers everything from the design of the kitchen exhaust system to how often it must be cleaned. If you have ever had a restaurant inspection fail because of grease accumulation, you already know how strict these requirements are. Inspectors look at the hood, the ductwork, and the fans. They also check the fire suppression system, which is often an Ansul system that uses wet chemicals to extinguish a grease fire. When that system discharges, it needs to be able to reach all the cooking surfaces without being blocked by heavy grease.

Let me walk through what actually goes into a professional cleaning, what it costs, and why skipping it is a bad idea.

The Anatomy of a Kitchen Exhaust System

The exhaust hood is the part you see over the cook line. It captures smoke, heat, and grease particles. The grease then travels through the ductwork and into the exhaust fan, which pushes it outside. Along the way, some of that grease condenses and sticks to the interior surfaces. Over time, that layer of grease can get thick enough to drip. A properly maintained system includes a grease trap inside the hood that captures the heavier particles before they reach the duct. But even with the best grease trap, you still need regular cleaning.

Modern hoods sometimes come with a freeze-proof hood design that prevents grease from solidifying in cold climates. Variable speed fans help control airflow and reduce energy costs. But none of these features eliminate the need for cleaning. The NFPA 96 standard requires that cleaning frequency be based on the volume of cooking and the type of food being prepared. A high-volume chicken fryer needs more frequent cleaning than a bakery oven. Most professional cleaning companies will inspect the system and recommend a schedule based on your specific operation.



What Professional Hood Cleaning Involves

A full deep cleaning covers more than just the visible surfaces. The crew will remove all filters and baffles, usually taking them to a pressure washing station. They scrape and clean the inside of the hood, the entire duct run from the hood to the fan, and the fan itself. They also clean the roof top area around the fan and any filter racks. Some companies also offer HVAC cleaning for the supply side of the system, but that is a separate service.

The cleaning process typically uses a combination of degreasing chemicals and hot water pressure washing. The goal is to expose bare metal on all interior surfaces. After the cleaning, the technician will reassemble everything and run the system to make sure it works. They should also check the condition of the fire suppression system, though a full inspection of the Ansul system usually requires a certified technician. A good cleaning company will note any damage or wear they find and recommend repairs.

Cost Factors for Hood Cleaning Services

Pricing for hood cleaning for restaurants varies based on several factors. The size of the hood is the biggest driver. A small hood over a single oven might cost a few hundred dollars, while a large hood over a busy fry station can cost over a thousand. The length and complexity of the ductwork also matters. If the duct has multiple elbows or runs a long distance, it takes more time to clean. Access is another factor. If the crew has to work around equipment or on a steep roof, the price goes up.

The frequency of service affects the cost as well. A restaurant that runs a high-volume fry operation might need cleaning every three months. A lighter operation might get away with twice a year. Some cleaning companies offer discounts for signing a contract for regular service. That can help you budget more predictable costs. But be careful with the lowest bid. I have seen cheap cleanings where the crew only wiped down the visible parts and left the ductwork full of grease. That will not pass an inspection.

Here are the main cost factors to consider when getting quotes:

- Hood length and number of sections
- Duct length, number of elbows, and accessibility
- Volume and type of cooking (grease load)
- Frequency of service (monthly, quarterly, semi-annual)
- Additional services like fan cleaning or filter replacement

Most professional companies will provide a free estimate after looking at your system. Make sure they include cleaning of the entire kitchen exhaust system, not just the visible hood. Ask if they follow NFPA 96 guidelines and if they will provide a cleaning certificate after the job. That certificate is important for insurance and for your local fire marshal.

Why Regular Cleaning Matters Beyond Fire Safety

Fire safety is the main reason to keep up with hood cleaning for restaurants, but it is not the only one. A clean exhaust system runs more efficiently. Grease buildup restricts airflow, forcing the fan to work harder. That increases energy costs and puts extra strain on the motor. Over time, that can lead to fan failure and expensive repairs. A well-maintained system also helps with climate control in the kitchen. If the exhaust fan is struggling, the kitchen stays hotter, which makes the HVAC system work harder to keep the dining room comfortable.



Another practical concern is the risk of roof damage. When grease accumulates on the roof near the fan exhaust, it can attract pests and create a slip hazard for anyone walking on the roof. It can also stain the roofing material and lead to premature deterioration. A good cleaning will include wiping down the area around the fan and removing any visible grease on the roof surface.

Restaurant ventilation is something that most customers never think about, but it directly affects the dining experience. A kitchen that vents properly keeps cooking odors and smoke from drifting into the dining room. It also helps maintain a comfortable temperature for the staff. If the exhaust system is clogged, the kitchen can become unbearable during peak service.

Common Misconceptions About Hood Cleaning

Some restaurant owners think that if they use a high-efficiency hood or a UL 710 listed unit, they do not need cleaning as often. That is not true. UL 710 covers the fire resistance of the hood itself, not its grease holding capacity. Even the best hood still needs regular cleaning because the ductwork and fan are downstream. The grease will accumulate there no matter what hood you have.

Another misconception is that cleaning the filters is enough. The filters catch some grease, but a lot of it passes through and deposits in the duct. Changing or cleaning the filters is important, but it is not a substitute for a full system cleaning. A professional cleaning company will remove the filters, clean them separately, and then clean the entire exhaust path.

Some owners also believe that a fire suppression system makes hood cleaning optional. That is dangerous. The fire suppression system is a last resort. It puts out a fire that has already started. The best defense is preventing the fire in the first place, which means keeping the grease from building up to a point where it can ignite. Even a properly charged Ansul system might not reach a grease fire that is burning deep inside a clogged duct.

What to Look For in a Cleaning Company

When you hire a professional, you want someone who understands the relevant codes and standards. Ask if they are certified by the International Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning Association (IKECA) or another recognized organization. They should carry insurance that covers their work. They should also provide a detailed report after each cleaning, documenting what was cleaned and noting any issues they found. That report becomes part of your documentation for insurance and inspections.

Here are a few things to verify before you sign a contract:



- They follow NFPA 96 guidelines for cleaning frequency and methods
- They provide a certificate of cleaning after each service
- They inspect the fire suppression system and alert you to any problems
- They have liability insurance and workers compensation coverage

Building a relationship with a reliable cleaning company takes some effort upfront, but it pays off over time. You will get consistent service, and they will learn the quirks of your specific system. That makes each cleaning faster and more thorough. They can also alert you to small problems before they become expensive repairs.

Final Thoughts on Keeping Your Kitchen Safe

Regular hood cleaning is not just a line item on your maintenance budget. It is a fundamental part of running a safe and efficient commercial kitchen. The cost of a professional cleaning is small compared to the potential loss from a kitchen fire. And the peace of mind that comes from knowing your system is clean and your staff is safe is worth every dollar.

If you are not sure how often your kitchen needs cleaning, start by looking at your cooking volume and the type of food you prepare. Then talk to a professional cleaning service that specializes in restaurant ventilation. They can help you set up a schedule that meets NFPA 96 standards and keeps your kitchen running smoothly. Your fire marshal, your insurance agent, and your staff will all thank you.