Practical Guide to Grease Removal from Kitchen Hoods for Restaurant Owners

The Real Cost of Ignoring Grease in Your Exhaust Hood

If you run a restaurant kitchen, you know the ventilation system works hard. But the grease that collects inside the hood canopy and ducts doesn't just look unpleasant. It creates a serious fire hazard. NFPA 96 sets the standard for ventilation cleaning and fire safety in commercial cooking. Most operators understand the rulebook exists. Few realize how quickly grease buildup compromises their equipment and their insurance coverage. I've spent years working with kitchens of all sizes, and I can tell you: the difference between a well-maintained exhaust hood and a neglected one is night and day.

Why Grease Removal from Kitchen Hoods Matters More Than You Think

Commercial kitchens produce grease vapor constantly. Every time you fire up the fryer or grill, that vapor travels upward into the hood, past the grease filter, and into the ductwork. Over time, it condenses into a sticky, flammable layer. A single spark from a cooking surface or an electrical fault can ignite that layer. Fire suppression systems exist to handle emergencies, but they aren't designed to compensate for a thick coat of grease. Regular grease removal from kitchen hoods is the only reliable way to keep your kitchen safe and compliant with fire code. I've seen kitchens where the hood inspection revealed a layer nearly an inch thick. The owners were shocked. They thought their routine wipe-downs were enough.

Hood cleaning frequency depends on your cooking volume. A high-output restaurant that runs fryers and grills all day needs deep cleaning every three months. A lighter-use cafe might stretch to six months. But waiting too long invites trouble. NFPA 96 requires that hoods, ducts, and fans be cleaned at intervals that prevent grease accumulation from becoming a hazard. If you let it slide, you risk not only a fire but also a failed hood certification that could shut you down during a surprise inspection.

What Professional Cleaning Involves

Professional cleaning goes far beyond wiping the visible surfaces. A thorough service includes high-pressure washing of the entire exhaust system: the hood canopy, the internal baffles, the ductwork from the hood to the roof fan, and the fan itself. Technicians use specialized degreaser chemicals that break down cooked-on grease without damaging stainless steel surfaces. They also check the condition of the charcoal filter if your system has one, and inspect the fire suppression system to ensure it's operational. After the cleaning, they provide

documentation for hood inspection purposes. That paper trail matters for your insurance and local fire marshal.



One detail many operators miss is that UL 710 listing applies to the hood unit itself. It certifies that the hood meets fire safety standards for commercial use. But even a UL 710 listed hood becomes dangerous if it's caked with grease. The certification doesn't guarantee performance under neglect.

What to Expect During a Deep Cleaning

- Full disassembly of removable parts like grease filters and baffles for separate cleaning
- Application of industrial-strength degreaser to all interior surfaces
- High-pressure washing with hot water to remove stubborn deposits
- Manual scraping of heavy buildup in hard-to-reach corners of the ductwork
- Final rinse and inspection of the entire system for damage or wear

The process takes several hours for an average-size commercial kitchen. It's disruptive, so most operators schedule it after hours. But the peace of mind is worth the inconvenience.

Doing It Yourself vs. Hiring a Pro

Some restaurant owners try to handle grease removal from kitchen hoods with off-the-shelf cleaners and a pressure washer. In my experience, that approach rarely meets fire code standards. The ductwork is the real problem area. It's hidden from view, and grease accumulates there in ways you can't see from the kitchen floor. Professional cleaners have the equipment to reach those sections: long pressure wands, specialized vacuum systems, and cameras for inspection. They also know the local fire code requirements and can spot issues like a damaged fire suppression system or a missing grease filter that you might overlook.

On the other hand, routine maintenance between professional cleanings is something you can handle. Wipe down the hood canopy and grease filters daily. Replace charcoal filters according to the manufacturer's schedule. Keep an eye on the hood for signs of excessive splatter. If you see grease dripping from the filter, it's time to call the pros.



Cost Factors in Commercial Kitchen Hood Cleaning

Pricing for cleaning services varies by location, system complexity, and the severity of grease buildup. A simple single-hood setup in a small restaurant might cost a few hundred dollars per cleaning. A large institutional kitchen with multiple exhaust hoods and miles of ductwork can run into the thousands. But consider the alternative. A kitchen fire can cost tens of thousands in damage, lost revenue, and increased insurance premiums. Regular cleaning is a fraction of that risk.

Some companies offer flat-rate contracts for routine cleaning. Others charge based on the time and materials required. Always ask for a written estimate that includes a hood inspection

report after the job. That report is your proof of compliance for NFPA 96. Without it, you're essentially taking the company's word that the work was done right.

Common Mistakes I See

- Using household oven cleaner on stainless steel hoods, it can pit the surface
- Forgetting to clean the rooftop exhaust fan, which is often the dirtiest part
- Skipping the ductwork because it's hard to access
- Assuming a new hood doesn't need cleaning for the first year
- Ignoring the fire suppression system during maintenance

Any of these mistakes can lead to a failed inspection or, worse, a fire. I've walked into kitchens where the staff thought they were doing a good job because the hood surface looked clean. But the ducts above the ceiling were caked. That's the kind of hidden grease that feeds a fire.

Final Thoughts on Keeping Your Kitchen Safe

Grease buildup is inevitable in any commercial kitchen. But it doesn't have to be a problem. Regular professional cleaning, combined with daily surface wiping, keeps your exhaust system functioning efficiently and safely. If you're due for a cleaning or haven't had one in over six months, call a certified ventilation cleaning company. They'll handle the heavy work and give you the documentation you need. Your kitchen, your staff, and your customers will thank you.



Remember: fire code compliance starts with the hood. Make sure it's clean, inspected, and maintained. That's the single best investment you can make in your restaurant's safety.