An Upscale Update

Designers create a state-of-the-art foodservice operation in the Union League Club of Philadelphia’s landmark building.

By Karen M. Alley || Photos by Renate Siekmann, RS Specialty Photography

Take a stroll down South Broad Street in Philadelphia, and you’ll notice a set of windows that allow you to peek in on chefs at work. They’re preparing luscious dishes in an a la carte prep kitchen. The captivating scene is part of the Union League Club of Philadelphia’s massive kitchen- and service-area renovation designed by William Caruso & Associates Inc. with offices in Denver, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Scottsdale, Ariz.

“The view of the kitchen is a unique slice of 21st-century ingenuity, and it’s only part of the exciting things we were able to do with this space,” says Stephen Young, FCSI, principal and director of design for WC&A. The firm got to design within the beautiful architecture of a landmark building (circa 1865), but the team was given a clean slate to create a new foodservice operation. “It was so fulfilling to open a workspace in this exceptional environment,” he says.

Their involvement included renovating the existing 8,000-sq.-ft. main kitchen to add a new bakery with chocolate room, garde manger, meat and fish cooler attached to a butcher room (all temperature controlled), a volume-cooking banquet kitchen, the on-view a la carte kitchen equipped with a high-end cooking suite, a new room-service production area, cold and dry storage, warewashing, new service pantries for the club’s Lincoln Ballroom and office facilities. Another new addition is an Innovation/Chef’s Table display kitchen, the brain child of the club’s general manager, Jeff McFadden. Finely finished for private, chef-helmed functions, it also is visible from the street. The club’s iconic parlor bar was redone as well.

The design team expanded the club’s basement, adding cold and dry storage for finished menu items and storage for beverages. “We also added a new exclusive wine/private function room with a dining table,” Young adds.

In With The New

The renovation entailed bringing in new equipment, which not only expanded the operation’s menu but also enabled the club to provide more services, including private dining venues, cooking demonstrations, expanded bakery and chocolate work for catering and onsite filleting/meat preparation. The renovation also improved the club’s production efficiency, giving the staff the ability to prepare foods for back-to-back meetings and functions. Among the equipment that improved labor, efficiency and throughput were an Irinox blast chiller, Alto-Shaam combi ovens and additional cold storage to hold finished foods.

“We worked closely with Union League Executive Chef Martin Hammond and his team during this project and introduced them to some of the equipment available to really increase production,” Young says.

In With The New

One of the project’s main goals was to enhance workspace efficiency while improving energy use in a kitchen that hadn’t had a major renovation in more than 50 years. “Sixty years of bringing in new pieces of equipment and adding on little by little—that changed things for new menu items—the workflow pattern was compromised,” Young says. “We were able to clear out everything at the start of the project, so, in effect, it was like designing in a brand-new facility.”

Log of workflow was a paramount goal. In the new floorplan, food flows logically from receiving to storage to preparation, then to the final assembly in preparation for service or holding for service. Over the years, and with the addition and installation of equipment whenever the staff could fit it, flow of food from receiving to service was less than optimal.

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Unique Guest Spaces
The project came with a unique challenge: how to improve services for a club that already provided a premium, upscale environment with fantastic food. Young and his team met the challenge by using multiple pieces of Energy Star-rated equipment, including broilers, convection ovens and refrigeration systems. New equipment choices helped reduce the kitchen energy use by more than 50%.

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head on, creating new dining areas that provide unique experiences for the club's members. First was the basement. Charged with expanding refrigerated and dry storage, the team remodeled the basement to include bulk storage space as well as an attractive temperature-controlled wine storage room highlighted by the building's original exposed brick. The design team finished the space by creating two beautiful private dining rooms, one for a small party and one for a larger group.

Another exciting new feature is the Innovation Kitchen and Chef's Table. Guests are able to participate in the food-preparation experience as they sit at elegant tables with a clear view of the chef as he prepares their meals. "It's exciting to see what happens in this kitchen, and it gives people the ability to experience a unique inside view of commercial foodservice production," Young says.

Throughout the project, staff members—in addition to Chef Martin—were included in the planning. Everyone had an opportunity to voice opinions, which helped the final design improve operations for all involved. The renovation was successful not only because the project improved efficiency and reduced energy use, but also because everyone, from the staff to the guests, loves spending time in the new environment.

"You can tell that the staff is thrilled with the new space," Young says. "They walk people through on tours, and it's wonderful to hear them call it 'our kitchen.' It truly was a collaborative effort, and now the Union League Club and its talented culinary team are reaping the benefits of their hard work."

One of the challenges of designing in an older building is working around the existing architecture. These columns were integrated into the design so that, rather than disrupting workflow, they create symmetry and add interest.

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