

## **Out with the Old, In with the New**

### **Carolyn Roberts**

#### **How Chipotle helped reimagine the exhaust hood cleaning process**

Within the restaurant industry, exhaust hood cleaning is a necessary evil that helps ensure the safety of customers, employees and facilities. Despite its benefits, though, exhaust hood cleaning is not always easy—something that Chipotle knows first-hand.

The process of cleaning ventilation systems has evolved over the years. As recently as 10 years ago, a typical hood cleaning consisted of the following steps: remove the baffle filters, scrape up as far as possible, tip back the fan, scrape down as far as possible and wash the fan. Job complete. Unfortunately, through that process, all the grease accumulation in the ductwork that was unreachable could become a ticking bomb, resulting in extensive damages, loss of sales and even death.

#### **Looking for a Better Approach**

In 2006, after surveying approximately 25 percent of our restaurants' exhaust systems, cleaning practices and odor issues, Chipotle decided to completely revamp our protocols related to exhaust systems.

Working with our primary hood cleaning company, Enviromatic Corp., we strategically developed a plan to clean every one of our then 500+ restaurants to a 100-percent, bare-metal standard, regardless of the length of ductwork involved. Using the traditional methods of rags and scrapers would not allow us to access many areas. In addition, while we had access panels in place, we quickly realized that panels placed to meet code requirements wouldn't necessarily allow for our cleaners to access the ductwork.

In order to access every inch of these exhaust systems, Don Pfleiderer of Enviromatic designed specialty hot water wash nozzles and perfected the use of spin-jet nozzles that rotate at pressures higher than 1,200 psi. The hot, soapy, high-volume water allows the company to accomplish Chipotle's mission of 100-percent, bare-metal for every location.

#### **Trial and Error**

We were very excited to implement this new technology. We set up our first cleaning and quickly realized that very few of our exhaust systems were water tight. We had to regroup on our strategy. The first hurdle was figuring out how to account for the more than \$3 million needed to make all locations water tight. This required welding and then retesting for water leaks. The project required extensive work to obtain approvals from landlords, as well as thoughtful coordination between hood cleaners, welders, fire suppression vendors and facilities managers. We also had to add many access panels to our existing systems and obtain before-and-after photographs of every system. We had to develop an individual plan for every restaurant, and we had to do it with little to no impact to sales.

With all this work happening in existing restaurants, we knew it was imperative to also create a system for the more than 75 restaurants we were opening per year at that time. We worked with

Pfleiderer to develop the water leak test for ductwork in all new restaurants during construction using the same 1200 psi spin jet.

A group consisting of design managers, consulting architects, general contractors, subcontractors, facilities managers and construction managers, along with Enviromatic, congregated at a restaurant under construction in Denver to perform the first water leak test. Ironically, the fire inspector was signing the “pass” test as we walked in the door. We explained what we were doing, and he stayed to watch.

In the first two hours, we found more than 90 leaks in a 12-inch duct. It took seven more tests and five days to make the ductwork 100-percent leak proof. While it was an incredibly arduous process, it quickly made the business case to incorporate this into our construction standards going forward.

### **Well Worth the Effort**

As easy as it was to decide to standardize this area of our business, we did not anticipate how challenging it would be to communicate the importance of this practice to our existing hood cleaners, general contractors, mechanical contractors and, surprisingly, fire inspectors. With the help of Pfleiderer, we spent many phone calls, training sessions and emails communicating our stance with these various folks. After more than eight years, we feel that all our effort has paid off in spades—not only for Chipotle and our two other concepts—but also for the restaurant industry as a whole. Many municipalities now require water leak testing as their only approved method. Insurance companies offer discounts for premiums by employing this method of cleaning, which quickly pays for many months of regular maintenance.

According to the NFPA website, more than 7,500 structure fires occur annually in eating and drinking establishments. How does a facilities manager manage this area of the business while also mitigating odors, preventing fires and, at the same time, attempting to reduce costs? Partnering with a great hood cleaner and fire protection company and requiring before-and-after photo documentation is the best defense in staying ahead of this facilities challenge.

Carolyn Roberts is Executive Director of Facilities, Construction, Design and Sustainability with Chipotle. Roberts has been with Chipotle for nine years while working as an outside contractor with them for nine years prior. Roberts has been involved with RFMA since its inception, and she is currently serving on the RFMA Board of Directors.