7 Things To Explore Before Purchasing a Hot or Cold Shelf

Temperature-controlled shelves work to slow the cooling or warming process of already cooked or pre-chilled foods and beverages. They're perfect for quick-turn applications, and are a clear favorite among foodservice professionals. With that said, there are seven critical elements every buyer must consider before investing in a foodservice shelf.



1 Menu and temperature

Offering grab-n-go lasagna, an artisan pizza buffet or cold acai bowl bar? Always consider your menu when weighing whether you need a hot shelf, cold shelf, hot/cold convertible shelf, or any combination of the three.

Which shelf type or types are right for you?

- **Hot shelf**
- **Cold shelf**
- **Hot/cold convertible shelf**

A great option for switching between hot and cold menus during different dayparts!

Are your holding practices safe?

Keeping potentially hazardous foods out of the "danger zone" is essential to food safety. Hot and cold shelves help operators maintain foods at the required temperature ranges.



Hold hot foods at **140-160 °F (60-71 °C)**

Avoid the danger zone to prevent rapid bacterial growth **40-140 °F (4-60 °C)**

Hold cold foods at **32-40 °F (0-4 °C)**

2 Common applications

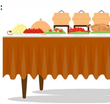
There are a lot of applications for hot, cold, or hot/cold combination shelves. The key is to identify all of the areas throughout your operation that would benefit from a temperature-controlled shelf.

Shelves benefit any industry, but how will your unique operation incorporate them?



Common applications:

- Grab-n-go
- Outdoor service areas
- Food trucks
- Concessions
- Buffets
- Salad bars
- Expediting stations
- Waitstaff windows
- Food-prep areas
- Other holding and serving zones



3 Portable vs. built-in

Will your shelf be a "Steady-Eddie" and stay in one location? Or are you looking for a "mover-and-shaker" that'll travel where needed? Deciding on a built-in versus a portable foodservice shelf starts with understanding your needs.



Which is right for you?

Built-in shelf

A set location can elevate the look of a serving or holding area and create efficiencies through familiar workflows.



Portable shelf

Shelves that easily move locations offer greater workflow flexibility and support a variety service options.



Typical mounting options for built-in shelves:

- **Flush** - Installed by aligning the shelf with the height of the counter. Often a metal frame is added to help capture product.
- **Recessed** - A small "wall" surrounds the shelf to contain spills and keep pans and containers from landing on the ground.
- **Undermount** - Shelf is directly mounted against the underside of a countertop to provide a frame-free, seamless integration.

4 The look you're after

People "eat with their eyes." Aesthetically pleasing cold and hot holding shelves in your front-of-house can add to the overall appeal of what you're serving. The right foodservice shelves can also provide the exact front (and back) of the house look you're after.

Which shelf top complements your aesthetic?

29% Beautifully presented food is rated 29% more delicious by study participants.[1]



Stainless steel or hard-coated aluminum

This classic look fits with any decor. Both hot and cold shelves that utilize a metal top produce excellent thermal transfer and quickly heat up and cool down for a fast recovery.



Simulated stone

Often available in different color options, stone tops are one way to elevate the look and feel of your establishment. Simulated stone is an effective option, but it might need just a few minutes longer to heat up since the element is under a quarter-inch of stone.



Ceramic glass

This sleek and modern option is a surefire way to boost the look and feel of your establishment. Ceramic glass that's been UL tested is also incredibly strong. Available as a hot-holding solution, ceramic-glass shelves take a bit longer to heat up since the element is buried deeper within the unit, but like the simulated stone option, they're incredibly effective.



Your countertop (undermount)

An undermount shelf works well with both hot and cold transfer and is mounted under your regular countertop to create a seamless look that always fits with your decor. Acceptable countertop materials for this type of shelf are quartz, granite, stainless steel and aluminum.

Want an impressive frosted look?
Frost Tops are similar to cold shelves but aren't exactly the same. One distinctive feature is their ability to easily produce a frosty look that both cools product and looks beautiful. Interested in learning more?

Check out our Cold Shelf vs. Frost Top article



5 Capacity

Determining the size and volume of shelves you need means taking a look at the quantity of food your operation holds during peak service times. You'll also want to take into account the amount of kitchen or front-of-house space you have available for equipment. Foodservice shelves conveniently come in different sizes. Portable shelves also have the added flexibility that allows you to store them out of the way when they're not in use.

Worried about hold time, not capacity?
Separately, overhead warmers and heated shelves are slotted for just a few minutes of holding hot foods. But what if you need more holding time? Pairing an overhead warmer (heat lamp or strip heater) with a warming shelf increases the surface area of the food that the heat covers. This combo-solution creates longer holding capabilities and increased operational flexibility.

6 Hot vs. cold installation

Hot shelf installation

Hot-holding shelves are available in both built-in and portable options. They typically don't have as many components as their cold counterparts, so installation is a bit less involved. For built-in options, simply follow the installation instructions and mount the unit and power/temperature control box into the cabinetry. And for portable options, just plug 'em in and be on your way!

Cold shelf installation

Cold and hot/cold shelves are sold as a build-in (not portable) solution because of their need for a condenser. The biggest installation decision with these shelf options is to determine if you want a remote-mounted or self-contained power and temperature control panel and condenser. Remote is always a nice option, as it moves more components further away from the customer's view.

Always consult the manufacturer's product manual to ensure you're up to speed on all installation requirements prior to making a purchase.

7 Volts and watts

Volts and watts impact the time it takes for a shelf to get to a desired temperature. The more voltage available in your building and the higher-watt unit you purchase, the quicker the temperature gets there. Just be sure to check the available voltage in your building to ensure it'll support the wattage of the equipment you purchase. This is typically more of a concern with high-powered cooking equipment, but it's worth a quick check.

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1. Flavour, A taste of Kandinsky: Assessing the influence of the artistic visual presentation of food on the dining experience. June 2014