

Understanding Cutlery

Almost all cutlery used in foodservice is made from stainless steel, even if it is finally plated with electro-plated nickel silver (EPNS). The finest cutlery is made from almost pure silver, but is rarely used in anything but the highest level of dining because of its cost. A silver knife and fork can cost from £75 upward.

With EPNS, the thickness of the plating determines both the durability and the price, so cheap EPNS may look good initially, but may not have a good lifetime cost. EPNS is used at the high end of restaurants and has a very elegant and classical look about it, but in addition to its extra cost, requires the additional maintenance of occasional use of a silver dip or polish to retain the silver lustre.

Stainless steel, which is the cutlery 99.9% of restaurants use, is a mixture of steel, nickel and chromium and in cutlery it is described by the nickel and chromium content in that order by the description of two numbers separated by a forward slash. The most popular restaurant grade of stainless steel is labelled 18/10, which means of the 100 parts in the steel, 18 parts are nickel, 10 parts are chromium and the remaining 72 parts are steel, which itself is an alloy of iron and carbon.

The advantage of 18/10 cutlery is that it is a hard material which is resistant to scratching and very dishwasher safe. If tarnishing appears on 18/10 cutlery the two likely reasons are that it is low quality or incorrect use of detergents in the dishwasher.

There is a lower grade of stainless steel used in cutlery which has less of the expensive metals nickel and chromium. This is very useful in situations where tableware cost has to be kept to a minimum and losses may be a cause for concern such as in institutional foodservice or cafeteria-style outlets. It is cheap and cheerful in appearance will be stamped out from much thinner material than 18/10 cutlery and there may be some tarnishing with dishwasher detergents over a period of time.

There are scores of patterns of cutlery and they fall into two styles. The traditional patterns such as Harley, Jesmond and Bead are called "parish patterns" from the areas of Sheffield they were originally designed in. These patterns are now made around the world, most notably in the Far East. There are also modern designs which have no natural home, but have been the work of cutlery designers.

Steak knives used in informal dining have a serrated blade and a handle of either riveted plastic or riveted wood. The coarse serration is to both cut and tear through steak and other grilled meats which may be slightly tough. The problem with wooden handled steak knives is that regular cleaning through a dishwasher will lead to a bleaching of the handles through the action of the detergent and the handles will take on a dried-out appearance. Plastic handles are bleach resistant.

Hollow handle or solid

This is purely a preference by the restaurant. Hollow handles have a lighter, chunky feel in the hand, solid handles a firmer, smaller feel. There is no difference in durability and seldom any difference in cost.

How to buy

Cutlery stock is subject to losses. This can be through wear and tear, theft by customers or staff, but most usually through plate-scraping in the dishwashing area when cutlery is inadvertently swept into refuse sacks along with plate waste. Whatever the reason, any restaurant has to be sure that individual replacement items of cutlery are available over a long-term basis.

An important question to ask when buying a new range of cutlery from a supplier is what is the stockholding, do they source a design from just one factory and what is the delivery time for additional pieces?

It is important to buy from the original cutlery supplier as in the global production of cutlery, one factory's interpretation of a standard pattern may be different from another. So while, for example, the pattern is quoted as Dubarry, there will be noticeable design difference on the tablecloth between the knife from one factory and the knife from another.

How to find out more about cutlery

Talk to the experts.

The Catering Equipment Suppliers Association

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