



How to buy an ice machine: The top five considerations:

Cook's Direct went straight to the experts to find out what foodservice operators need to think about when specifying a new commercial ice machine.

The summer months are fast approaching, which for foodservice operators means the heaviest season for wear and tear on their [ice machines](#) is almost here.

If it's time to replace a commercial ice machine, what are the key considerations foodservice operators need to make before buying? Of course, energy efficiency is a critical factor to think about, and many of the commercial ice machines on the market today are designed to use less energy and water in their production of ice. But what are the other important characteristics to look for?

In the second of a three-part series on ice machines, the experts in the commercial ice machine industry recommend what you should consider when it comes to making that crucial ice machine purchase.

1. Ice type. Ice cubes, Half cubes, Flake ice, Compressed ice. The days where plain old square-shaped ice cubes were the only option are long gone. Now, in addition to serving the classic cube, operators can choose from variations in cube size to completely different ice forms, including the most recent form and massively popular chewable ice. Your choice may depend on how the facility will use ice or the market the facility is serving.

"Different forms of ice are more practical for different segments of the industry," said Mike Kraus director of strategic accounts for Ice-O-Matic. "The half cube is considered a universal ice form, in that it virtually goes into any kind of a drink application. It dispenses very well, and it blends very easily. A larger, full cube, is referred to often as the clink in the drink, and it's more of a classic ice," Kraus continued. "It's more of an upscale application, and it's used in fine dining.

"Then you have compressed-like ice, which is the soft chewable ice that everybody's excited about right now in foodservice, drink service and in convenience stores. It is a customer-friendly, chewable ice form that actually absorbs the drink flavor," Kraus added.

Another type of ice, flake ice, is often used in retail for preservation of produce, fruits and fish and in baking to retard the rising of yeast, Kraus said.

In any case, the type of ice the facility uses is the key consideration before purchasing a commercial ice machine. It must be determined for the other criteria to matter.

2. Production and storage. How much ice does your foodservice operation require? At first, this may sound like an easy question to answer, but it really isn't. Restaurants and other foodservice venues never see a consistent, steady volume of customers every day, seven days a week. The daily and weekly variations in customer traffic make it impossible for a foodservice operation to expect equal amounts of ice service every day. And there's more to consider than just beverage service when it comes to ice production.

"It is important to look at all the areas of a foodservice operation that use ice," a spokesperson for Scotsman Ice Systems told *Food Equipment and Supplies* magazine (January 2011). "Beverages tend to represent the most common area that comes to mind when examining ice consumption, but it is important to note that foodservice operators may use ice in display applications such as in a salad bar or to cool food in the back of the house."

And don't forget storage. The ice machine will produce hundreds of pounds of ice once it's installed, but there has to be a place to put it. That's where the ice bin comes in, and its selection often leads to a dilemma for many foodservice operators: What's more important to ensure the facility's ice supply is sufficient on a daily basis? Is it the ice machine's production rate? Or is it the storage capacity of the bin?

"Both are important," said Ken Hardisty, vice president of sales for Hoshizaki America. "The biggest factor is how much physical space is available. An operator should always place as much ice storage as space allows."

Aside from maximizing storage capacity, installing the largest bin the space will accommodate can save money and energy, according to Scott Bingham, product marketing manager for Follett Corporation.

"You should consider both and optimize your storage and production scenario," Bingham said. "Your bin storage capacity tends to be much less expensive than ice production capacity." To do that, he said that Follett recommends sizing the storage bin for the facility's peak day requirement of ice and the ice machine for the average daily needs. But Hardisty offers a different view.

"I believe the operator should work their ice machine," he said. "It doesn't make any sense to place a 500-pound ice maker on a 1,000-pound bin. All [ice machines](#) are rated based on ice produced in a 24 hour period.

"The idea is to have what we call recovery production during operating hours," Hardisty added. "This will keep up with the demand. Overnight, the ice machine will produce until the bin control is satisfied and the ice maker shuts off."

3. Sanitation. Most customers realize that ice is a food product, Kraus said, so they acknowledge the importance of having access to the foodzone for easy cleaning and maintenance. Some ice machines are easier to clean than others, but whatever machine is in use, operators need to recognize and factor in the time and money needed to keep them sanitized, Showers said. Helping in the effort to maintain sanitation, most

manufacturers use antimicrobials in the plastic components of their commercial ice machines.

According to Bingham, another method that can help sanitation efforts is automatic filling of ice dispensers.

“There’s a significant benefit to automatically filling your dispensers rather than hand-transporting it, scooping it and dumping it,” he said. Moving the ice directly from the machine to the dispensers through tubes minimizes exposure of the ice to employees and other potential sources of contamination.

4. Maintenance. “Ice machines tend to be among the most neglected pieces of equipment in a restaurant,” the Scotsman Ice Systems spokesperson told *Foodservice Equipment and Supplies*. That’s a bad trend, because lack of maintenance of any machine eventually leads to breakdowns and downtime. And a foodservice operation with no ice service is one that’s going to lose customers quickly.

“Reliability is key,” Showers said. “I heard a statement from an end user not too long ago that was more or less, ‘If I have to think about my ice machine, it’s usually a bad thing.’

“They just want the machine to make ice. It can’t be down. If you talk about a restaurant, an ice machine is mission critical, and if they don’t have an ice machine, they have a big problem on their hands,” Showers added.

Consider the ease of maintenance before purchasing a commercial ice machine.

According to Showers, the machine should be easy to diagnose and service. Also consider the time and reliability of service if a technician is required.

“If you’re going to buy an ice machine, don’t just look at the price. Look at the long-term cost of ownership; is this machine going to be a headache for you or is it going to be fairly simple to own?” Showers said.

Properly maintained ice machines can be expected to last eight to 10 years, the Scotsman Ice Systems representative told *Food Equipment and Supplies*. Lax maintenance can cut that life expectancy in half.

5. Application and space availability. With the different types of ice and different machines available, a one-size-fits-all solution just doesn’t exist.

“The machine you would buy for a grocery store or for a display counter is distinctly different from what you might need for a convenience store, which is distinctly different than what you might need for a QSR restaurant,” Showers said.

Also make sure enough space is available to accommodate the [ice machine](#) and that utilities are located close enough to where the ice machine will be stationed.

“Location of utilities is a critical factor when placing an ice machine,” the Scotsman Ice Systems representative told *Food Equipment and Supplies*. “Power, water and drainage should all be within six feet of the unit to ensure it functions properly. It is (also) important to note that ice machines need to be in an area where the ventilation and air quality is good.”