

Avoid Catastrophe: Done Right's CEO Jacob Checkov Discusses the Dangers of Ignoring Hood Cleaning

Regular hood cleaning is not just a maintenance task—it's a critical safety measure. Jacob, CEO of Done Right Hood & Fire Safety, emphasizes the importance.

MIAMI, FL, UNITED STATES, April 9, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- It was a busy Friday night when flames erupted above the grill. What started as a small flare-up in a frying pan quickly roared into an inferno climbing the kitchen walls. Within minutes, the fire had raced into the overhead exhaust hood, finding a ready supply of fuel in the greasy residue lining the ducts. Firefighters arrived to find flames shooting through the rooftop vent, imperiling the restaurant and the apartments above.



A Done Right hood cleaning specialist cleaning a commercial kitchen canopy at a local restaurant

Stories like this are all too common – from a Michelin-starred London eatery gutted when a kitchen blaze spread through grease-choked ductwork, to a South Florida bistro where an uncontrolled grease fire sent four people to the hospital. In each case, the culprit is not just open flame or bad luck, but something far more preventable: neglected hood and duct cleaning. A dramatic flare-up in a restaurant kitchen – without proper hood cleaning, such flames can spread rapidly through grease-laden ducts.

These incidents underscore a sobering truth: the residue hidden in a commercial kitchen's hood and ventilation ducts can be a time bomb. "Potential fire hazards are the key unseen danger in commercial kitchens," warns Jacob Checkov, CEO of [Done Right Hood & Fire Safety](#). Checkov has spent over a decade protecting restaurants in New York and South Florida, and he's seen firsthand how complacency or corner-cutting on hood maintenance can have devastating consequences. "Understanding [NFPA 96](#) is the golden ticket to maintaining safety standards

while keeping the right culinary fires burning,” he says. In other words, following fire codes for kitchen exhaust cleaning isn’t just bureaucracy – it’s life or death for your business.

Every commercial kitchen generates grease-laden vapors. As chefs sauté, grill, and fry, tiny droplets of oil and combustible debris are drawn up into the exhaust hood. The hood’s filters catch some of it, but over time a significant amount adheres to the interior of the ducts and fans. This buildup forms a flammable coating – a literal fuse running through the ceilings. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), nearly 8,000 eating and drinking establishment fires are reported annually in the U.S., causing around \$246 million in property damage. A leading ignitor in a fifth of those fires is “failure to clean” the grease from hood and duct surfaces. What makes a grease-fueled fire especially dangerous is how rapidly it can spread out of sight. Once flames penetrate an uncleaned exhaust hood, the blaze can race through the duct like a chimney.

As one fire protection engineer notes, a dirty duct “can act like a fuel”. Fire investigations repeatedly show that grease-laden ducts lead to the most severe fire damage. The fire might start on a grill or fryer, but it will follow the grease—up through vents, into false ceilings, between walls, even to the roof. With kitchen exhaust ducts, there are typically no fire dampers to stop the spread (codes forbid dampers in these ducts, since they could clog with grease). That means a single spark can travel the length of the ductwork, igniting fires in crawl spaces or lofts far from the kitchen itself. Real-world cases drive this point home. In one notorious incident, a blaze at a vegetarian restaurant in Houston spread into long-neglected ductwork and caused a flashover that collapsed a building’s roof. Four firefighters lost their lives and 13 were injured. Investigators



A Done Right hood cleaning specialist cleaning a commercial kitchen's grease filters and hood at a Japanese restaurant



Grease doesn't stand a chance—expert hood cleaning high above Midtown keeps kitchens safe and city-compliant.

later found the restaurant had been cited for greasy conditions prior to the fire. In another case in Charleston, SC, authorities revealed that almost half of the city's restaurant fires over several years were stoked by grease buildup in hoods. The local fire marshal put it bluntly after seeing ducts so caked with carbonized grease that vents were nearly clogged: "It's going to be bad... Somebody is going to lose their life over this". Unfortunately, his warning came true more than once. Even when lives are thankfully not lost, a kitchen fire can wipe out a livelihood. Consider a popular New York bakery that went up in flames one morning when accumulated grease in its vent sparked a blaze. Firefighters managed to contain the fire in the duct before it consumed the whole shop.

The aftermath for the owner, however, was daunting – weeks of downtime, costly repairs, inspections, and a shaken reputation in the community. Checkov notes that beyond the immediate fire damage, "nothing kills a business faster than bad PR due to safety negligence." Customers and insurers alike may lose confidence if a fire reveals an owner's inattention to basic precautions. In the age of social media, a single incident can brand a restaurant as unsafe. The stakes couldn't be higher.

If hood and duct maintenance is the frontline defense, thoughtful kitchen design is the critical foundation. Architects and kitchen design specialists emphasize building it right – because a well-designed ventilation system can make the difference in containing a fire. As one fire safety consultant put it, "the most important aspect of design when it comes to commercial kitchens is undoubtedly the extract ductwork". All other fire precautions in a restaurant – extinguishers, sprinklers, suppression systems – may be for naught if the ductwork itself becomes a highway for flames.

To design for fire safety, experts recommend planning straight, short duct runs with minimal bends (to reduce grease accumulation points), installing ample access panels for cleaning crews, and using high-quality steel ducting sealed against grease leaks. "A fire that originates in the kitchen hood filters can spread into the ductwork, fueled by oil and grease. It can ignite other materials via radiant heat or grease leaks at duct joints," warns a leading commercial ventilation designer. Therefore, designers strive to ensure ducts are fully welded and routed in fire-rated shafts – so if a worst-case fire does occur, it's at least confined within a protected chase and can't easily ignite the building's structural elements. Kitchen design pros also collaborate with mechanical engineers to size exhaust hoods correctly for the equipment underneath. An



Done Right fabrication team welding a NFPA 96 code-compliant exhaust systems.

undersized hood or poorly placed exhaust fan might allow more smoke and heat to spill into the kitchen (creating hazards for occupants), or conversely, might fail to capture all the grease vapor which then deposits throughout the kitchen and duct. “Proper ventilation is crucial to maintain air quality and remove potentially harmful substances... it’s about creating a safe and comfortable space, not just meeting code,” notes a commercial kitchen design guide. In practice, this means choosing hoods with efficient grease filters and designing make-up air systems so that the hood can draw grease-laden air effectively. Geoff, an architect cited for fire-safe kitchen design, underscores that grease filters are the first line of defense. Research into better grease filtration (like advanced baffle filters that carry UL 1046 fire-resistance ratings) can significantly reduce how much flammable residue enters the ducts. Yet, even the best design cannot eliminate the need for regular cleaning. As Geoff notes in his article, “The single most important thing you can do to keep your commercial kitchen’s exhaust system safe is to regularly inspect and keep it clean.”

All the fire-resistant construction in the world won’t stop a grease fire if the grease is allowed to accumulate unchecked. This is where operations and maintenance intersect with design: designers hand off a kitchen with the expectation that owners will uphold their end by scheduling routine cleanings and inspections. Unfortunately, when that partnership fails, disaster can result. For instance, Boston learned this lesson after a tragic 2007 restaurant fire (fueled by grease) killed two firefighters. In response, the city worked with industry groups like the International Kitchen Exhaust Cleaning Association (IKECA) to mandate training and certification for hood cleaners, and now even “mom-and-pop” eateries must have hoods cleaned at least twice a year by certified pros. That combination of smart design, strict regulation, and professional maintenance has paid off – Boston fire officials can’t recall a significant restaurant blaze since the rules were tightened.

Whether you operate a Manhattan diner or a Miami Beach café, one set of guidelines stands above all in keeping kitchens safe: NFPA 96, the Standard for Ventilation Control and Fire Protection of Commercial Cooking Operations. This national code (often adopted into local law) lays out everything from how hoods should be built and installed to how often they must be cleaned. Neglecting NFPA 96 is not just risking a fire – it’s inviting legal and financial ruin. “If you think grease-laden vapors are scary, the consequences of non-compliance with NFPA 96 can be a real horror show,” Checkkov quips in his characteristic frank style. He’s only half-joking: ignoring these safety standards can lead to fines, liability lawsuits, and even the loss of your business. What exactly does NFPA 96 require? For starters, regular inspection and cleaning of the entire exhaust system, “cleaned to bare metal,” at intervals based on usage. The code provides guidance: high-volume or solid-fuel cooking operations might need monthly cleanings; moderate-volume kitchens, quarterly; low-volume, semi-annually. Local authorities often amplify these rules.

In New York City, for example, the Fire Code mandates hood systems be professionally cleaned at least once every three months – and more frequently if cooking volume demands. (If you use wood or charcoal cooking, NYC also requires monthly in-house inspections plus quarterly

cleanings by certified pros.) Restaurants must keep records of each cleaning and even display a sticker on the hood with the date of service. In Boston, an officer dropping by on an unrelated call will still “glance at the sticker” – if a hood is overdue, they issue a citation for “failure to clean” on the spot. The penalties for non-compliance can be steep. In New York, fines up to \$10,000 can be levied for failing to maintain clean hoods. Fire insurers, too, are increasingly wary. Many policies now require proof of NFPA 96 compliance and up-to-date cleaning logs; otherwise, a fire claim can be denied on grounds of negligence. Restaurant owners have learned the hard way that not adhering to code might leave them paying out of pocket for massive damages. Worse yet, if a grease fire injures someone – say a patron or firefighter – and an investigation finds the owner ignored cleaning mandates, legal liability can be crippling. Business owners have faced lawsuits for property damage to neighboring tenants and allegations of gross negligence. It’s a cascade of consequences: first a fire, then fines, then lawyers and insurance adjusters picking through the charred remains of what used to be a business.

Jacob Checkov emphasizes that compliance isn’t just about avoiding punishment; it’s about protecting your people. “We tell clients that an uncleaned hood is essentially a loaded gun pointing at your kitchen every day,” he says. “It’s not if it will go off, it’s when. Following NFPA 96 – getting those cleanings done, keeping your suppression system tagged and serviced – that’s how you take the bullet out of the chamber.” In New York City’s hyper-vigilant environment, Checkov’s team at Done Right Hood & Fire Safety stays busy ensuring thousands of restaurants (from fast-food franchises to corporate cafeterias) avoid fires and violations. Meanwhile, in Florida, fire inspectors similarly use NFPA 96 as their yardstick. The Florida Fire Prevention Code adopts NFPA 96, meaning a South Florida restaurant is held to the same strict standards of grease removal and system upkeep. As a result, a Miami or Fort Lauderdale kitchen that doesn’t clean often enough could be shut down by the fire marshal just as readily as one in NYC. No matter where you are, fire codes and insurance requirements are converging on a clear message: clean your hoods and ducts, or face dire consequences.

The good news is that today’s restaurant owners aren’t fighting grease fires with one hand tied behind their back. A wave of advanced technologies is making it easier to keep kitchen exhaust systems clean and safe. Jacob Checkov, always an early adopter, notes that “first-hand knowledge of new technology and code changes should be a priority” for any kitchen safety professional. Let’s look at a few innovations leading the charge:

EcoAzur Demand-Controlled Ventilation (DCV): One of the challenges in traditional exhaust systems is that fans run at full tilt whenever the lights are on, even if cooking activity is low. EcoAzur, a next-generation intelligent ventilation system, uses heat and optical sensors to continuously monitor cooking effluent.

When the grill is sizzling and woks are flaming, EcoAzur automatically ramps up fan speed to capture the surge of heat and smoke. But during prep lulls or off-peak hours, the system safely dials back the exhaust to as low as 30% of full speed. This on-demand approach has two big benefits: it saves energy (less conditioned air sucked out of your building means lower HVAC bills) and it reduces wear-and-tear on the system, potentially slowing the accumulation of

grease. Traditional “always on high” ventilation can actually dry out grease deposits into a hard resin that’s tough to remove; by contrast, a modulated system like EcoAzur keeps air moving just enough to vent fumes without constantly baking the ducts. Importantly, EcoAzur’s dual sensors (heat and smoke) address a shortcoming of earlier systems that only sensed heat. Those older models might not react until a room was already smoky. EcoAzur “sees” the smoke immediately with optics, preventing haze buildup. For busy urban kitchens in NYC and South Florida, this means a more comfortable workspace and an added layer of fire safety through smarter airflow control.

CaptiveAire Self-Cleaning Hoods: CaptiveAire, a leading manufacturer of commercial hoods, offers a game-changing feature in its premier hood lines – an integrated self-cleaning system. These hoods include stainless steel spray pipes running the full length of the hood, just behind the grease filters. At the end of each day (or on a preset schedule), hot water and a special surfactant detergent are automatically sprayed through these nozzles for a few minutes, washing down the inside of the hood plenum and a portion of the ductwork. In essence, the hood cleans itself each night so grease doesn’t get a chance to accumulate. The cleaning cycle even hits the back of the filters and the lower duct riser, which are spots where grease likes to hide. The benefits are significant: kitchens with self-washing hoods report

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