HOSPITALITY CLEANING 101

RESOURCE GUIDE

Mastering Chemical Selection for Food Service & Food Processing

A Practical Guide for Operators and Plant Managers

By Jerry Bauer

40-Plus Years in Hospitality Cleaning & Sanitation

HospitalityCleaning101.com

Why This Guide Exists

I started my career as a dishwasher back in the 1970s. I didn't know what I was using; I just knew the stuff worked, or it didn't. Over the next 40-plus years — through Ecolab, ChemStation, and my own consulting work — I figured out exactly why it worked, when it didn't, and what happens when the wrong chemical ends up in the wrong hands on the wrong surface.

That's what this guide is about. Not a product catalog. Not a sales pitch. A straightforward resource you can use to make smarter decisions about the chemicals running through your operation — whether you're managing a busy restaurant kitchen, running a hotel laundry, or operating a food processing facility under an SQF or HACCP audit.

The wrong chemical choice doesn't just waste money. It can destroy equipment, contaminate food, injure staff, or land you a failed inspection. I've seen all of it. This guide is how you avoid it.

Who this is for: Restaurant operators, executive chefs, food processing plant managers, facility managers, and anyone responsible for cleaning and sanitation programs in a food environment.

Section 1: The Language of Cleaning Chemicals

Before you can select the right chemical, you need to speak the language. These aren't just definitions — they're the terms that show up on safety data sheets, regulatory documents, and product labels. Knowing them puts you in control of the conversation with any chemical supplier.

Dwell Time / Contact Time

This is the amount of time a disinfectant or sanitizer needs to remain wet on a surface to actually do its job. It's not optional — it's a hard requirement baked into the product's EPA registration. Most operators skip this step entirely and wonder why they're still failing pathogen tests.

Real-world example: A quat sanitizer might have a 60-second contact time. If your staff is spraying and wiping immediately, you're getting zero kill. The surface looks clean. It isn't.

Active Ingredient

This is the chemical component that's doing the actual cleaning, disinfecting, or sanitizing. Everything else in the formulation is a carrier or performance enhancer. When you're comparing products, compare active ingredients first — not brand names, not price per gallon.

Common active ingredients you'll encounter: quaternary ammonium compounds (quats), sodium hypochlorite (bleach), hydrogen peroxide, peracetic acid, and iodophors. Each has a distinct job, a specific dilution range, and compatibility considerations.

Food Contact, No-Rinse (FCNR)

These products are formulated and EPA-registered for use on food contact surfaces — prep tables, cutting boards, utensils — without requiring a water rinse afterward. They're your workhorse sanitizers in a restaurant kitchen. The keyword is registered. Don't assume a product qualifies just because the label sounds safe. Check the EPA registration number.

Food Contact, Post-Rinse Required (FCR)

These chemicals do require a thorough rinse with potable water after application before the surface contacts food. Many heavy-duty degreasers and some disinfectants fall in this category. Using an FCR product without rinsing on a food-contact surface is a serious food safety violation—and a liability.

Hard Non-Porous (HN)

This designation covers non-porous surfaces like stainless steel, tile, glass, faucets, and door handles. When a product is labeled for HN surfaces, it's tested on those surfaces. Don't assume it performs the same on porous materials like grout or wood — it may not, and using it there could drive contamination deeper rather than eliminating it.

Parts Per Million (PPM)

PPM is how sanitizer concentration is measured and verified. It tells you how much active ingredient is present in your diluted solution. Too low and you're not sanitizing. Too high and you're creating a residue risk, potential chemical burn, or regulatory violation. Every sanitizer has a target range — know it and test it with the appropriate test strips or meter.

pH

pH determines whether a cleaner is alkaline, neutral, or acidic — and that matters enormously for what it will clean effectively and what surfaces it's compatible with. Alkaline cleaners (pH 8-14) cut through grease, oils, and protein soils. Acid cleaners (pH 1-6) remove mineral scale, rust stains, and beer stone. Using the wrong pH range on the wrong soil type is one of the most common and expensive mistakes I see.

Section 2: Cleaning vs. Sanitizing — Not the Same Thing

✔ Applies to Both

This is the number one misconception I run into, and it costs operations real money and real health risk. Cleaning and sanitizing are two separate steps. They cannot be combined in a single product under most circumstances, and one does not replace the other.

Cleaning removes visible soil — grease, food debris, dirt. It uses detergency (surfactants) to lift and suspend the soil so it can be rinsed away. Sanitizing reduces the microbial population on a clean surface to safe levels. The operative word there is clean — sanitizers don't work effectively on dirty surfaces. The soil physically blocks the active ingredient from making contact with the microorganism.

The sequence that matters: Clean first. Rinse. Then sanitize. Every time. In every environment. There are no shortcuts here that don't eventually show up in your inspection report or your customer's health.

A two-step sink setup in a restaurant — wash, rinse, sanitize — is codified in health codes for this reason. In food processing, your master sanitation schedule (MSS) should reflect this same logic for every zone in the facility.

Section 3: The Chemical Categories — What They Are and When to Use Them

Here's where most guides get vague. I'm not going to do that. Below is a breakdown of the major chemical categories you'll encounter in food service and food processing, with dilution ranges, appropriate applications, and practical notes drawn from field experience.

3A. Alkaline Cleaners

✔ Applies to Both

Alkaline cleaners are your primary weapon against grease, oil, fat, and protein-based soils, which describe most of what you're dealing with in any food environment. These run from mildly alkaline (general-purpose floor and surface cleaners) all the way up to caustic, high-pH products used in CIP (Clean-In-Place) systems and oven cleaning.

Dilution Range

General-purpose alkaline cleaners: typically 1:16 to 1:64 (dilution with water). Heavy-duty degreasers: 1:4 to 1:16 depending on soil load. CIP caustic solutions (sodium hydroxide-based): 1-3% concentration, applied at 140-160°F for optimum effectiveness.

Applications

- Fryer cleaning and hood degreasing in restaurant kitchens
- Floor scrubbing in food processing facilities
- CIP circuits in breweries, dairies, and beverage plants

- Oven and grill cleaning
- Conveyor and equipment frame cleaning in processing lines

Field Note: I've walked into food processing plants where they're using a general-purpose floor cleaner on a CIP circuit. The pH is too low, the temperature isn't right, and the biofilm is just laughing at them. CIP requires a purpose-built, high-caustic formulation applied with heat and velocity — not a mop bucket product.

3B. Acid Cleaners

✔ Applies to Both

Acid cleaners are the counterpart to alkaline products. Where alkaline cleaners attack organic soils, acid cleaners attack inorganic deposits — mineral scale, lime buildup, rust stains, and beer stone in brewery equipment. If you're in a hard water area, you need acid cleaners in your rotation.

Dilution Range

Light-duty descalers (phosphoric acid-based): 1:16 to 1:32. Heavy-duty mineral/lime removers: 1:4 to 1:10. CIP acid rinse steps (nitric or phosphoric acid): 0.5-1% concentration at 120-140°F.

Applications

- Descaling commercial dishwashers and steam equipment
- Removing beer stone and mineral deposits in brewery fermenters and lines
- Deliming espresso machines and coffee brewing equipment
- Acid rinse step in dairy and beverage CIP programs.
- Removing rust stains from floors and surfaces

Compatibility Warning

Never mix acid cleaners with alkaline cleaners or bleach. The reaction can be violent, create hazardous gases, and neutralize both products, so neither works. If you're running a CIP program with both alkaline and acid steps, an intermediate water rinse between steps is not optional.

3C. Sanitizers

✔ Applies to Both

Sanitizers are the final step in the cleaning process. They reduce the microbial load on a clean surface to a level that's safe for food contact. In the U.S., sanitizers used on food contact surfaces must be EPA-registered. There are four main types you'll work with in food environments.

Quaternary Ammonium Compounds (Quats)

Quats are the most widely used sanitizers in food service. They're stable, effective against a broad range of bacteria and viruses, and relatively forgiving of water hardness compared to other sanitizer types.

- Use concentration: 200-400 ppm for food contact surface sanitizing
- Contact time: typically 60 seconds on a clean, wetted surface
- Use test strips specific to quats — chlorine strips will not give you an accurate reading.
- Water temperature: effective across a wide range, generally 55-115°F
- Limitation: can lose efficacy in very hard water above 500 ppm hardness; use a quat formulated for hard water or consider a softening step

Chlorine / Sodium Hypochlorite

Chlorine sanitizers are fast-acting, low-cost, and broadly effective. They're also less forgiving — they degrade quickly, are sensitive to organic load, pH, and water temperature, and can be corrosive to certain metals and plastics at higher concentrations.

- Food contact surface sanitizing: 50-200 ppm.
- Food processing equipment (USDA-regulated facilities): typically 100-200 ppm
- Manual warewashing final rinse: 50-100 ppm
- Contact time: 7 seconds at 100 ppm (per FDA Food Code) on clean surfaces
- pH range for best efficacy: 6.5-7.5
- Water temperature: do not exceed 120°F — chlorine off-gasses rapidly at high temperatures
- Test with chlorine test strips; replace solution frequently, especially in high-soil environments.

Iodophors (Iodine-Based Sanitizers)

Iodophors are less common in food service but show up frequently in dairy, brewing, and food processing applications. They're gentler on certain materials and offer a visible color indicator — when the solution turns pale yellow or clear, it's exhausted.

- Use concentration: 12.5-25 ppm titratable iodine for food contact surfaces

- Contact time: 30 seconds at the correct concentration
- Effective pH range: below 5.0 for optimum germicidal activity
- Water temperature: most effective below 75-80°F — iodine vaporizes at higher temps
- Note: can stain porous surfaces and plastics; test on equipment before committing

Peracetic Acid (PAA)

Peracetic acid is increasingly common in food processing and is particularly valuable in USDA-regulated facilities because it breaks down to acetic acid and water — no rinsing required and minimal environmental impact. It's highly effective against a broad spectrum of pathogens, including biofilm-forming organisms.

- Typical use concentration: 100-400 ppm, depending on application
- CIP and equipment sanitizing in food processing: 200-300 ppm
- Poultry, produce, and seafood processing: 50-200 ppm on product contact surfaces.
- Contact time: 60-120 seconds
- Temperature: effective at low temperatures (even near freezing) — valuable in cold chain environments
- Handle with care: PAA is highly corrosive in concentrated form; always add to water, not water to product.

3D. Degreasers

🍽 Restaurant / Food Service

Degreasers deserve their own category because the word gets misused constantly. A true degreaser is a solvent-based or high-surfactant alkaline product formulated specifically to penetrate and emulsify heavy grease deposits — the kind you find in a vent hood, behind a fryer battery, or on a heavily soiled grill area.

Most general-purpose cleaners will touch light grease but won't cut through a two-inch buildup of polymerized cooking oil in a hood plenum. Using a diluted GPC on that application wastes your time and labor.

Dilution Range

Ready-to-use heavy degreasers: used full-strength or 1:4. Concentrate degreasers: 1:4 to 1:16 depending on soil load. Always check the SDS — some require dilution for food contact surface use, others are non-food-contact only.

Post-rinse reminder: Most degreasers are FCR products. Rinse thoroughly before resuming food contact use on any surface where they were applied.

3E. Enzyme Cleaners / Biological Cleaners

✔ Applies to Both

Enzyme cleaners use biological action — specific enzymes targeting proteins, fats, or starches — to break down organic soils at a molecular level. They work more slowly than conventional chemicals but are highly effective in applications where residual biofilm or persistent organic soils are the problem.

Applications

- Floor drains in food processing facilities — enzymes digest grease and organic buildup that collects in drain lines.
- Pre-soak for heavily soiled utensils and equipment in restaurant applications
- Odor control in food processing and hospitality environments
- Grease trap maintenance

Enzyme cleaners are not sanitizers. They clean — they do not disinfect. Don't substitute them for your sanitizing step.

3F. Disinfectants

✔ Applies to Both

Disinfectants are EPA-registered products that kill a defined spectrum of microorganisms on hard, non-porous surfaces. Unlike sanitizers (which reduce microbial load to safe levels), disinfectants aim to eliminate pathogens entirely on the treated surface.

In food service and food processing, disinfectants are typically used in non-food-contact areas — restrooms, locker rooms, common areas — or in response to specific contamination events. Using a disinfectant on a food contact surface requires either an FCNR-rated product or a thorough rinse step before food contact resumes.

Contact Time Matters More Here Than Anywhere

Disinfectant contact time claims can range from 30 seconds to 10 minutes, depending on the pathogen claim on the label. If you're purchasing a disinfectant based on its kill claim against a specific organism (norovirus, Listeria, Salmonella), verify that the contact time claim is achievable in your operation. A 10-minute contact time sounds great on paper and is useless if your staff wipes it off in 30 seconds.

Section 4: Regulatory Frameworks — What You Need to Know

You don't need to be a compliance expert. But you do need to know which frameworks govern your chemical program, because ignorance of the standard isn't a defense during an inspection or audit.

4A. FDA Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)

🏭 Food Processing

FSMA, signed into law in 2011, fundamentally shifted food safety regulation in the U.S. from a reactive model (respond to outbreaks) to a preventive model (prevent contamination). For food processors, FSMA's Preventive Controls for Human Food rule requires a written food safety plan that includes sanitation controls.

Your chemical selection is directly tied to your sanitation controls documentation. You need to know what you're using, why you're using it, at what concentration, and how you're verifying it's working. Random chemical use without documentation is an FSMA finding waiting to happen.

4B. HACCP — Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points

🏭 Food Processing

HACCP is the systematic approach to identifying, evaluating, and controlling food safety hazards. It's required by the USDA for meat and poultry processors and the FDA for seafood and juice processors. Many food processors implement it voluntarily — and their retail and foodservice customers increasingly require it.

Where chemicals fit into HACCP: your sanitation program is a Sanitation Standard Operating Procedure (SSOP), which is a prerequisite program supporting the HACCP plan. SSOPs must document the chemicals used, concentrations, contact times, frequency of application, and verification methods. If your chemical program isn't documented to this level, you don't have an SSOP — you have a hope and a prayer.

4C. SQF — Safe Quality Food

🏭 Food Processing

SQF is a GFSI-recognized certification standard widely used by food processors and manufacturers supplying retail and foodservice channels. SQF Code Element 11 (Good Manufacturing Practice) and Element 2 (Food Safety Fundamentals) both touch directly on your chemical handling, storage, and application procedures.

An SQF audit will examine whether your chemicals are approved for their intended use, stored correctly (segregated from food, labeled, and SDS available), applied at validated concentrations, and verified through monitoring records. If you're pursuing SQF certification, your chemical program needs to be documented before you invite the auditor in.

4D. FDA Food Code (Food Service)

🍽 Restaurant / Food Service

The FDA Food Code governs food service operations — restaurants, hotels, and institutions. It's adopted and enforced at the state and local level, so the specific requirements vary, but the underlying standards are consistent. Key chemical-related provisions include: sanitizer concentration requirements for manual warewashing (chlorine at 50-100 ppm, quats per manufacturer specs), equipment sanitizing procedures, chemical storage and labeling requirements, and SDS availability for all chemicals on the premises.

When a health inspector walks through your operation, they are checking compliance with the local version of the Food Code. That's the test. Know it.

4E. OSHA Hazard Communication Standard (HazCom)

✔ Applies to Both

This one cuts across every operation regardless of segment. OSHA's HazCom standard (29 CFR 1910.1200) requires that employees who work with hazardous chemicals have access to Safety Data Sheets (SDS), receive training on the chemicals they use, and that containers are properly labeled. A chemical program that doesn't include SDS management and staff training is an OSHA citation — and a potential injury — waiting to happen.

Section 5: Chemical Dispensing and Dilution Systems

✔ Applies to Both

Here's something the blog posts don't tell you: the best chemical in the world is only as good as the system delivering it. Improper dilution is the single most common reason a chemical program fails — and most operators don't know it's happening.

Why Manual Dilution Is a Problem

Asking an employee to mix chemicals by hand — even with a measuring cup — introduces error. Under-dilution wastes product and money. Over-dilution means your sanitizer may be below the effective concentration. Under- or over-concentration of a cleaner means the job doesn't get done, or a surface gets damaged.

Proportioning and Metering Systems

Proportioners (also called eductors or chemical dispensers) automate dilution at the point of use. They connect to a water line and deliver a precise ratio of chemical to water every time. For a food service operation running three or four different cleaning chemicals, a good proportioning system pays for itself in reduced product waste within the first year.

Refillable bulk systems — like the ChemStation model — take this further. Rather than buying cases of RTU (ready-to-use) products, you buy chemistry in bulk concentrate and refill on a scheduled basis. The environmental and cost advantages are significant for high-volume operations.

Verifying Concentration

Whatever dispenser system you use, verification is not optional. Test strips and electronic titrators should be part of your daily opening procedures for any sanitizer application. Keep a log. A concentration log is also documentation for your HACCP or SQF records — it's two birds with one stone.

Section 6: The Mistakes I've Seen (And How to Avoid Them)

Forty-plus years gives you a long memory for what goes wrong. Here are the patterns I keep seeing, in both restaurants and processing plants.

1. Substituting Products Mid-Program Without Validation

A purchasing manager switches chemical suppliers to save $0.40 per gallon. Nobody tells the operations team. The new product has a different active ingredient, a different dilution ratio, and a different compatibility profile. Three weeks later, there's a failed environmental swab in the processing facility or a health inspector citing inadequate sanitizer concentration.

Any time a chemical product is changed, the new product needs to be validated for your specific application before it goes into routine use. Test it. Document it.

2. Conflating 'Clean' With 'Safe.'

A surface can look spotless and still be harboring Listeria monocytogenes in a floor drain crack or under equipment. Visual cleanliness is not a food safety standard. ATP testing, environmental swabbing, and concentration verification are how you actually know.

3. Ignoring SOP Drift

I can walk into a kitchen that has a great laminated wall chart, a solid chemical program, and watch an employee use the degreaser bottle as a general-purpose spray because it was closer than the sanitizer. SOP drift happens in every operation. The answer is not a better wall chart — it's regular observation, coaching, and accountability.

4. Buying in Bulk Without Rotation

I once walked into a stockroom with a 55-gallon drum of general-purpose cleaner that had been sitting there for two years. The surfactant package had separated, the active ingredient had degraded, and the staff was using it full strength because they thought more was better. Bulk purchasing makes economic sense when you have the volume to turn it. If you don't, you're not saving money — you're buying expired chemistry.

The old drum story: Early in my career as a cook, I watched a chemical rep drop silver dollars into a new 55-gallon drum of GPC to show us how fast we should be using the product. It worked — we burned through chemistry at a rate that was great for his sales numbers and brutal for the restaurant's budget. Don't let a supplier's enthusiasm for volume drive your purchasing decisions.

5. Using Non-Food-Contact Products on Food Surfaces

This one shows up more than it should. A maintenance chemical gets picked up by a kitchen employee. A disinfectant with a required rinse step gets applied to a prep surface and not rinsed. Always verify the intended use classification on any product before it touches a food contact surface. When in doubt, check the label and the SDS.

Section 7: Building or Auditing Your Chemical Program

Whether you're starting from scratch or evaluating an existing program, this is the framework I use when I do a chemical program assessment for a client.

Step 1: Inventory What You Have

Walk the facility. Catalog every chemical product — name, manufacturer, intended use, location, and how it's being applied. You'll almost always find products that shouldn't be there, products in unlabeled containers, and products being used for purposes they weren't designed for.

Step 2: Match Products to Applications

For each surface type, soil type, and cleaning task in your operation, identify the right product. Use the chemical categories in Section 3 as your framework. If there's a gap — a task with no appropriate product assigned — fill it. If there's a redundancy, eliminate it.

Step 3: Document Concentrations and Procedures

Write it down. For every product: intended use, dilution ratio, application method, contact time, rinse requirements, and verification method. This becomes your SOP — and your defense in an inspection.

Step 4: Train and Verify

Training isn't a one-time event. New hires need it. Existing staff need refreshers. Any time a product changes, everyone using that product needs to know. Verification — through observation and concentration testing — is how you know the training actually took.

Step 5: Review on a Schedule

Annually at minimum. Any time a product changes, a regulatory update occurs, or a new process is added. A chemical program isn't a set-it-and-forget-it exercise.

Quick Reference: Chemical Selection Summary

Alkaline Cleaner	Grease, oil, protein	1:16 – 1:64 (GPC); 1-3% CIP	Both
Acid Cleaner	Mineral scale, beer stone, lime	1:16 – 1:32 (light); 0.5-1% CIP	Both
Quat Sanitizer	Bacteria, viruses (food contact)	200-400 ppm	Both
Chlorine Sanitizer	Bacteria, viruses (food contact)	50-200 ppm	Both
Iodophor	Bacteria (dairy, brewing, food processing)	12.5-25 ppm	Food Processing
Peracetic Acid	Bacteria, biofilm, cold chain	100-400 ppm	Food Processing

Degreaser	Heavy grease, polymerized oil	1:4 – 1:16 (heavy)	Restaurant
Enzyme Cleaner	Biofilm, drain maintenance, odor	Per label	Both
Disinfectant	Pathogen kill on non-food surfaces	Per EPA registration	Both

Need a Second Set of Eyes on Your Chemical Program?

A well-run chemical program isn't about buying the most expensive products. It's about using the right products correctly, consistently, and with documentation that protects your operation. If you've read through this guide and you're not confident your current program checks all those boxes, that's where I come in.

I offer a Market Entry Assessment and program review for food service operators and food processing facilities. The first conversation is always free. Reach out through HospitalityCleaning101.com or connect with me directly through Bauer Consulting.

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