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Catering and Refrigeration Equipment

WINTER HOT HOLDING GUIDE

A practical, straight-talking guide from NCE, built for busy kitchens.

We know winter service can be tough in the UK. Shorter days, busier rushes, colder air hitting the pass, and customers who expect steaming-hot food every time. This guide gives you simple, reliable steps to keep food hot, consistent and protected from drying out, without adding stress to the team.

Everything here is based on what we see daily across cafés, restaurants and canteens up and down the UK. We've put it all into this guide for you.

QUICK WINS (READ THIS FIRST)

✓ If you only have 30 seconds, do these:

- Preheat your gantry for 10–15 minutes
- Don't overfill trays, spread food evenly
- Keep lids nearby and use them when needed
- Stir every 20–30 minutes
- Warm plates before service
- Top up in small batches, not in bulk
- Protect food from drafts and vents

These alone improve temperature, reduce waste, and speed up service.

1. SETTING UP FOR SUCCESS

1.1 Position the Gantry Properly

Where the unit sits affects heat, texture and speed.

Best placement:

- On a stable, heat-safe countertop
- Close to the pass or service area
- Away from doors, windows and cold airflow
- Not directly under strong extraction fans
- Not in the path of staff traffic

Cold drafts pull heat out of food fast. Extraction fans can dry dishes out and cause uneven heating. Good placement leads to hotter portions, fewer refills, and less waste. It also protects your team, no awkward reach or unsafe angles during service.

1.2 Power & Preheat Routine

- Uses a standard 13amp plug
- Preheat for **10–15 minutes**
- Insert trays *before* switching on
- Turn the lamps on, even if you're not using the top tier

The first portions tell your customers everything. Starting from cold is one of the most common causes of lukewarm complaints. Preheating protects your food and your reputation.

2. USING YOUR TRAYS EFFECTIVELY

Your Winter Warmth Bundle includes:

- **1 × 65mm shallow tray**
- **1 × 100mm deep tray**

Using the correct depth makes holding easier, safer and more profitable.

2.1 Shallow Tray (65mm)

Ideal for:

- Chips
- Roasted veg
- Pastries
- Hash browns
- Breaded items
- Sausages / bacon
- Side portions
- Anything with fast turnover

Shallow trays allow heat to reach food evenly. They recover temperature quickly after scooping, and they keep textures consistent, especially for sides and items that move fast across the counter.

2.2 Deep Tray (100mm)

Great for:

- Stews
- Curries
- Pasta bakes
- Jacket potato toppings
- Thick sauces and gravies
- Pulled meats
- Hot breakfast dishes
- Anything with higher moisture

Deep trays retain moisture, protect slow-moving dishes, and stay stable at temperature for longer. They're perfect for foods that dry out or separate easily in shallow containers.

2.3 Tray Management Tips

- Don't overfill, heat can't recover properly after scooping
- Spread food evenly
- Keep the correct utensil with each tray
- Use lids during quiet spells
- Stir gently every 20–30 minutes
- Top up in **small** amounts (not a whole pot at once)

Why this matters for business:

Even heat = fewer complaints, less waste, better reviews and consistent portion control.

3. HOT HOLDING MADE SIMPLE (THE REAL RULES)

Yes, food must stay above **63°C**, but kitchens need more than a number. Here's the practical version that actually keeps customers happy and your costs under control.

3.1 The “63°C and Climb” Rule

Aim for **70–80°C inside the tray**.

This gives you a buffer during busy service or long holds. Once food dips too low, texture changes, moisture drops, and portions get sent back, which costs time and money.

3.2 Stirring Strategy

Stir every **20–30 minutes**, not constantly.

- Too little → cold spots, drying, uneven portions
- Too much → food breaks down

Use a gentle fold-through motion for thicker dishes.

3.3 Managing Moisture

- Keep lids close (resting lids halfway works well)
- Add a splash of water, stock or sauce when needed
- Don't let thick dishes sit fully uncovered for long
- Avoid piling food too deep in shallow trays

Moisture loss is the biggest cause of tough, dry food in winter holding. Protecting moisture protects quality.

4. SPEED UP SERVICE (WITHOUT EXTRA STAFF)

4.1 Portion Consistency

Use ladles for wet dishes and serving spoons for sides. It ensures faster service, predictable plate cost, better stock planning and less waste

4.2 Warm Plates

Cold plates drain heat instantly.

Warm plates = happier customers, hotter food and fewer returns

4.3 Keep the Menu Tight

A smaller winter menu is easier to hold well.

It's better to serve two dishes perfectly than stretch five across the gantry.

This helps staff speed, predictability, holding quality and cost control.

4.4 Pre-Portion When You Can

Soups, sauces, sides and toppings all benefit from even heating and smooth top-ups.

This reduces queues, helps new staff settle in, and keeps you ahead during rushes.

5. KEEPING THE GASKET UNIT CLEAN & RELIABLE

A well-looked-after gantry lasts longer, holds heat better and keeps your food safer.

5.1 Daily Cleaning

- Switch off and cool completely
- Remove trays and wash in warm soapy water
- Wipe the gantry with a damp cloth
- Avoid abrasive chemicals
- Never splash water directly onto lamps or heating bars

5.2 Weekly Checks

A 2–3 minute check saves downtime later:

- Cable wear
- Loose screws
- Clean under the unit
- Tray edges (bending or warping)
- Lamps clean and clear

5.3 Red Flags to Watch

These signal something needs attention:

- Uneven heat across the tray
- Food drying quickly
- Constant condensation
- Flickering or discoloured lamps

Fix the setup early and you'll avoid bigger issues later.

6. FAST TROUBLESHOOTING

Problem	Likely Cause	Quick Fix
Food drying out	Too hot / too exposed	Add liquid, reduce depth, use a lid
Uneven heat	Overfilling	Spread food evenly
Condensation	Lid too tight / tray too full	Loosen lid
Slow recovery	Cold food added in bulk	Top up smaller amounts
First portions lukewarm	No preheat	Preheat 10–15 mins

7. WINTER PROFIT TIPS

Small habits make a big difference:

- Use your deep tray for the dish with the highest margin
- Add optional extras (rolls, sides, toppings)
- Keep portions consistent
- Batch cook during off-peak times
- Have refills ready to drop in quickly
- Keep hot holding tight to avoid waste

8. 5-MINUTE STAFF TRAINING

Hot Holding Checklist:

- Preheat the gantry
- Spread food evenly
- Stir every 20–30 minutes
- Keep food above 63°C
- Use the right tray for each dish
- Keep lids handy
- Don't mix utensils
- Check food quality every hour
- Wipe spills quickly

9. THE NCE WINTER HOLDING SYSTEM

A quick recap of best routine for a smooth winter service:

1. **Preheat** — 10–15 minutes
2. **Fill deep tray** with your main dish
3. **Spread sides** into the shallow tray
4. **Check temperature** before service
5. **Stir on a timer** every 20–30 minutes
6. **Top up in small batches**
7. **Use lids when needed**
8. **Keep plates warm**
9. **Do quick quality checks** throughout service

Follow this and you'll keep food hot, consistent and ready, even on your busiest winter days.

If you ever need guidance on hot holding, layouts or choosing the right kit, we're here. One quick call and we'll point you in the right direction.