

NAFEM Roundtable Explores Dream Kitchen Scenarios

April 1, 2013— Roundtable participants included: Ken Toong, executive director, auxiliary enterprises, University of Massachusetts Amherst; David Eichstaedt, director of retail dining services at University of Massachusetts; Timothy Dietzler, director of dining services at Villanova University; Heather DeMeola, food services area manager at Orange County (Fla.) Schools; Mark Freeman, senior manager of global employee services for Microsoft Corp.; Rene Rodriguez, director at The University of Texas at Austin; and Rikk Grant, project manager at Pizza Patron. The session was moderated by Sharon Olson, executive director, Y-Pulse and Joe Carbonara, editor in chief of Foodservice Equipment & Supplies magazine.

Participants shared their perspectives on a variety of topics relating to commercial kitchen design, foodservice equipment selection and more.

Menu Trends Driving Kitchen Design

Growth in ethnic food offerings: This menu trend has been a catalyst for introducing more international styles of cooking in high-volume kitchens.

Operators are turning to international study tours where the equipment and the styles of cooking are just as fascinating as the study of the actual cuisine. In some cases street food cooking can inspire innovation in simple designs for professional kitchens in the United States.

Pairing healthfulness and great taste: While customers are reluctant to give up their favorite foods, foodservice operators face the challenge of making these menu items delicious and more healthful. Even though schools are eliminating fryers in favor of other cooking methods, fried foods are often among the most popular with consumers. New technologies, including a fryer that spins the basket thereby eliminating a significant amount of the oil without compromising the integrity of the menu item, were of interest to the panel.

Local sourcing of ingredients: Kitchen updates to accommodate locally sourced menu items seem inevitable, according to the panel. In addition, staff training is an important part of this evolution. As part of this trend, many high-volume kitchens are moving from cook-chill operations to the more traditional system of kitchen brigades used in hotels and upscale dining venues where food is prepared a la minute.

The Dining Experience

Creating a dining experience: Operators want more innovative and interactive ways to showcase their menus and create more dynamic dining experiences. For example, the panel pointed to a food shield with a digital display being shown at The NAFEM Show as a potentially dynamic way of letting customers know what items are being served, as well as the nutritional content or messaging about sources of the food about to be enjoyed.

Creating front-of-the-house ambiance: Operators want to make their front-of-the-house spaces warm and inviting. A room allowed for high-top tables with plug-in outlets for customers. Community tables were noted as a key feature.

Ultra quick service: Speed of service remains a top priority. New cooking technologies because of the equipment are allowing for very short periods of time. Even traditional slow-cooked equipment that gives a slow-cooked result is being re-examined.

Operational Issues

Flexibility and smaller footprints: Operators want the same equipment at different times of the day.

Kitchen safety: Operators lauded technology that alerts them immediately to potential problem areas. The panelists noted that safety is a top priority.

Using technology to improve performance: While panelists were very familiar with the new technologies and how they can enhance the quality and productivity of their kitchens, all were well aware of the impact new equipment has on employees. Simply put: if employees are not trained to use new equipment, it is more than likely that many of the advantages will not be used. Training will continue to become more important and will be more of an ongoing initiative rather than a one-time thing. Equipment that is easy to use every day is vital. Simple things like readouts that can be seen at a distance and easily understood were singled out as being beneficial.

Green teams: Energy efficiency and minimizing the foodservice operation's impact on the environment is of significant interest for all operators. The panelists point out it's not easy being green because the responsibility can extend beyond the purchase of products.

Foodservice Equipment & Supplies magazine is collaborating with Y-Pulse on the Chicago-based foodservice research firm's Dream Kitchen Survey. The collaboration will expand the scope of the study beyond the education segment to the entire foodservice operator community. To kick off the study, a roundtable discussion of industry leaders took place during The NAFEM Show in Orlando.