

How combi technology makes rolling out new menu items easier



New products and limited-time only (LTO) offers are among the most powerful strategies available to restaurateurs to increase revenue. Unfortunately, launches now are complicated by the desire to simplify and shrink kitchens for faster, more efficient and consistent production. There's also the added stress that falls on the kitchen staff, a known cause of accelerated turnover.

When Popeyes Louisiana Kitchen ran out of its new chicken a month earlier than expected, the whole world noticed—especially after archival KFC depleted supplies of its new faux chicken product in five hours. Consumers used social media to rant about missing their chance to try the new menu items. Restaurateurs likely viewed the situation as a reminder of how important new products can be in giving customers another reason to visit and talk about their experiences, particularly via social media.

Product introductions are key business drivers of many popular brands, including Taco Bell, Burger King, Jack in the Box, McDonald's, Starbucks, Pizza Hut, Tim Hortons and a host of other quick service restaurant overachievers. Others try to keep their brands fresh by putting customer favorites into the market for a limited period, purposely pulling them back before customers can get their fill.

A new menu items strategy is necessary to drive customer demand, but adding a product can be a challenge, particularly given today's labor situation and operational realities. Patrick McDonnell, Senior Partner at foodservice consultancy McDonnell Kinder & Associates notes, "An LTO does not have to involve a menu change out and it is a great way to test a new item, price points and its level of popularity – before you make a final decision." Even with this shorter time frame there are many considerations. Will the core ingredient list expand and is the distribution in place? And, does each location have the necessary equipment, staff skill sets, and throughput capacity?



BENEFITS OF OFFERING NEW MENU ITEMS

While increased traffic is a key reason to develop new menu items, there are a number of benefits to offering new menu items and LTOs. According to Technomic's Five Types of LTOs, each type offers a different way to increase interest, excitement, traffic and revenue.

- 1 Novelty Items create conversations and consumer buzz
- 2 Diet-Centric items appeal to a niche audience seeking menu accommodations
- 3 Flavor-Centric items capitalize on emerging flavors, seasonal options and nontraditional applications
- 4 Broad Appeal items leverage mainstream ingredients and new iterations of popular foods
- 5 Best in Class options appeal to taste or value

So, what's trending now? According to McDonnell, the current key menu trends are Latin/Asian flavors and cleaner/healthier food items. "The first because of the changing cultural demographics and new flavor experiences. The latter because all of us are becoming more concerned with the quality and processing of our ingredients and their impact on the environment. LTO's are being designed to validate both areas and major companies are designing new product lines to address these opportunities."

Offering new and limited-time menu items can help operators generate traffic and increase incremental sales, as well as excite existing customers and encourage repeat visits. Offering them is crucial for restaurants wanting to stay relevant and competitive, but how can the process be made easier?



MAKING NEW INTRODUCTIONS EASIER

New operational realities, from shrinking kitchen space to labor challenges to the new throughput demands of delivery, can significantly complicate the introduction of new customer draws. But, what if there was a way to ease those stressors? With the right equipment, there is. Today's networked, multifunctional equipment can keep the footprint small, reduce reliance on specialized labor, and ensure a simultaneous, systematic rollout of new items across stores.





OVERCOMING OVERHEAD WORRIES

It's not practical to add a new piece of equipment or conduct extensive staff training every time an item is added to the menu. That's why many consultants advise on developing items that can be cooked within a chain's standard equipment footprint. According to McDonnell, his clients are looking for versatility from ingredients and equipment. This mentality aligns with smaller back of house spaces and ensures there's space to prepare all of the customers' favorites in addition to the new additions.

Keeping the space small, the rent low, the menu fresh, the execution fast and the food great is a recipe for financial success, and it requires equipment that's versatile, reliable and space-efficient. Separate dedicated open-flame charbroilers, deep fryers, convection ovens and other single purpose equipment is simply not feasible, but neither is forgoing new menu items. Consequently, many operators are turning to multifunctional foodservice equipment, such as combi ovens that have a small footprint and can fry, roast, grill, steam, poach, bake and much more in a single self-cleaning piece of equipment. Combis also offer the possibility of cooking multiple food items and the same time without flavor transfer. This versatility helps solve the problem of creating a varied menu in a small space.



MITIGATING LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT WOES

According to a 2019 Technomic operator survey, 75% of operators say higher labor costs are a top concern, compared to just 62% who said so in 2017. In addition, unemployment in October 2019 was only 3.6%, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. As labor costs continue to rise and unemployment continues to drop, operators are finding themselves in tough situations.

With an ever-shrinking labor pool and high turnover that's typical for foodservice, operators need to be mindful of how to best optimize their staff's time. The key is to have the staff you have execute the menu to a higher level. Simplifying the cooking process, without forgoing food quality and flavor by using a self-monitoring, intelligent cooking device, offers one solution. Even more appealing is the ability to prepare almost any food via any cooking method with the touch of a button.

This automated cooking is one of the biggest draws of combi ovens. Combi ovens can be programmed so that even the greenest employees can perfectly prepare both new and existing menu items. Combi ovens manage the temperature, humidity and cooking time, and also monitor browning—and eliminate the need to flip or turn foods for even cooking.

For busy staff who may be untrained, these user-friendly ovens make it easier to prepare consistent, high quality food items and add new menu options. As staff is familiar with the equipment, there's no need to invest in extensive training for more food preparations. It also speeds up the onboarding process for new employees.

When offering a new menu item, operators can rely on combi ovens to streamline the process. RATIONAL, the leading manufacturer of combi technology, offers ConnectedCooking, a state-of-the-art cloud-based networking solution that monitors and manages equipment remotely for professional kitchens. Operators use ConnectedCooking to upload new menu item recipes to combis simultaneously across their system simplifying recipe rollout.



DRIVING DELIVERY DEMAND

Delivery is big business these days, with a third of consumers reporting ordering carryout or delivery at least once or twice a month and 28% saying they order it three to four times per month, according to Technomic's 2018 Takeout & Off-Premise Consumer Trend Report.

What's more, 60% of operators say they are receiving more takeout orders compared to 2016. With the increase in demand for delivery, kitchens have to accommodate not only dine-in customers but also off-premise ones—all in the same amount of space.

Converting to a "combi kitchen" can provide increased cooking capacity when combis replace large single-method equipment. While it may take re-thinking a cooking process, combis can often reduce cooking times, increase production with overnight cooking, and enable operators to expand into delivery with items designed for transport. Thanks to their multi-functionality, combi ovens make it easy for restaurants to add a delivery menu or special LTO to increase delivery business with less execution risk and without negatively impacting their core operations.



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GETTING NEW MENU ITEMS RIGHT

Adding new menu items is a way to get more customers in the door—and it's also a way to raise check averages, satisfy a bargain-hunter's desire for value and strengthen brand recognition and reputation. And with the right equipment, adding new menu item execution is much simpler—simply press a button on the combi oven and wait for perfection.

Combi ovens, with an array of different preparation methods, cooking intelligence, programmable recipes and more features, offer operators the convenience and easy-to-use solution that solves the problems surrounding new menu item introductions. According to McDonnell, "Combi ovens represent a whole new way of marrying rapid execution, higher quality and technology into a small footprint. And in the hands of a

skilled operators, there is no limitation as to where it could go and what it can achieve. It is an industrial revolution for the industry."



To learn more
about how combi
ovens can make it
easier to offer new
menu items, visit
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