



Cafe Rio Mexican Grill.

Elevating consistency, flavor
and yield.



RATIONAL Equipment Improves Consistency, Increases Efficiency, Reduces Costs.

At Cafe Rio Mexican Grill, central to every bite is the belief that every ingredient must be fresh and every dish made fresh to order. That means no freezers, no microwaves, and nothing premade at this fast-casual restaurant that operates 130 locations in 12 states. In the spring of 2020, in the midst of Cafe Rio's growth, the coronavirus pandemic hit, changing the industry landscape and necessitating a quick change to curbside pickup. It was during this time that the incorporation of RATIONAL combi ovens proved to be essential in the advancement of Cafe Rio's business and culinary goals.



About Cafe Rio Mexican Grill

Founded in 1997, Cafe Rio Mexican Grill is based in Salt Lake City and operates more than 130 locations in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Maryland, Montana, Nevada, Utah, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming. Cafe Rio serves authentic, fresh Mexican cuisine made daily with pride and from scratch. All stores are owned and managed by the company. Cafe Rio has won more than 100 awards, from the Best of City Search and the Oxnard Salsa Festival to the Inc. 500 and the Alfred P. Sloan Award.

Cafe Rio Mexican Grill
Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

Goal

- › Prepare consistently delicious, fresh food in the most efficient way possible

Approach

- › Consign RATIONAL combi ovens to corporate kitchen for testing
- › Partner with RATIONAL corporate chef to perfect recipes and introduce efficiencies
- › Install RATIONAL units at new and retrofitted locations
- › Establish a central commissary powered by the RATIONAL SelfCookingCenter® to prepare ingredients for individual restaurants

Equipment

- › RATIONAL SelfCookingCenter® Combi-Duo 62/62

Results

- › Elevated consistency across locations and same-store batches
- › Reduced labor costs by an average of 8 percent (compared to kitchens without a RATIONAL)
- › Increased protein yields between 8 and 10 percent via overnight cooking
- › Eliminated a grill from kitchen design, saving money and space
- › Accelerated and increased profitability of new locations

Cover image: Grilled steak is prepared for burritos, tacos, salads and other signature dishes.

Outstanding Flavor and Forward – Forward-thinking Kitchen Concept Drive Profitable Growth.

Cafe Rio's authentic dishes are inspired by the traditional cooking of Northern Mexico's Rio Grande region, southern Texas, and New Mexico. Specialties include Mexican favorites incorporating sweet pork barbacoa, chili roasted beef, shredded chicken and grilled steak. Dishes are served with sides of cilantro lime rice and savory black or pinto beans, prepared fresh throughout the day. There also is a rotation of much-loved daily specials, which include customer favorites such as tamales and salmon tacos.

Consistency, freshness and flavor are the hallmarks of the brand and of primary importance to Douglas Henriquez, director of culinary and kitchen operations for Cafe Rio. He wants every burrito, enchilada, tostada and salad to taste the same, batch to batch, location to location. Correctly executed, the recipes and the flavors create immediate Cafe Rio evangelists. Guests return in anticipation of repeating that first great flavor experience.

As a result, any changes in preparation methods needed to be thoroughly evaluated to maintain or enhance the Cafe Rio customer experience.



“RATIONAL takes the guesswork away. Having the chicken, steak, seafood perfect every time is priceless.”

Douglas Henriquez, Director of Culinary and Kitchen Operations, Cafe Rio Mexican Grill

Testing salmon at a new Cafe Rio location using the RATIONAL Diamond and Grill Grate.

Evaluating Equipment Options.

As he planned upgrades and new openings, Henriquez evaluated multiple brands of kitchen equipment. RATIONAL made the short list; he previously worked for the Cheesecake Factory where he used RATIONAL combi-steamers with excellent results. Consequently, he was predisposed toward RATIONAL, if it could deliver results that would increase consistency while maintaining – or even improving – the signature flavors and textures associated with Cafe Rio's inspired and fresh food.



A burrito prepared for customer pick-up or delivery.

Henriquez rekindled his connections at RATIONAL during the NAFEM show. This international exhibition sponsored by the North American Associate of Food Equipment Manufacturers attracts an array of operators, dealers and consultants. The RATIONAL booth featured an operating restaurant and is where Henriquez met with his RATIONAL Account Director. Together they reviewed the latest RATIONAL combi ovens and technology, and discussed possible next steps for Cafe Rio. Not long after, two new RATIONAL Combi-Duo cooking systems were shipped to Cafe Rio's headquarters. During April of 2019, these consignment units were installed in the Cafe Rio corporate test kitchen in Salt Lake City.



“The level of support from RATIONAL is world class. The equipment and the professionalism of the company is unmatched.”

Douglas Henriquez, Director of Culinary and Kitchen Operations, Cafe Rio Mexican Grill

Thorough Testing for Taste and Texture.

Once the consignment units were operational, RATIONAL Senior Corporate Chef Joel Elliott worked in the test kitchen alongside Henriquez and his team to fine-tune recipes and develop cooking programs with the same or better taste and texture. During this process efficiencies were identified that would reduce labor and product cost.

Many items were easily adapted for cooking in the RATIONAL combi. During this process, and with support from RATIONAL, the Cafe Rio team reengineered recipes that used the RATIONAL for roasting, steaming, overnight cooking and grilling, with outstanding replication of flavors. The versatility of the RATIONAL is eliminating the need for a grill in kitchens going forward.

A convenient feature of RATIONAL combi ovens is the ability to cook different food items at the same time, without having to monitor each individual item – the intelligence baked into the RATIONAL automatically monitors and adjusts cooking times. During testing, the joint team identified which items to cook together to speed production, too. The result is that multiple food items are prepared together in intelligent mixed loads. The RATIONAL roasts the various vegetables used to make the fresh salsa at the same time, and then notifies the operator when to take out each sheet for optimum results.

After about four months of testing and tasting, the results were clear. The RATIONAL SelfCookingCenter® elevated consistency and improved taste, yield, operations, and labor efficiencies. In the fall of 2019, Cafe Rio entered into an agreement to purchase RATIONAL Combi-Duo cooking systems for new and existing locations, installing the first RATIONAL units at the busy District location in Salt Lake City in late 2019. Other locations, including the Thousand Oaks, California store followed shortly thereafter in 2020.



“So little training is required – just put in the probe and close the door. It’s less work for team members.”

Douglas Henriquez, Director of Culinary and Kitchen Operations, Cafe Rio Mexican Grill

Better Outcomes through Consistency and Efficiency.

“With a RATIONAL, the labor cost in the store decreases significantly,” Henriquez said. “This happens for several reasons. Overnight cooking means that the food is ready when the staff arrives. Virtually no training is needed, so training costs are very much reduced. The ovens clean themselves, so no staff time is needed for that. Yields are better and less equipment is needed in the kitchen.

“It’s simply more efficient from a financial perspective,” he added. “There is a better outcome through greater consistency and labor savings. The savings really add up when you think about the hundreds of thousands of pounds of meat, fish and poultry that are cooked in a year. It’s significant.”

Just as the third set of RATIONALs was ready for installation at a new location in Virginia, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a pause to these plans. Cafe Rio quickly implemented a successful online ordering and curbside pick-up strategy, with RATIONAL at the heart of operations in Salt Lake City. As the sheltering-in-place orders relaxed, the new RATIONAL Combi-Duo units in Virginia were installed, and the rollout to Cafe Rio locations was again underway.



“With RATIONAL, new locations become even more profitable sooner.”

Douglas Henriquez, Director of Culinary and Kitchen Operations, Cafe Rio Mexican Grill

A Pivot to Curbside Service to Meet Customer Demand.

Cafe Rio's 130 locations were primarily indoor dining, with a small percentage of takeout and drive-through orders, as well as orders placed through third-party delivery services. When the pandemic struck in March 2020, Cafe Rio's management team, autonomous and willing to try new approaches, was able to quickly to reopen, redistribute and reduce labor, and increase efficiency.

Cafe Rio closed its dining rooms on March 16, 2020, and just four days later, re-opened all locations for curbside pickup, adding more drive-through lines where possible.

In its home market of Salt Lake City, Cafe Rio centralized some food preparation at the corporate test kitchen, where the two RATIONAL Combi-Duo cooking systems were installed 11 months earlier. The RATIONAL combi ovens helped Cafe Rio continue to meet local customer demand by augmenting production of various essential ingredients.

As a result, Cafe Rio's customers in this key market could continue to enjoy their favorite Mexican dishes during this unprecedented time.



“The ability to easily pull HACCP and food safety data is outstanding.”

Douglas Henriquez, Director of Culinary and Kitchen Operations, Cafe Rio Mexican Grill



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