



MERRYCHEF®

Q&A: How to build a stronger foodservice operation

Q&A: How to build a stronger convenience foodservice operation

*Labor shortages, rising operating costs and changing consumer expectations are reshaping convenience foodservice. **Garamy Whitmore, General Manager, Merrychef U.S.**, shares his thoughts on how operators can simplify operations, grow foodservice sales and build a business that's ready for the future.*

Q. How are convenience retailers balancing ongoing labor pressures with growing a foodservice offer?

Labor remains one of the biggest challenges facing convenience retailers, but foodservice also represents one of the biggest opportunities. Increasingly, retailers are competing not just with other convenience stores, but with quick-service restaurants, so customers expect the same speed, quality and consistency. The operators having the most success are finding ways to do more with fewer people. They're simplifying their kitchens without limiting their menus, investing in versatile equipment that can prepare a wide variety of menu items while reducing the number of cooking platforms staff need to manage.

Every visit has to be repeatable. Customers only spend a few minutes in a convenience store, so if the experience isn't consistent, they'll simply buy fuel and visit a QSR instead.

Q. Many retailers are looking to expand their foodservice offer without adding operational complexity.

What role does equipment play?

The right equipment can turn menu expansion into an opportunity rather than a burden.

High speed ovens give operators flexibility to prepare a wide variety of menu items throughout the day without investing in multiple pieces of specialist equipment. They also make it easier to respond to changing consumer trends as menus evolve.

Space is always at a premium, so compact, ventless equipment with simple electrical requirements can maximize production while keeping installation straightforward.

Versatile equipment delivers much greater long-term value and helps future-proof the business.

Q. Training and staff turnover remain significant challenges. How can technology reduce onboarding time while maintaining consistency?

Technology can dramatically shorten the learning curve for new employees.

Touchscreen interfaces with images of menu items make ovens intuitive to operate and help remove language barriers. Staff don't need extensive culinary experience; they simply match the product to the image and follow the prompts.

Pre-programmed recipes and on-screen instructions guide staff through each stage of preparation, creating a repeatable process across every location. As menus evolve, recipes can be updated quickly across the network, keeping every store consistent.

Q. As retailers scale foodservice across multiple locations, how can connected kitchen technology help maintain consistency?

For multi-site operators, consistency starts with connected equipment.

Recipes and menu settings can be managed centrally, ensuring every oven operates to the same standard. At the same time, connectivity provides valuable insight into equipment usage, cooking activity and oven performance across the network.

Q. Operating costs remain under pressure. Beyond reducing utility bills, how are retailers thinking about energy efficiency?

Energy efficiency has become part of a much broader conversation around total cost of ownership.

Operators are looking beyond purchase price to consider labor efficiency, maintenance, floor space and utility consumption. Consolidating several cooking platforms into one versatile solution can reduce equipment, ventilation requirements and associated operating costs. For example, removing a fryer also removes the ongoing cost of oil and the need for a ventilation hood.

Standby modes also help reduce energy consumption during quieter periods while keeping ovens ready to cook. It's all part of improving profitability while future-proofing the operation.

Q. High speed cooking technology has developed significantly in recent years. What innovations are making the biggest difference?

Today's high speed ovens are faster than ever while offering larger cooking cavities in compact footprints. Alongside speed, connectivity, intelligent recipe management, improved airflow technology and intuitive operation have transformed into complete cooking platforms.

They're no longer just about cooking food quickly; they're becoming intelligent platforms that support the entire foodservice operation.

Q. How do the conneX®16 and conneX®12 give operators flexibility for different store formats and menu ambitions?

Both ovens deliver high performance in compact footprints, making them well suited to convenience retail. The conneX®16 is ideal for higher-volume stores or operators with broader menu ambitions. Its larger cavity accommodates products such as 16-inch pizzas for slice programs while increasing throughput for breakfast sandwiches and other high-volume items.

The conneX®12 is our highest-volume seller and suits smaller formats or lower production requirements. Many operators choose two conneX®12 ovens to increase throughput while maintaining flexibility across different menu items.

Q. Data and connectivity are becoming increasingly valuable. How can connected equipment help retailers make better decisions?

Connected equipment gives operators real insight into how their kitchens are performing.

They can identify production trends throughout the day, align staffing with demand and monitor how individual ovens are being used. Many discover one oven is handling significantly more cook cycles than another, allowing them to balance workloads and extend equipment life.

Connectivity also helps identify the best times for routine cleaning and maintenance. That's particularly useful for stores operating 24/7.

Q. What are the key foodservice trends you're seeing in convenience stores?

Freshness, customization and food prepared to order are becoming increasingly important. Consumers are moving away from products that have been held for long periods and expect freshly prepared, premium-quality food. At the same time, operators need the flexibility to fulfil customized orders coming through kiosks, mobile ordering and other channels.

Retailers that can consistently deliver fresh food on demand will be well positioned for future growth.

Q. Mobile ordering, pickup, delivery and drive-thru all create peaks in demand. How can operators manage that without compromising service?

The key is building a kitchen that can absorb demand spikes without adding complexity. High speed cooking allows food to be prepared on demand, helping operators maintain service times across in-store orders, pickup, delivery and drive-thru while reducing unnecessary food holding.

The flexibility of this technology also allows retailers to run multiple food concepts from a single location, helping them reach more customers and grow sales.

Q. Many convenience stores operate for extended hours or even 24/7. What should operators look for when it comes to reliability and service support?

As foodservice becomes a larger contributor to revenue, equipment uptime becomes business critical. Operators should look beyond cooking performance and consider service support, preventative maintenance and how easy equipment is to clean. The easier daily cleaning is, the more likely staff are to do it consistently, helping extend equipment life.

For independent operators, a strong service network is essential. Larger chains also benefit from connectivity, which allows service teams to monitor equipment remotely and respond more quickly when issues arise.

Q. What advice would you give to an operator looking to expand their foodservice offer?

Start by understanding your competition and identifying where you can differentiate your offer. Build your menu around products that are repeatable and easy to execute before introducing more complex items. Make sure you can receive, store, cook and serve every product consistently.

Finally, invest in versatile, future-proof technology, but don't try to do everything at once. Build a strong operational foundation first, then expand as your program grows.

Q. Finally, what can retailers expect to see from Merrychef at NACS?

Visitors will be able to see both the conneX®12 and conneX®16, along with accessories including the new panini press, which expands menu opportunities for products such as wraps, burritos and quesadillas. We'll also be showcasing our cavity liner, which can reduce oven cleaning time from around 20–25 minutes to as little as three to five minutes. That saves labor, reduces chemical use and gives staff more time to focus on serving customers.

Most importantly, it's an opportunity to talk to the Merrychef team about building a successful foodservice operation. We manufacture high speed ovens, but our focus is helping operators improve their overall operation and achieve long-term success.