

Changing Views

By Rita Nergrete-Rousseau

The takeout era has brought along with it some alternative ways of looking at equipment, food halls, and c-stores.



As restaurants learn to produce everything from multiple-branded menus to family meal kits to bottled retail products out of the same site, that speaks to the need for flexibility and modularity within the confines of existing kitchens.

A takeout-focused future implies “less of an investment in equipment, but different equipment,” suggests Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, who heads up New York-based restaurant and hospitality consulting firm Arlene Spiegel & Associates. “There will be more need for sous vide and rethermalizing equipment, quick-chill systems, Cryovac, things that allow you to make large-batch recipes in advance and retherm quickly,” she says. “There will also be a need for ventless cooking equipment for when you have to set up an additional cookline to meet high-volume demand.”

Food Halls: Problem and Solution

Food halls have been on-trend for some time. Spiegel immediately saw a food hall as the solution when the Cherokee Nation Casino in Oklahoma approached her to rework its buffet restaurant due to a pandemic-driven need to alter the buffet format.

“A food hall concept will give the operator an opportunity to function even as foodservice changes,” Spiegel explains. “It’s fast service – the equipment is being designed for a three-minute turnaround threshold – but it gives diners a more exciting, high level culinary experience of mix-and-match food than they’d get with a boring buffet.” The hall will include multiple concepts focusing on comfort food and celebrating food from indigenous people. Meals will be either ordered ahead by phone, at a kiosk just outside the hall, or by phone from a dining table within the hall with a runner bringing the meal on a tray with china and silverware.

Operators engineer food hall menus “for quick turnaround and to be limited,” Spiegel notes. “If a concept

is not working, it’s really easy to change out because the equipment is generic: heating, holding and chilling, a plug-and-play panini grill, a steam-jacketed kettle, a little pizza oven, a lot of induction. You don’t have to break things up or change the mechanical engineering each time. In fact, food halls are great laboratories for new concepts.”

C-stores Stand Strong in the Restaurant Space

College and corporate dining services departments may observe and copy trends in commercial restaurants from time to time, but retail food sectors are mounting an invasion of this noncommercial territory.

Spiegel completed a consulting project for Swiss Farms, a 13-unit drive-thru c-store chain in Pennsylvania. She sees suburban c-stores less as a threat to restaurants and more of a opportunity. “C-stores have always known that a quarter of their revenue comes from sandwiches and deli items, but now they’re finding that guests want to stay in their cars, come to a pickup area and get a well-known branded meal,” she says. “In areas where people depend on cars, a drive-thru c-store can become a pickup area for nearby restaurants or ghost kitchens. The store could work with three local restaurants, offer four items from each.” C-stores prefer this model she says because it means they no longer need kitchen equipment or staffing, refrigeration, hot holding and labeling equipment are all that’s required.

Spiegel’s advice to restaurants: “You are no longer serving all your food under one roof; you need to think about other points of distributions.” In addition to c-stores, coffee shops that are expanding food offerings and community feeders, all may be good partnership opportunities, she suggests.

Her assessment of the restaurant industry future in these fast-changing times? “There’s so much going on! It’s exciting!” FE&S