

3 Sweeping Tech Trends

By Rita Negrete-Rousseau



The foodservice industry is changing extremely fast these days, driven by significant challenges. Among these challenges are an unprecedented labor shortage, supply-chain snarls, and changes in the ways consumers patronize restaurants. Foodservice designers stress that the technology and automation streamlining the consumer contact points must always be matched by back-of-the-house improvements that help restaurants better leverage what labor they do have. These improvements also accelerate production to better align output and food quality with consumers' rising demands.

Kitchen Automation in the Broader Sense

Automating kitchen functions can have a big impact on operators. Operators can achieve some labor savings by moving tasks to the front of the house, says Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, founder and president of New York-based firm Arlene Spiegel & Associates. "Customers today were brought up on tech, and they have no problem making their own gourmet espresso or going to a beautiful gelato machine and making their own sundae," she says. Liquor bars, especially, lend themselves to automation, Spiegel notes, because uniform dispensing of pours can bring down adult beverage costs significantly.

Additionally, Spiegel points out that operators continue to move kitchen tasks off-site, which

is another form of automation. Not all forms of automation require adding new equipment or technology to the back of the house.

Managing kitchen automation, like managing every other aspect of running a restaurant, requires getting a handle on logistics, Spiegel stresses. Whether the operation is big or small, "the key is having someone in the company, either on-site or in a corporate office, who understands logistics — the way things connect," she says. "That requires technology and analytics to figure out how to be flexible enough to accommodate changing pressures and challenges of your local marketplace. If you don't know how to manage information, technology and automation, you're missing opportunities to take advantage of new market opportunities."

Foodservice of the Future

Small-scale operators may in fact get "the worst part of automation," Spiegel cautions. For them, even investing in vital technology may not bring good ROI if they're relying on off-the-shelf software and equipment from different manufacturers. "They all have to talk to each other [to justify] paying a fee for them every month," she says. "If there's going to be one owner-operator or one manager in charge of that, it may not have payback. And operators trying to figure this out may be taking their eye off the ball on their relationships with customers." ●