

KITCHEN EQUIPMENT: OBSERVATIONS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE POND

Every two years the North American Food Equipment Manufacturers (NAFEM) organization hosts its premier event somewhere in the United States – the NAFEM Show – where manufacturers throughout North America display the latest and greatest foodservice equipment they have to offer. On the other side of the pond, in Italy, there is another biennial event – the HOST show – where the latest and greatest European kitchen equipment is showcased, offering industry professionals an opportunity to “kick the tires.” This past fall, these two tradeshow events were held back-to-back in Atlanta and Milan, and I was fortunate to participate in both.

Separated by less than a week, attending these two shows one right after the other highlighted clear similarities and differences between trends in the two regions. I would like to briefly address the commonalities first, as analyzing the differences is far more revealing. Generally speaking, walking around the more than 20 combined exhibit halls, just about everything I saw was “familiar.” There were a few new, truly innovative products at both shows, but even these were often improvements within a pre-existing category. In other words, there were some different style ranges with very unique features – but they were still ranges. Pressurized braising pans had an increased presence and seemed to be growing in popularity – but they were an improved version of the familiar piece of equipment we have been using for decades. I think you see my point.

The differences between equipment displayed at these two exhibitions, however, were more intriguing to me because I believe that they convey a great deal regarding trends, preferences, health codes, and priorities within each region. Certain products – even product categories – that were on display in Atlanta could not be found in Milan; and the reverse was also true. The remainder of this column highlights some of the key divergences I observed between the goods on display at these two events. Here they are, in no particular order:

- As a general rule, the European equipment featured a higher quality of fit and finish. Craftsmanship of the equipment was typically superior to their North American counter parts. The polishing, welding, corners, and overall design of the European equipment seemed to receive more attention and consideration. The Europeans are more thoughtful about the design of their equipment, with a better understanding of how the equipment is actually utilized within commercial kitchens.
- The European equipment featured a number of little details that had been carefully conceived to improve the European products' function, cleanability, and durability. Here are just a few examples of what I am referring to: Manual cranks for tilting equipment that featured a recessed handle which could be "stowed" when not in use; pre-determined access points within lids on kettles and braising pans to ensure that the fill faucet would not be damaged; a recessed griddle top to help keep food in one place, as opposed to raised shields on three sides (also much easier to keep clean).
- The Europeans use far more induction tops. A heavy duty induction range – built to match a full bodied range line – was a standard at the HOST show. A similar piece of equipment could not even be found at NAFEM.
- Food guards (also referred to as sneeze guards or breath shields) were a standard in the United States, and even the sole or primary product line for several manufacturers. These items were much harder to find in Milan. While they were incorporated into some of the buffet and serving equipment, they were far less prevalent.
- Many of the cooking suites (pianos) on display in Milan featured an open bottom with no ovens or storage cabinets below. While this does make cleaning much easier, I was a bit surprised given the limitations on space throughout Europe and traditionally smaller footprints for kitchens.
- Speaking of smaller footprints, I saw range line-ups, complete with cabinet and oven bases, that were only 550mm deep (less than 24"). This

seemed to have some possible application for venues where variety is desired, but volume is low and space is at a premium.

- The popularity of different cooking methods was evident in the equipment on display. In Italy, combination oven-steamers have become the norm in what is now referred to as “vertical cooking.” While combi-ovens, as they are commonly called, are continue to gain popularity in North America, they are not nearly as common as they are in Europe where nearly every corner bistro employs a combi-oven in the kitchen. Conversely, charbroiling is still a very popular method for cooking in North America, but few charbroilers were exhibited at the show in Italy.
- Due primarily to health code requirements in the US, temperature controlled food holding equipment was far more common at the NAFEM show. More specifically, I am referring to equipment that is designed to hold food product – either hot or cold – that is ready for service. Drop-in hot food wells, refrigerated cold pans, induction heated chafing dishes, and other such comparable equipment on display in Atlanta was specifically designed to hold food products either above 140F or below 40F. The equivalent equipment in Italy did not focus meet the same temperature requirements. This is most likely due to differences in code requirements and preparation methods. I can only remember seeing one manufacturer in Milan showcasing hot food wells, and I did not see a single drop-in cold pan. Frost tops were utilized in most of the cold serving equipment, a method which is slowly being phased out in the US.
- The European equipment placed far greater importance on limiting the usage of energy and water. Of particular interest was a manufacturer of dish machines who has a worldwide presence. During the show, they unveiled a new flight-type dish machine that can operate on just 50 gallons of water per hour. This machine, however, is not available in North America; the comparable unit that is available uses approximately 400 gallons of water per hour.

Within these observations there is a story being told. Different regions have different requirements and priorities, which impact the design and function of their kitchen equipment. What is important in one region may not be as important as another. Cooking methods, local health codes, cuisine, manufacturing processes, and local customer expectations all work to shape the type and style of equipment being offered in each region. In my experience, the lines between European and North American foodservice practices are blurring more and more each day. North American based hotel and restaurant brands are expanding globally while European culinary practices are being sought out more regularly throughout the United States as food preparation and consumption continue to play a more important role in everyday life. Taking time to explore and consider practices from the other side of the ocean – regardless of which side you live on – could result in a few good ideas that might improve your operation.