

The Kitchen Evolution

As a one of my colleagues often criticizes about the design of most kitchens in the foodservice industry ... “We are still cooking in Escoffier’s kitchen.” What he is implying, and correctly so, is that the design of kitchens and the equipment within them has not changed much over the last 100 years or more. Escoffier could walk into a modern kitchen and feel quite at home. Consider for a moment the progress that has been made in other industries over the course of a century, and then look at our industry. Ford recently celebrated 100 years in business. 100 years ago Ford was making the Model T – and look at where they are now. A deck oven from the early 1900’s look remarkably like the deck ovens we still use today. Looming on the horizon is what I believe to be the *Kitchen Evolution*.

Evolution, Not Revolution

Quite carefully, I have chosen the word *evolution* as opposed to *revolution*, as I believe the general nature of our industry is not going to change. The foodservice industry, as a whole, is more reactive than proactive. Thus, the changes on the horizons will be beneficial modifications to existing and known processes as opposed to an abandonment of the way we do things now. This has been confirmed by the adoption of new equipment brought to the marketplace.

Several manufacturers have introduced technology such as induction based cooking appliances and combination oven-steamers. Despite the wide-spread use of these items in Europe, the adoption of these appliances state-side has been slow or non-existent due in large part to their cost and lack of familiarity by end users. On the other hand, the introduction of the boiler-less steamer (now offered by virtually every foodservice equipment manufacturer that offers steam equipment) has been extremely successful. This success is directly associated with the fact that it is a known technology, steaming, that has been improved. The adoption of this technology, as a result, has been rapid. Manufacturers, looking to capitalize on potential profits from the sale of such equipment, have flooded the market with boiler-less steamers.

Technology in the Kitchen – Not So Fast

The discussions that I have heard at industry conventions or read about in industry periodicals seem to focus exclusively on the inclusion and implementation of technology in the kitchen as the next big thing. There are systems that can track anything from temperature of the walk-in cooler, to the efficiency of the compressor that is running it. There are systems that manage holding temperatures for food and yet others that assist with integrating ordering and food production. There are an endless number of options available. While I don't discount the importance of technology in the kitchen, in fact I believe that technology will have a significant impact on our industry, I believe that wide spread adoption of such systems is a long-term and not a short-term effort. Large hotel and restaurant chains, given their cost structures, volume, and overhead, can justify such expenses for information management within the kitchen, as their payback is reasonable.

The average mom and pop operation, however, will experience a much longer payback period, if at all. In fact, I have personally seen an aversion to technology from those who have tried to include more technologically advanced appliances and systems. As an example, over the past couple of years I have seen a growing number of convection ovens sold with manual controls as a replacement for units that previously featured digital controls. When I have inquired about this purchasing decision, the owners have informed me that they simply had too many problems with the digital controls and preferred the manual controls for reliability reasons. Thus, while sophisticated information systems in the kitchen will have their place, I am not sure that it is in the near future.

The Evolution Revealed

While technology makes its push into the kitchen, there is a more desirable concept that could have an even greater impact than technology on everything from operational efficiency to profitability ... FLEXIBILITY. If you think about the average kitchen, there is very little flexibility beyond mobile and countertop equipment. The main structures in the kitchen are fixed, and do not allow the

kitchen facility to grow or evolve as the operation changes over time. I have seen hot food wells on chef's counters used as iced cold pans or even covered up and used as a work surface. What a waste! I have seen restaurant ranges with ovens that have been "out of order" for years and are beyond repair, but the units are not replaced because the 6 burners and griddle on top still work. I have seen functional pieces of equipment abandoned and replaced to accommodate the addition of a new featured menu item or desired kitchen configuration. Even worse ... I have seen operational changes put on hold due to the complex and expensive modifications required for the kitchen facility.

Think about your facility: the walk-in cooler and freezer, the chef's counter, the exhaust hood ... and so on. These systems are not designed with flexibility in mind, therefore limiting the ability for the facility to evolve. Not only would flexibility in the kitchen help end-users, but it could change the way that our industry conducts business and makes decisions related to purchasing, operations, and growth, just to mention a few. Moreover, the inclusion of flexibility in the kitchen, like the boilerless steamer, is a modification to known equipment and technology ... it is evolutionary, not revolutionary. Thus, the adoption of such equipment should be rapid.

Conclusion

As I stated earlier, technology will have its place in the kitchen – guaranteed. However, the incorporation of flexible equipment will have far more benefit and a much greater impact on the industry as a whole. Take a few moments, when you are done reading this, and consider the flexibility that you *should* have in your kitchen. Without this approach, Escoffier's kitchen and the deck oven may remain unchanged for the next 100 years. I sure hope that is not the case.