Shopping for student satisfaction: A foodservice equipment and supplies buyer’s guide

Education foodservice is changing – here’s how to adapt your operations.
Before you buy, read this.

Meatloaf and mashed potatoes paired with bland cafeteria backdrops and servingware used to be par for the course. Now, students (from kindergarten to undergrad) settle for nothing less than the dining experiences they’re used to outside of campus confines. That means more restaurant-like experiences, from-scratch cooking, made-to-order options and healthier ingredients, to name a few.

When it comes to an upgrade, remodel or new location, it’s important to remember what students want – and how that aligns with your foodservice equipment and supplies purchases.

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Happy shopping!
Rule 1: Prep for more prep.

Are the time and resources spent on your operation’s food prep on the rise? It could be a sign of the times. In addition to 2012 USDA guidelines that forced schools to up the ante on nutrition (more vegetables, fruits and whole grains make for additional prep work), today’s health-conscious, gourmet-minded students expect more and more menu items to be fresh and “homemade.” While the youngest pupils still may prefer simple comfort foods, the bar rises with each school year, according to Y-Pulse, a foodservice research department within Olson Communications. Middle school and high school student demands are mimicking those of college students, Y-Pulse says, calling for more adventurous, from-scratch preparations.

These inclinations toward freshness, authenticity and personalization all mean more prep work — and perhaps more prep equipment. When it comes to food prep equipment purchases, here are some tips to help you work smarter — not harder:

• **First, take a long, hard look at your menu.** Chances are, you know what types of food prep equipment you’ll need based on your menu. But do you have a good handle on utilization/demand on those items? If you have six different types of house-made salsas that fly off your taco assembly line faster than you can say “pico de gallo,” you might need to purchase multiple blenders or food processors. What’s more, how many people will be prepping at a given time? Be sure you’re covered in terms of quantity and prep space.

• **Consider food allergies.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), food allergies among children jumped about 50 percent between 1997 and 2011. Even those without life-threatening allergies expect individualized prep. If your operation deals in dough, you might see the need to buy two sets of prep equipment — one dedicated solely to gluten-free students.

• **Stay sharp.** When it comes to slicing, dicing and blending, look for multipurpose equipment and don’t skimp on quality. The best food processors and blenders, for example, are those precise enough to make coarsely chopped salsas without compromising yield, but powerful enough to blend and puree. In general, the higher the RPM, the less precise the cut, so consider the speed settings and your application before you buy.

• **Prep more, work less.** Some equipment — such as a vegetable washer that eliminates manual work — can pay for itself in labor savings.
Rule 2: Seeing is believing.

Looks matter – especially with today’s trend toward open kitchens and assembly-line style ordering. And school environments, particularly high school and college, are no different. This not only calls for aesthetically pleasing ingredients, but good-looking prep equipment.

But even in open kitchen concepts, not every prep task should be visible. Put the prep equipment you use for the more appealing tasks front and center. For example, prep fruit and ingredients for fresh fruit smoothies out of site, then blend the final product in view of students.

When it comes to the equipment itself, look for designs that are sleek, modern and easy to keep clean.

Rule 3: Aim for easy cleanup.

Kitchen cleanup is mission-critical in any equipment and supplies category, but there are special considerations when it comes to prep work. Consider the ease of cleanup when comparing products including blenders, food processors, slicers, juicers and cutting board surfaces. Look for equipment with easy to remove attachments and fewer crannies to navigate.
Rule 1: Save your energy (and your space).

As the focus on energy efficiency intensifies, and more grants and incentives become available to schools who focus on sustainability, purchasing new equipment can be more confusing than ever. Sure, choosing ENERGY STAR-certified products is an obvious tactic, but that’s far from the silver bullet. While the vast majority of energy-efficient equipment should perform better than predecessors (and may deliver higher long-term ROI), it’s important to compare specs.

When you do succeed in energy-efficient kitchen design, space savings are often a happy side effect. Here are some tips to make sure you achieve energy efficiency and productivity:

- **Prioritize upgrades.** If you aren’t starting from scratch, overhauling your whole kitchen at once is not only cost prohibitive, but also can be unnecessarily overwhelming. Focus first on replacing equipment types that are typically the biggest energy users: older broilers and ovens, for example, may be a good candidate for replacement.

- **Think about heat and ventilation.** Manufacturers are developing ever-more efficient gas broilers, which not only save in energy during operation, but also create less radiant heat and contribute to A/C savings. Meanwhile, smart ventilation systems use photoelectric smoke or heat detection to “decide” when and at what speed to run exhaust fans for big savings. These systems may not be right or necessary for every operation, but they’re something to consider.

- **Rethink your recipes (or at least your cooking methods).** Bigger energy savings might require outside-the-box thinking. For example, switching to a cook-hold system for meats (versus cooking and then transferring to holding equipment) can cut energy use for that application in half. Induction technology, meanwhile, enables clean, compact and eco-friendly cooking.

- **Get smart.** The aforementioned smart ventilation system is one example in a larger trend. Equipment manufacturers are developing technology-advanced systems that are a boon for energy savings: cook-and-hold technologies that can be programmed to automatically switch to “hold” mode after cooking, and record cooking times for easier food safety documentation; and cutting-edge conveyor belt ovens that sense down time and lower the temperature and belt speed accordingly.

Learn more about the latest in energy efficiency [here](#).
Rule 2: Think like a restaurant.

As government mandates and student demands up the ante on campus foodservice (better ingredients, more restaurant-like experiences), budgets are stretched and foodservice directors are challenged. In the face of this, education foodservice consultants and experts are encouraging schools to think more like restaurants in the way they operate — finding ways to save money (and boost profitability) and generally operate more efficiently.

In addition to a greater focus on cost and labor savings, some schools are opting for smaller, more compact “mini-restaurants” or stations (similar to a food court setup) that attract more student diners and keep the flow of traffic moving. This calls for compact, “cleaner” technologies (ventless fryers, induction cooking, small conveyor ovens) that not only save space but also labor: the order taker handles food preparation. This setup lends itself the transparency that students crave, and the variety of choice can make campus dining more appealing.

Rule 3: Satisfy adventurous taste buds.

Consumer demand for more variety in terms of flavor and preparation continues to rise. According to NAFEM’s 2014 State of the Industry Report, 52 percent of consumers say they like spicy foods, and the smoky flavor trend is gaining ground. Meanwhile, Asian concepts have seen the biggest recent growth, and that’s just the beginning – diners are getting more and more adventurous and discerning when it comes to their food. It stands to reason that today’s students are even more likely to demand adventurous dining experiences — having grown up on a wider variety of flavors and ethnic cuisines than previous generations.

To keep up, a good mix of primary cooking equipment is important. Mix traditional staples (broilers, grills, fryers, etc.) with specialty equipment that allows for more authentic ethnic cooking. Vertical spits, smokers, woks and tortilla presses are examples of tools that not only enable you to keep in line with flavor/cuisine trends, they excite and delight when in view of students.
Chapter 3: Refrigeration and ice machines

Chill and freeze

Rule 1: Fresh is best.

College students are no longer ambivalent to the Freshman 15; K-12 students are taking a more health-conscious approach to food as well (as are the USDA guidelines that shape their campus dining experiences). With the call for more fresh fruits and veggies and more from-scratch cooking might come the need for more cooler space. Still, refrigeration is a necessary element of many kitchens — and that’s where a combination walk-in might come in handy. For the right applications, these units offer both functions in one package.

Meanwhile, blast chillers, a piece of equipment already employed often in the education foodservice segment (particularly in central-kitchen setups) is an unexpected tool to help maintain “fresh” appearance and taste. If you plan to move food from cooking equipment with a rack system, look for a blast chiller that aligns with that for easy transfer. You can even put your blast chiller in your walk-in to save space. Like many other types of equipment, some blast chillers feature smart technology — from data collection (for monitoring food temperatures) to automatic start functionality.

Rule 2: Let them grab and go.

Grab-and-go is hot — particularly among schools ramping up their breakfast programs. In fact, the National Education Association (NEA) asserts that traditional school breakfast programs may get better results by switching to a grab-and-go model under which kids can eat in the classroom, with schools that do so achieving 63 percent participation, on average. On the university side, the appeal for busy, on-the-go students is irresistible — assuming grab-and-go foods are fresh-prepared, healthy and flavorful.

School foodservice directors looking to increase grab-and-go breakfast participation or profit on college campuses should take note: those who choose open-front, easy-to-access, grab-and-go display units may boost sales by as much 50 percent, according to Foodservice Equipment & Supplies.

Be sure to keep space in mind when making purchase decisions — refrigeration equipment suited for grab-and-go has to be properly located (not too close to windows and doors, away from heat sources, breathing room around the condenser, etc.) to work efficiently.

Rule 3: Remember regulations.

In 2015, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced new rules that delist certain refrigerants. While this regulatory burden falls mostly on the shoulders of manufacturers, foodservice directors buying new refrigeration must adhere to the rules. When looking for refrigeration equipment that fits the bill, be sure to scrutinize the total cost of ownership — and check with your electric company to see if you qualify for rebates thanks to compliance.
Rule 1: Get ’em in and get ’em out.

When the lunch rush hits, staff in campus dining areas brace themselves for chaos. But many are making strides to improve the flow of traffic in school cafeterias and university dining halls by breaking up serving lines and stations into multiple points of service. This aligns with the aforementioned trend toward food court-style dining and relieves long lines and pressure on staff. This could mean the need for more, but smaller, serving line equipment setups, each with different accommodations depending on the concept.

Another serving option schools of all types are exploring: mobile food carts to relieve pressure from overloaded points of sale. Some carts are designed to go all over campus – with the goal of getting food in front of students during busy times of the day or when they’re far from main dining areas.

Rule 2: Supercharge their salad.

Y-Pulse asserts that school-age children, no surprise, like pizza, chicken and sandwiches; but salad and fruit also are popular standouts, the firm says. On college campuses, more health-conscious students crave greens, too. School dining operations are getting on board with salad bars that not only accommodate a variety of options, but also help move students through the area more quickly (double-sided bars with the same offerings on each side, for instance). As with buffets and salad bars in any other foodservice operation, aesthetics matter when it comes to attracting student diners.
Rule 1: Know your quantity.

The basic rules of cookware and smallwares haven’t changed in a while – aluminum is still great for conducting heat; cast iron is still durable and naturally non-stick; stainless is still low maintenance and easy to clean. But when it comes to menu changes, expansions or remodels, it might not be the types of smallwares that are stumping you, but the necessary quantity.

Below are the basic guidelines for several different types of operations; given the fact that many school and university foodservice concepts are emulating restaurant foodservice operations. These numbers can provide a baseline for a variety of campus applications.

- Bakery
- 200-seat buffet
- 200-seat cafeteria
- 75-seat deli
- Fast food restaurant
- 60- to 80-seat fine dining restaurant
- 75-seat pizza restaurant
- 100-seat restaurant

Rule 2: Little updates can make a big difference.

Quantities and types of smallwares are important when specifying, but are you thinking about the hidden opportunities? One anecdote we’ve heard involves a simple pan switch in a buffet line – from a large buffet pan to individual servings – that resulted in less food waste and big cost savings.
Chapter 6: Storage and handling equipment
Hold, tote, cart, transport and display

Rule 1: Rethink holding.
Remove the taboo of hot holding. With new technologies and features, hot holding equipment can help foodservice directors save time, labor and money and maintain consistency without any degradation to the quality or taste of the food. Pulse heat technology, which uses low intensity heat at a high volume, makes it easy to hold food for longer periods without drying it out. Humidifying technology is another option for some foods that need to stay moist. For high-volume cafeteria applications, pass-through storage may be a necessary luxury. The time it saves for staff and the speed at which it helps get students through the line can often justify the cost.

Heated and cooled food wells/prep tables are another consideration. With the increase in Chipotle-style assembly line concepts, foodservice directors must find ways to efficiently keep food, hot or cold, in a very visible way. This means storage and handling that offers the flexibility for hot, cold and aesthetic appeal.

Rule 2: Farm-to-table storage.
The trend toward fresher ingredients may require a slight shift in storage equipment. Experts recommend clear storage bins, for example, particularly for more perishable produce and grains. This allows for easier visibility to monitor freshness. Storing the produce in the boxes straight off the delivery truck is a no-no; clean things immediately and transfer them to sanitary storage. Specialty storage bins – such as those with drainage to wick away moisture from fruits and veggies – also are available. Take stock of your ingredients and look for storage best suited to maintain their integrity and freshness.
Rule 1: Think before going trayless.

In recent years, some schools (particularly colleges and universities) have gone trayless in an effort to curb food waste and be more environmentally friendly. But you may not want to jump on the bandwagon just yet: depending on your operation, you may face challenges that outweigh the benefits. First, trays are often a convenient vehicle through which staff and patrons easily dispose of food scraps and drop off servingware; they catch crumbs, spills and other messes, too, making dining room cleanup easier. Without them, school foodservice operators must consider alternative solutions.

Getting students on board can be difficult, as well. Trays make the all-you-can-eat nature of pre-paid campus dining options easier, so students may feel cheated if the meal is limited to what they can hold in two hands. If you’re considering going trayless, weigh the pros and cons before taking the plunge.

Rule 2: Rethink reusable.

For school foodservice operators who have a choice between disposable and reusable servingware, the decision often comes down to long-term costs, and several variables factor in. But while disposable servingware may seem like the easier option, reusables can save money, and the planet, in the long run. While operators must factor in the upfront cost of warewashing equipment, reusables often offer long-term savings. Those that need disposables for grab-and-go options may still want to consider reusable cutlery for the remainder of foodservice.
Rule 1: Watch your water.

The EPA asserts that hospitality and foodservice operations make up 15 percent of the total commercial and institutional water use in the United States — the majority of that coming from the kitchen. In fact, by 2019, all prerinse spray valves must allow a max of 1.28 gallons of water per minute, down from 1.6 gallons. The aforementioned valve change may save an estimated $500 over the life of the part, according to Foodservice Equipment & Supplies. When shopping for dishwashers, new features include dual rinse zones and heat recovery systems that save water and energy.

Rule 2: Vent smart.

Several equipment types allow you to eliminate or reduce ventilation, but what about the ventilation itself? And the whole HVAC system, for that matter? Smart ventilation systems can decide when and at what speed to run exhaust fans, saving significant amounts of energy.

Another way to save money on ventilation is to streamline cooking operations/techniques. Multipurpose equipment, such as a combi-oven, can reduce the amount of linear hood you’ll need — saving in equipment and energy costs. Finally, don’t let all that heat generated in the kitchen go to waste in the winter time: heat recovery systems recycle it for use in other areas of the building, reducing heating costs significantly.
Rule 1: Put the café in cafeteria.

School foodservice operations from elementary to university are emulating café and restaurant dining environments. That means everything from high-top tables where students can stand for a quick snack, to booths complete with charging stations for phones and laptops. Lounge and bar seating is particularly popular at universities, to encourage students to hunker down and study or socialize – presumably making repeat snack and beverage purchases. Look for comfortable, inviting and modern seating options and mix and match different sizes and styles to create a sit-and-stay-awhile atmosphere.

Rule 2: Liven things up.

College dining areas allow for a little more freedom when it comes to restaurant-style décor, aligned with the given concept, for an authentic, engaging vibe. Their grade-school counterparts, however, can incorporate lively, thematic designs, too. For younger students, colorful, engaging décor in line with a nutrition or educational theme can add to the ambience, even during time-limited lunch breaks. When in doubt, mascot-driven décor is a popular option. The bottom line: Bright décor makes for a refreshing, happy break from an otherwise regimented school day.
There’s more where that came from.

If you’re overwhelmed with equipment and supplies purchasing decisions for your school foodservice operation, or simply want to see everything that’s out there in one convenient trip, make time for The NAFEM Show, Feb. 9-11, 2017, in Orlando, Fla. It’s the one place where you’ll have access to all of the industry’s leading equipment and supplies manufacturers.

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