



CULINARY CONNECTION

I WANT IT, BUT DO I NEED IT?

ASSESSING THE BENEFITS OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES FOR YOUR OPERATION

BY DAVID VOELZ, CEC, CWPC, CCA, WCEC, CDM, CFPP, FMP, FSWC

WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE. We're at a food show, visiting another kitchen, or looking at social media when we see it. That *thing* we think will be the magic pill for our operation. If we just had *that*, then we'd be able to immediately elevate our food quality, solve all our problems, or be able to operate with less labor. And then we see the price tag... So, we backtrack and begin to think, "Do I really *need* it?"

Here are five things to think about when deciding if that golden piece of equipment or technology is something that is feasible for your operation.

COST

Let's face it. With rare exception, none of us work in an operation with a bottomless pit of money to spend on every whim and desire. The reality is we usually have a set amount of money to spend on new equipment or technology for the year. And the bigger reality is often that money may disappear if it's needed elsewhere in our operation. So what happens if an essential piece of equipment breaks down beyond repair? If we've already purchased the new item, can we replace the essential equipment as well?

The other option is to hold off on that item and push it to our finance office as a capital expenditure for the next year. Most companies have a pool of money that is earmarked for improvements at the beginning of the year. Our job as operators is to make sure we submit our request, with

justifications, in time to ensure we have that money allocated to us in order to go ahead with the purchase.

Another way to think through a purchase, especially if it is one that contains new technology, is to play a waiting game. As we've seen in the consumer market with electronics, waiting a bit on the newest technology rewards us with lower prices. Did you ever think you'd see a 70-inch TV for \$500? The same line of thought applies to the new technologies that come out for food and beverage applications. Not only will waiting and being patient pay off in getting a lower price, it also gives the manufacturer a chance to work out any bugs and make necessary improvements to new technologies.

UNIVERSAL USE VS. SPECIFIC USE

My parents were kitchen gadget people. They had cabinets and drawers filled to overflowing with every cooking gadget known to man. What did most of them do? Only one thing. I've worked in my fair share of kitchens, and without fail one of the biggest issues is always storage. There is nowhere to store a myriad of equipment that only does one thing.

When looking at that new, shiny piece of equipment, ask yourself how many ways it can bring value to your establishment. Will this be for one menu item? What happens when you change your menu? Will you be able to use it for another item or will you be putting it in storage that doesn't exist? Consider your menu or concept as a whole and make sure this piece of equipment will serve



many purposes. Multi-use equipment should ideally be used for two to five functions.

There are two caveats to this thought. The first is if you are known for a specific thing. For example, if you are renown for homemade pasta, then it is probably worth it to buy that fancy imported Italian-made pasta machine. It should improve productivity and help with consistency. The other caveat is buying a machine that does many things, yet it's the only option in your operation. What happens if that one piece of equipment goes down? How many pieces of equipment will you need in order to make up for it? Do you have all that equipment to save the day? Be careful not to buy something that will sink your operation if it goes down. As sturdy as kitchen equipment is, it takes a lot of abuse and is bound to break down at some point. Don't put yourself in a potentially bad situation.



TRENDS HAVE VARIOUS RUNS OF TIME.

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TREND SPECIFIC

Food trends are a lot like fashion. Something is "in" and then before you know it, it's "out." If you're in this crazy business long enough, you'll see many things come and go. We vacationed on an island one year and every restaurant we went to had fried green beans as an appetizer. The next year we went back to that same island. Not a fried green bean on any menu. What if all those restaurants had rearranged their lines to accommodate another fryer? What if they had gone all in and bought one of those fancy ventless fryers? Would they still be able to use it? This is a slightly different point than the previous one, because the time gap between trends can be years or even decades. Have you ever considered that someone may have a closet full of fondue pots? Fondue has been on hiatus for quite some time!

Waiting may be in your favor in this application as well. Trends do have various runs of time. Depending on your operation, if a trend lasts six months, that may work for you. You can capitalize on a high volume of sales to make your money back very quickly. You will still have to figure out where to store your equipment or how to use it for another purpose, but at least you will have come out ahead financially.

Switching to new technology can be a hard decision to make. Some technology in our field seems to be fairly stable and last for a long time. Being an early adopter may put you ahead of the curve and pay big dividends to your operation. If you come in too late, others may be way ahead of you. But what happens if it turns out to be something that is a flash in the pan? Not only have you invested in the technology, you may have also had to add infrastructure to your physical plant in order to make it work. What then? Hopefully it's adaptable for the next big thing. Do your research and find out as much as you can. Often, new technologies have

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SOUS VIDE

is a huge labor-saving tool
and technology. Having food
cooking in a sous vide tank
frees up your ovens, pots on
the stove, or tilt braiser.

been tried in other areas of the country or other parts of the world. Do a search and see if those technologies lasted elsewhere before bringing them to your house.

LABOR SAVING

This topic is especially important in today's labor market. We are perpetually short-staffed. All of us are looking for ways to run our operations knowing that we won't have the number of people we need to staff it for the best outcomes. We look to equipment and technologies that will help our existing employees work faster or more efficiently.

Some great pieces of equipment are out there that will save time and speed up production with low technology. When thinking about these pieces, think "old school." A buffalo chopper is a piece of equipment that has been around forever. While it's not for precision work, it certainly speeds up chopping for anything that does not have to be cut to a specific shape. It will work for cooked proteins, like steamed chicken for chicken salad, or vegetables. There is some control built in as far as how many times you let the bowl turn. Also, there is usually a space for a meat grinder attachment. Items like a tabletop mixer, food processor, or immersion blender will all save staff time and enable them to complete tasks quicker.

Depending on your tolerance for completing variances, sous vide is a huge labor-saving tool and technology. Instead of putting something in an oven for hours and staff having to work around that, having food cooking in a sous vide tank frees up your ovens, pots on the stove, or tilt braiser. There is some added expense around this piece of equipment. You must have a vacuum sealer and an endless supply of plastic bags. But once you have these in house, you can begin freeing your staff since food will be cooking at a constant temperature for a predetermined amount of time. No need to check or rotate. Just make sure you don't run out of water. The downside here is checking your local ordinances. If you are inspected by the health department, you will likely have to complete a variance so they know that you understand what you're doing. There are some loopholes in various principalities that allow you to use this technology unchecked. Plenty of training videos and literature are available for free that can get you moving safely and quickly.

STAFF COMPETENCY

This last point of consideration is the most subjective. There is no solid metric to weigh this one. It is necessary to take an honest look at the makeup of our staff and assess their skill level and comfort with technology. Some really cool pieces of equipment are out there with a high level of technology that may look great in the kitchen, but may not be something staff feels they can use. I like to consider myself someone, even though a bit older, who is pretty comfortable with technology. I did an event a few years ago sponsored by an equipment company. We did the raw prep and were ready to cook. The corporate chef came over, plugged a thumb drive into the equipment, started scrolling through preset functions, making adjustments, and skipping from one


directory to another. I was lost. Completely. I can only imagine how some of our older or less tech-savvy workers would react. How about our staff members whose first language is not English? That piece of equipment would be a foreboding hunk of intimidation looming over them all day long. And they would likely find a workaround to complete their task.

We can also make an assessment of the learning capabilities of our staff. Just because they are not comfortable with something now, doesn't mean they aren't able to learn. The issue here may be how far they're able to leap. If the staff operates at a basic level, with basic equipment and

technology, we need to be careful how much of a step we take when purchasing new equipment. If we have staff that is accustomed to using a standard convection oven, purchasing one with electronic controls instead of dials would likely be a step they could take. However, buying a combi oven and expecting them to set multiple stages of cooking with different temperatures and percentages of steam may be a step they are not able to make. Don't think of this as something condescending toward your staff, rather consider it taking stock so

precious resources will be committed to something that will bring value to your operation through the staff's use of it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Being able to decide on the purchase of a new piece of equipment or adoption of a new technology is not a simple process. Many, many factors go into it. Since no two operations are the same, just doing what your peers do may not be the right solution for you. Hopefully as you consider the thinking points outlined here, you will be able to work through your unique situation and come to a conclusion that is best for you, your operation, and your staff. 



**TAKE AN HONEST LOOK
AT THE MAKEUP OF
YOUR STAFF**
and assess their skill level and
comfort with technology.



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CE QUESTIONS | CULINARY CONNECTION



This Level I article assumes that the reader has introductory knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to ensure a basic understanding and explanation of the concepts of the subject matter and recalling of related facts.

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1. What is the name for projected purchases for the next fiscal year?
 - A. Yearly expenses
 - B. Capital expenditures
 - C. Equipment list
2. According to the article, what is in short supply in the majority of kitchens?
 - A. Storage
 - B. Patience
 - C. Chemicals
3. If a piece of equipment is considered 'multi-use,' how many things should it be able to do?
 - A. 1
 - B. 2-5
 - C. 15-20
4. More advanced equipment can help existing staff by helping them work:
 - A. Effortlessly
 - B. Harder
 - C. Faster
5. What can you count on with a trend?
 - A. It will be around forever
 - B. It will likely come around again
 - C. It will only happen once
6. What must be assessed about our staff when considering new technologies?
 - A. Their commitment to the job
 - B. How long they've worked in the industry
 - C. Their ability to learn new things
7. Deciding on new equipment and technologies is:
 - A. An exact science
 - B. A complex series of thoughts and factors
 - C. A complete shot in the dark



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