

# Fast, fun and fancy-free

Getting the casual dining boom right touches everything from interior design and kitchen equipment to workwear and food and drink, as *Richard McComb* explains

Casual dining is the trickle that became a torrent, with the UK surge in informal, value-driven restaurants showing no signs of slowing. If economists were looking for a sector that has bucked the trend during the recession, they would struggle to find a better example than the innovative food businesses that have flourished.

The street food craze, the influence of South-east Asian cuisine and the hybridisation of food, where flavours, textures and techniques from different cultures are combined, have been just some of the spurs for the growth of casual dining. These factors and many more – including savvier customers, greater demand for consistency and new ways of consuming – have reshaped the dining landscape in the UK.

The casual dining sector presents exciting new opportunities for food and drink producers and the suppliers of specialist equipment and new technologies. Now appearances may not be everything, but in casual dining in particular they count for a lot – and that extends to buildings and decor as much as staff.

Hannah Somers, design con-

sultant with Catering Design Group, says operators need to shout about their personality to stand out in a packed market.

## Big, bold and in your face

“The look is super-raw, edgy and industrial, with a hint of the seedy,” she says. “It’s big, bold and in your face. There really are no boundaries. It is about creating layers of complex textures across such materials as ceramics, brick, con-

crete and steel mesh to create visual interest. The aim is to communicate a humble, raw existence which shouts ‘it’s all about the food’ while showcasing your heart and personality.”

With the worst of the recession over, operators’ thoughts are turning to refurbishing sites and upgrading facilities. Ralph Grundy, managing director of Brakes Catering Equipment, says: “No one wants to be seen to be standing still. It is important that if a site is part of a chain it maintains a brand feel while simultaneously creating its own distinct identity. And, of course, differentiation is also essential for independent operators.”

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in improving service delivery times,

reducing wastage and improving communication. Ashley Shepard, commercial director for Call Systems Technology, encourages UK operators to look to their US counterparts, where kitchen automation software is popular.

He says: “A US operator would not dream of opening a restaurant without this technology. In

fact, 19 out of the 20 top restaurant groups in the US use it.

Bombay-style café chain Dishoom uses CST Connect Smart Kitchen back of house and ConnectSmart Hostess front of house to provide accurate wait times and communicate with the kitchen at its new Kings Cross site.

## Size matters

Frima has recently introduced the 112T, a tabletop version of its full-size VarioCooking Center Multificiency – a multipurpose tool consisting of a tilting pan, kettle and deep-fat fryer – aimed at small kitchens. Measuring 962mm x 800mm x 400mm, the 112T’s two 14-litre pans give it the same capacity as its larger stablemate, the VCC 112.

The energy-saving 112T can replace kettles, tilting pans, bratt pans, fryers and griddles, reducing the equipment footprint by

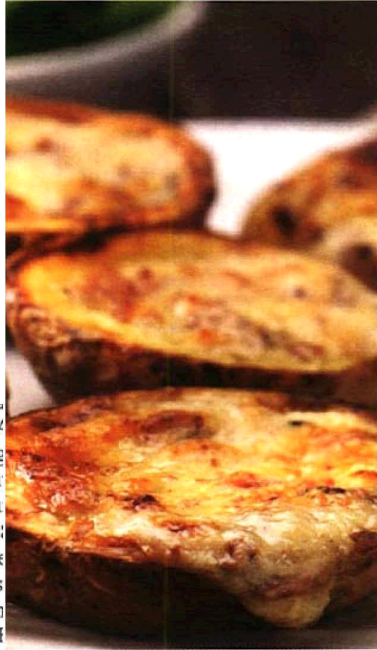




30% or more in the kitchen. It is also said to be up to four times as fast as conventional appliances.

Casual dining chimes brilliantly with quirky locales and buildings, but spaces packed with character often mean kitchen space is at a premium.

Alistair Farquhar, country manager UK for Ambach Ali Spa, says: "By creating a bespoke suite, such as the new Ambach IQ850, every bit of space can be used. This unit is also narrow, at just 800mm, so is perfect for this kind of space."



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