

# Finding the Balance Between Fresh & Fast

C-store customers increasingly want fresh, customizable food, but they also want it fast, which means retailers have some important choices to make

By Angela Hanson



**AT LUNCHTIME**, a hungry office worker gets into his car to pick up lunch at a convenience store. Like many Americans, he's within minutes of several c-stores that offer foodservice programs, which gives him options, but presents him with multiple questions.

Does he want something that can be extensively customized, or an item that is already hot and waiting? How long is he willing to wait for something made to order? If he wants something fresh, what exactly does that mean?

Convenience store operators, as they build up their foodservice programs, are wrestling with the same questions. What do they want to offer their customers, and what kind of foodservice program do they want to be?

The answers that retailers give to hundreds of questions will shape their offering, but as convenience foodservice evolves and individual retailers are able to create more advanced programs, one key consideration boils down to the balance of fresh and fast.

Research shows again and again that consumers value freshness, yet retaining speed of service is fundamental to what the convenience retail channel is known for.

The point at which c-stores land on that sliding scale affects not just the individual menu items they offer, but also what type of prepared food program they offer — made-to-order or grab-and-go — and what degree of customization is built into it.

C-stores need to live up to the standards they set, whatever those standards are, to become a desirable foodservice destination.

Industry veteran and consultant Jerry Weiner discussed this issue during his presentation at the 2018 NACS Show education session, "Is Made to Order Really For Me?", which sought to help c-store operators decide whether made-to-order or grab-and-go is the right fit.

"This is your program. This is your brand," Weiner said. "What you deliver and execute is what people will think of your brand."

It's easier said than done. So, how do retailers decide what to do?

## **A FOCUS ON FRESH**

In the fresh vs. fast debate, one question is obvious: How is "fresh" defined?

For certain products, it doesn't necessarily mean that every ingredient in a product is equally fresh, according to Ryan Krebs, director of foodservice at York, Pa.-based Rutter's, which operates 70-plus stores in Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

"The perception of fresh is what people are really after, and creating that is critical," he said.

This doesn't mean tricking customers or implying things about food quality that aren't true. However, for example, not every hamburger must be made with never-frozen beef. A frozen burger patty can be combined with fresher ingredients that have a shorter shelf life, such as bread and vegetable toppings, to offer freshness in a product that still gets into a customer's hands quickly.

This makes knowledge of and trust in supplier partners extremely important.

"In order to execute the quality and freshness people are looking for, you really have to leverage your manufacturers," Krebs advised. "[They] are key to providing that quality, fresh image that can be executed in five minutes or less, consistently, by a part-time minor."

Rutter's expanded into pizza with a personal-sized pie that has self-activating yeast in the crust. After being cooked for just two minutes, it has the texture of a brick oven pizza. Krebs points to this product as a good example of balancing freshness and speed.

"It did take a little longer than typical, but I feel like it was worth it," he said. "We even put language on the kiosk — 'Worth the wait.'"

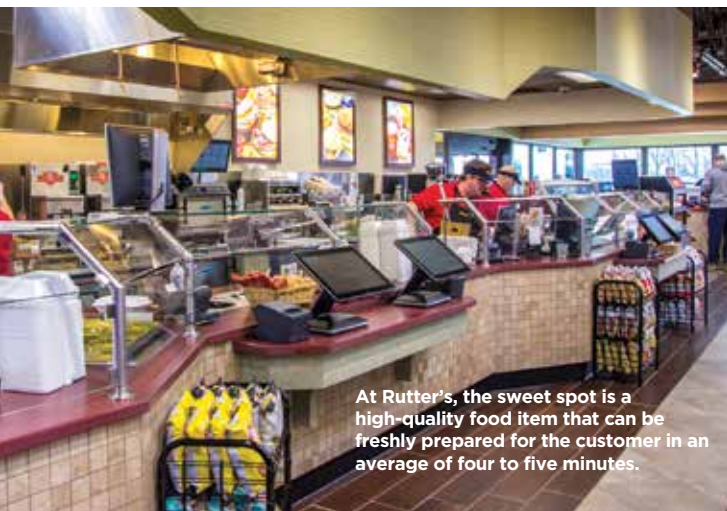
Of course, having the quality of freshness means nothing if customers don't believe it. Incorporating "fresh" as a key point of marketing is one way to earn trust. Another way, for c-stores with the resources to do so, is to let customers actually see the preparation process.

Sheetz Inc. won a *Convenience Store News* 2017 Store Design Contest award for the interior of its Morgantown, W. Va., store, which incorporates a kitchen with an open view, allowing customers to watch the preparation of their food.

While grab-and-go programs, which by their nature cater to the quick pickup, may not have that option, their focus on speed does not mean there are no standards for freshness.

Retailers have other avenues at their disposal to help customers feel confident that grab-and-go products haven't been sitting in the warmer for hours upon hours.

"Presentation, labeling and packaging are the keys to the fresh presentation," said Frank White, director of foodservice for Des Moines-based Yesway, which operates 150 convenience stores in eight states. "But the product quality has to be there."



At Rutter's, the sweet spot is a high-quality food item that can be freshly prepared for the customer in an average of four to five minutes.

Along with a continual focus on improving ingredients, Yesway is currently assessing different “carrier solutions,” such as bread, wraps, tortillas and bowls, that are designed to maintain texture better than typical sandwich bread does.

### FAST, FASTER, FASTEST

At a certain point, a convenience store's menu may become as optimized as it can be, with no further product changes able to be made without compromising freshness. From there, the only option is to deliver food as fast as possible, letting customers receive their orders and walk out the door before they grow impatient and opt to go elsewhere in the future.

Krebs points to a single factor as making the biggest difference in being able to quickly prepare fresh orders, even for more complicated items: training.

Training is “relentless” at Rutter's, he noted.

“I am so impressed at what our team does. If I create it, our team will figure out how to do it. I vet everything over and over again before we even get to deciding what we're going to do,” he said.

That training period, before a new product ever debuts, is built into the product development pipeline. More complicated products require extra training, particularly because a store-level employee may be young, with minimal foodservice experience when they start.

Krebs recommends that c-stores always require a minimum level of training, even for items that only require pressing a button to begin cooking. Foodservice leadership should also solicit feedback from team members who actually prepare the food.

“Even though we vet at our level, there's nothing better than having experts at store level tell you exactly the way it feels to them. By the time it hits kiosks, it's a perfectly executed system” he said.

While it doesn't take absolute top-tier equipment to build a quality program, the right kitchen technology can help as well. Yesway is investing in this area.

“We are investing in kitchen technology that can be multi-purpose — rapid heat ovens, humidified warmers, tortilla/panini presses — and can see the product through multiple dayparts,” White said. “Our Culinary Innovation Center under Chef Carlos Acevedo will allow us to really fine-tune the processes for the best consumer experience.”

White noted that significant time savings and value can be found in c-store classics like the roller grill, even for retailers working to transcend the c-store stereotype of offering low-quality food that sits there all day. Roller grill innovation is on the rise, with healthful items seeing a high profile, he said. He pointed to Tyson and Johnsonville as being notable in this area.

Other technologies may not strictly speed up preparation, but can improve processes behind the scenes. The easier the preparation is for employees, the quicker it will reach customers.

Ryan Yost, general manager for the print solutions division of Avery Dennison, pointed to equipment like the company's FreshMarx 9417+ solution, which tracks such information as expiration dates, nutrition information and recipe ingredients to ensure proper food preparation.

“Streamlining the process of serving customers quickly with foods that are continually evolving has more to do with organization than anything else,” Yost said. “The creation of the dishes originates in the corporate kitchen, of course, but bringing that to the shelf has everything to do with ease of use and standardization to ensure consistency and freshness.”



Industry experts agree that overall, as consumers have become more accepting of c-store foodservice as an appealing option, they have also grown more willing to wait for their orders — but there is a limit, which varies by daypart and by customer.

“Guests will wait for the right freshness, taste and quality, but why should they?” asked White. “I would say the order to checkout timeline should be limited to three to 10 minutes, based on complexity.”

Krebs concurs, citing an average window of four to five minutes at Rutter’s, with some products able to be ready in two minutes and others in six or seven minutes.

Retailers must be flexible and adjust their staffing and offerings based on daypart and an understanding of customers’ needs at different times of the day.

Individual personalities matter, too. Krebs describes two types of morning customers:



**Associate training is an integral part of preparing fresh items fast.**

the type who always builds time to stop for breakfast into their morning routine vs. the type who is continually running five minutes late and will never account for that time. The latter will opt for items in the hot-hold case no matter how delicious a made-to-order product might be.

Lunchtime is particularly challenging for c-stores not just because of the increased foot traffic, but also because most lunch hour customers are pressed for time and can’t afford a lengthy wait before they must get back to work.

On the other hand, dinnertime customers are typically more able to wait, which allows retailers to feature items in this daypart that take more prep time.

Depending on a store’s market and menu, there are countless ways to balance fresh and fast. An operator will be most successful after deciding what’s best for their operation and then following through every day. When c-stores show they can be consistent with their operation, customers are able to trust them and will make their dining decisions with that in mind.

“There is a balance but, at the same time, you can educate your customer to wait a little longer for quality,” Krebs said. **CSN**



**Roller grill innovation is on the rise, particularly healthful items.**