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Innovation is in the Eye of the Beholder

The term “innovative” was thrown around quite a bit throughout The NAFEM Show last month in Orlando, Fla. It was applied to anything from robotic arms to pizza ovens to hot fridges. The term also covered automated salad dispensers, induction burners, speed ovens and combi ovens. Opportunities with unattended food sales programs, expanded ventless technology and new shelving units were also touted as innovative.

Given this is an industry that still cooks with fire and cools with ice, so to speak, I began to question what really counts as innovative. Certainly, just because a product is new does not mean it’s innovative.

For my own sanity, here are some parameters that outline what I feel can make a product innovative. An innovative product:

- **Does more with less.** Can the operator generate more output with less labor? Produce more menu items in less space? Does it lead to more capacity for less dollars?
- **Increases accessibility to food.** Does the innovative product allow the operator to expand its reach? That could be through ease-of-payment, ease-of-placement, reduced footprint in a remote location or it could be ways to provide those in need or suffering through food insecurity with an avenue to receive safe food. (Think food waste reduction and repurposing.)
- **Provides an opportunity to entice people to eat healthier.** We all talk a healthier game than we eat. In other words, I do not believe that we need to scream, “EAT HEALTHIER” at every turn. However, I do believe that we do have the opportunity to impact the

health of the community by how we prepare, cook and serve food. Further, Gen Z (and Gen Alpha behind them) will ask for more transparency and authenticity in what they eat. In the age of the flexitarian diner, innovative products allow the operator to showcase fresh food and permit more on-site preparation and/or “finishing” of menu items.

- **Maximizes operational flexibility.** Innovation shows through in items that do more than one thing well. A cooler that can also be a freezer. Serving equipment that allows for hot, cold or frozen food presentation depending on the daypart, menu and more. Can it go vertical? Can we hide it in a cabinet or credenza? Operators want to preserve food, transport food and store food in one vessel, too.
- **Impacts the human experience.** This is, of course, more nebulous than the previous points. I would argue that it is the most important point and the place that we can all be innovative. This is not a product-centric call for innovation. This is a people-centric approach to innovation. Within our firm, we speak about taking care of each other and, together, taking care of our clients and their customers. Let’s all look for innovative ways to promote healthy engagement within our organizations, within our own sphere of influence, and within our industry. When we create space for our own folks to thrive, the innovation, collaboration, and creativity will follow. The products we produce, the services we provide, and the solutions we offer will be better and more innovative every time.

There’s plenty of intriguing pieces of equipment on the market today.

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