

FUTURE OF SCHOOL KITCHENS

TIGHT BUDGETS, THE SEARCH FOR ENERGY SAVINGS AND CHANGES IN THE FOOD AND STYLE OF FEEDING AVAILABLE IN SCHOOLS COULD LEAVE THE KITCHEN OF THE FUTURE LOOKING RATHER DIFFERENT TO THAT OF TODAY. INDUSTRY CONSULTANT **RICHARD WEDGBURY** OFFERS HIS VIEW



Ten years ago local authority school caterers were telling us that energy costs per meal were 8p-10p. That has probably doubled now, although almost no kitchen in the UK education sector has set up separate metering of gas and electricity for the catering department so the costs have to be estimated.

It means, though, that a school with 1,000 pupils and 150 staff would have an annual energy bill of £40,250: a not insubstantial amount. Modern catering can offer a 6% saving on energy consumption with CO2 emissions also significantly reduced.

Gas has always been the preferred fuel for chefs as it is more immediately responsive. The kitchen of the future is likely to be fuelled by electricity, as gas supplies are now getting more unreliable due to both political and supply uncertainty.

This will provide benefits to kitchen costs of the future as the high cost ventilation systems that gas supply requires will be dramatically reduced. It is now possible to filter out much of the cooking effects with extraction systems

fitted to individual ovens etc.

Likewise carbon monoxide, which is the by product of burning gas, will be eliminated saving catering staff from across the country from head aches and in some case flu like symptoms which occur when they suffer carbon monoxide poisoning due to poorly maintained extraction.

The latest ovens, fryers, refrigeration, dishwashers and other equipment is now computer controlled and this combined with high yield cookery techniques can lead to both labour and space savings. Computer controlled cookery can also provide much needed quality control by programming a particular recipe into the oven to ensure that who ever cooks it the end product will always be the same.

STEAMING AND FRYING

On a recent visit to Helsinki, in Finland I saw a school with 1,000 pupils show how the implementation of the kitchen of the future can cut labour costs significantly. In the UK we would expect to employ approximately 500 man hours to cook and serve 1,000 meals. They were serving fresh food, freshly cooked with only 170 man hours.

The kitchen was likewise only about one third the size of our traditional kitchen. Space is money and a kitchen with a smaller footprint you will create further savings by improved ergonomics (less walking about) and less to clean.

The post Jamie Oliver world we inhabit has now seriously questioned the need to deep fry food in our schools. Best practice suggests using this equipment only once a week. Given that schools only operate about 36 weeks a year this makes the purchase of such equipment truly questionable.

Steaming and frying can be done to high standard using the latest combi ovens and they can be by two computerised, tilting, stirring, boiling kettles.

Apart from a small hob to make sauces, gravy, etc, the remainder of the equipment

requirements are for sufficient stainless steel work tops, refrigeration and dishwashing.

In fact, that was the inventory for the Helsinki school. This small footprint kitchen achieves its high labour productivity by having two identical servery counters which are self-help, with two queues of pupils on each counter.

Further labour savings are achieved by the use of a fully automated dishwashing system which is fed by an electric conveyor belt. Pupils all clear to this point and perform all the filling duties that catering staff would normally perform.

The Helsinki kitchen cost about £190,000 but savings in energy cost and the large reduction in labour cost could very quickly be recouped. It is also possible to explore ways to finance this equipment by paying for it over the life of the equipment. It is difficult to argue how a school could afford not to explore this very attractive financial package.

Since Jamie Oliver, the cost of producing a meal in the maintained sector has risen to about £1.87 and the most efficient independent schools are producing meals at around the £2 mark. Both meal costs are for catering operational cost and do not include any utility costs, equipment maintenance, deep clean cost or insurance.

The much reduced labour cost applied to our English model would reduce the maintained school meal cost to approximately £1.20. On top of this there is the additional saving in utility costs mentioned earlier.

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