

Understanding Snack Equipment

This is the lightweight equipment that can perform a heavyweight performance in a wide range of catering operations, from cafes and pubs to hotel restaurants. Snacks are by definition a light bite, but business can be frequent and busy, so using anything less than commercial equipment means that it will not perform or last.

Toasters

One of the most commonly used items of snack equipment and one of the most heavily used. For this reason alone buying anything other than commercial specification is pointless. Commercial toasters are built to withstand prolonged heavy use with heavy-duty elements unlike domestic toasters, which often toast unevenly, will have no spare parts available and the toaster is unlikely to have the versatility to cook toasted sandwiches, a very lucrative revenue opportunity.

The peak demand time for toast is around breakfast and for hotels this will usually be focused into a tight window around 7.30am to 8.30am or for staff restaurants and cafes 8.30am to 9.30am. The size and type of toaster needs to be able to cope with that peak demand as breakfast is seldom a leisurely affair.

The fastest toasting production comes from conveyor toasters, which is what hotels need to deliver toast quickly and hot. Conveyor toasters are available as single slice belts, double, treble or even wider for really high toast production. Output can be awesome, with up to 400 slices an hour from a single conveyor belt.

Features to look for include an adjustable belt speed and heat setting, the facility to toast bread buns or muffins if needed and a toast rack on top of the unit for holding the toast warm.

Pop-up toasters can still produce lots of toast through having more than the traditional two slots. Pop-up toasters are available with up to 12 slots, which in output per hour is not far behind a single-belt conveyor toaster.

If toasted sandwiches are on the menu, it's possible buy toasters with an extra wide slot and a sandwich clamp for making toasted sandwiches or toasters with extra wide slots for toasting bread buns or muffins. A useful variation for hotels where the breakfast is self-service is to have a four-slot toaster where two slots are independently controlled, allowing two customers to use the toaster at the same time.

Bains marie

Often incorporated into modular island cooking suites or serveries, bains marie are also available as stand alone individual units usually holding between one to four flush-fitting tubs. The name comes from a French housekeeper called Marie who wanting to keep her master's food hot until he came home so sat small pans in bigger pans of hot water to keep the food hot. The French word for bath is bain, hence bain marie.

They can powered by LPG, which is useful for outside catering situations, but most are electric. There are two types, wet heat and dry heat. Both types will have thermostatic and adjustable heat controls with a maximum temperature of 90 deg C to avoid either the product boiling or burning or in the case of a water bath bain marie, the water boiling dry. Water bath models should have a drain tap to allow for emptying and thorough cleaning at the end of a service session. It also possible to get bain maries that are refrigerated for holding cold food safely.

Potato ovens

Baked potatoes are a British institution and while they can be cooked back of house and held in a warming cupboard, the popular way is to have a counter-top potato oven which acts as a cooker, a holding cabinet and a merchandiser. Most are made using enamelled cast iron to give that traditional appearance.

The cooking is done on racks using gas or electric convection. The holding drawer or cabinet should be matched to the cooking capacity, so an oven that can cook 30 potatoes in an hour has a holding drawer that can also take 30 potatoes to ensure a cooking and delivery cycle.

The normal way to operate them is for the first batch to go into the cooker one hour before service commences, then those stored for sale and a fresh batch loaded into the oven. If demand is high, extra potatoes can be cooked in a kitchen in the oven and led into the holding drawer while the potatoes in the oven are cooking.

An additional feature that is available is to have the oven with a built-on bain marie to hold toppings such as baked beans or curry sauce or a refrigerated bain marie for holding grated cheese and coleslaw. A flat surface around the bain marie makes for a cutting and topping work station. It is also possible to get merchandising accessories such as menu boards setting out prices and toppings available.

Hot dogs

Hot dogs are ready cooked and come in ambient tins or tubs, but need heating. There are three ways of heating the sausages: on a roller grill, in a hot dog steamer or in hot water. Hot water is not recommended as it leeches out the flavour and seasoning from the sausage.

Hot dog steamers are a type of table-top bain marie. The base has a heated water bath and suspended over it is an inner pan with water in which the sausages are held. The advantage of this double pan system is that the temperature of the sausages never rises above 75 deg C. Beyond that temperature there is the risk of the skins splitting, particularly with high-quality sausages which are using natural skins as opposed to synthetic. This style of hot dog machine tends to be where demand is heavy.

The best cooking theatre and merchandising comes from dog rollers where the customer can see the hot dogs rolling around. The heat comes from heating element running through the rollers, which can be gas heated, but more commonly is electric. Buying one with non-stick rollers prevents sticking, which can occur if the sausages get too hot. A useful accessory is a bun warmer, which can be sited underneath the roller to hold ready split finger rolls. Also very useful is a sneeze guard to maintain high standards of food hygiene.

For smaller operations, such as pubs or cafes an alternative theatre style of production is combined bread and dog warmers as a table-top, plug-in unit. The sausages are heated in a vertical heated glass container surrounded four heated spikes. The system is to cut off one end of a small baguette, spike it for a short while to heat the bread, then slide a hot sausage into the cavity made by the spike. For use with traditional finger rolls, an alternative bread warmer is a heated clamp. Both sausage warmers and bread warmers are available as separate units.

How to find out more about Snack Equipment

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