

Theatre Cooking

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Sony signs up the Varithek

■ Sony Europe Catering Manager Jeanette Branwhite has a stock of signs promoting the different offers from the Varithek front cooking unit.

From Bistro Bar to Omelettes, Wok, Noodles, Grill, Sizzling, TexMex, Breakfast to Hot Sticks, the signs highlight the offer of the day and help drive sales.

"Lunch breaks are getting shorter here," says Jeanette, "and most of our turnover is within a 30 minute period. The signage and the Varithek itself support what we are saying about our food offer – that it is all about fresh food, seasonal, locally sourced where possible. And, of course, the theatre of it all helps."

CH & Co has been the designated caterer at Sony for 18 years. Jeanette has been three years onsite and her team are the current holders of the 'Managed Unit of the Year Award', presented at the CH&Co Annual Conference. Front cooking was requested by Sony and duly included in CH's successful re-tender. There are 700 staff in the building, many from Asia and around 60% are women. Executive Chef Mike Brown is supported by a Chef de Partie and Sous Chef; a Commis is also joining, from nearby Brooklands College.

"There is no secret to cooking quickly and in front of the customer, but you have to do it well," says Jeanette. "Feedback is brilliant. The way people eat now is changing; the local Tesco at New Malden has a wok station, for example. The McDonalds approach has died a death...yes they

will eat burgers, but they want it fresh and grilled in front of them – not coming out of the kitchen on GN trays. On a Friday, for example, we can sell more fish through the Varithek than from the hot counter – we recently did 30 portions of Nile perch in 30 minutes! You get great smells coming off the Varithek; no greasy, frying smells...just the food. And I got a hug last week from one of the customers...about the duck. We

crisp up 45 confit legs on the Varithek, served with Hoisin sauce and egg noodles; it flew out and the customers love it.

"One of the biggest changes I have seen with the introduction of front cooking is that the ladies are now having main courses and no longer heading straight to the salad bar. Front cooking has brought the kitchen outside and it helps bring the staff out of themselves."

IMPROVED SALES MIX

Front cooking is also helping achieve a better sales mix. "Average spend is up by 30-50p when you are cooking a premium product in front of the customer."

Front of house food service counters and serveries were re-designed and



The theatre of front cooking helps communicate key messages about the food offer.

re-installed by Gloucester-based Space Catering, with the counters changed to accommodate the Varithek station. The cold and hot offers are now opposite each other and the salad bar moved to the centre to improve the flow.

Executive Chef Mike Brown adds, "The Varithek is a real asset. You need a well-balanced menu when front cooking; treat the front-cooked dish as Main Course 1, but have a strong Main Course 2 otherwise the front cooking will be too popular and hog all the limelight. Think menus differently!"

Sony Europe was the first major corporate client for CH&Co and this special relationship will reach its 21st anniversary within the contract – an amazing achievement!

UNIVERSITIES, SCHOOLS...

Everybody wants front cooking!

■ Jamie Jack, Head Chef in Hospitality Services at Edinburgh's **Herriot-Watt** University – also new to Varithek – said the unit was chosen: "To offer

flexibility and obviously add a bit of theatre. It is used for curries, stir fries, burgers – theatre cooking in general – and has received a very positive response.

Hospitality Services at Edinburgh's Herriot-Watt University

continued over





Universities, Schools... (cont)

"We sign it strongly because we are so busy here."

The **University of Warwick** now has five Rieber Varithek units. Mobile Varithek is used for functions, cooking hot canapés and Warwick Conferences have used it for a 'Hell's Kitchen' event, an exercise designed to take managers out of the classroom and put them under the spotlight. At University House there is usually one Varithek in the main restaurant, offering a theatre-cook menu.



Top right, Warwick University. Above left, and bottom right Bryanston School.



"BGL Rieber gave us a trial model and it proved to work extremely well; so well we bought it. Yes, it initially sounds expensive and you expect the quality to be there. It is. After delivery, the unit just plugs straight in and you can start cooking. It is simple and does its job," said Graham Crump, Executive Development Chef, Warwick Conferences.

Bryanston School, Dorset uses two Varithek mobile units and the school's servery system is based on Rieber's EST Ceran module, which



The JMCC Edinburgh.

can hold food and cook anything from fried eggs to noodles. The school catering contract is managed by Chartwells, Catering Manager is Mike Thorne: "We firmly believe theatre cooking is the way forward. We have two Rieber Varithek Front Cooking Systems which we use for stir fries, omelette bar, crepe bar and many other uses. We also have another eight service points using the Rieber Ceran hobs and hotplate, which can also be used for cooking." The Varithek section can serve 180 stir fry meals in 40 minutes.

JMCC – Pollock Halls of Residence, University of Edinburgh. The restaurant at the JMCC (John McIntyre Conference Centre) offers residential students self-service breakfast and dinner five days a week, with brunch and dinner served at weekends.

"Students are consumers," says Ian Macaulay, Assistant Director (Catering), "and where they choose to study involves a range of decisions, including accommodation and catering.

"The facilities here are designed primarily for the student but given our requirements to meet an increasing summer commercial market the specification is of a very high standard and benchmarked to other large business and industry contracts, thus we benefit from both markets."

The JMCC's catering service term-time usually runs with a sous chef, two chefs and three juniors, with chefs 'front cooking' in the theatre servery area. During the Edinburgh Fringe festival in August, the restaurant can serve up to 2,500 breakfasts daily, while during term-time the average is 1800-1900.

Communication is live front cooking

People love watching cooking...the TV is full of chefs and cooks creating dishes right in front of your eyes...so why not give the customer front cooking!



Raise awareness and expectations. Front cooking helps to sell the concept of freshly cooked food. Displaying the 'Dish of the Day' whets the appetite.

■ Cooking in front of customers raises awareness about your food offer.

Use it for starter dishes, main courses or desserts (ask us for our French Toast Recipe Using Brioche).

From simple fried eggs and bacon, to desserts such as crepes and pancakes – or main courses such as pan-seared tuna served with rice, fresh chopped chilli, Goan curry sauce and a garnish of fresh herbs – 'front cooking' or 'theatre-style' is all about *improving* communication with the customer.

Front cooking is used at all times of day by many types of caterer, highlighting that food is being 'cooked to order' and communicating key messages such as the use of all fresh ingredients and healthy eating options.

Placing cooking stations in the front of the restaurant or servery area can add significantly to the number of covers that can be served in one session,

helping to reduce pressure on the main kitchen facilities.

A key element is the chef or cook, who can explain and upsell the menu, make recommendations and help choose ingredients for the finished dish.

IT'S ALL ABOUT COMMUNICATION!

When diners can see the cooking experience, they know they can expect a quality meal.

For caterers who can expect a lunchtime 'rush' as staff pour out of the offices at 12.30 or 1pm, a front cooking station takes the heat out of queuing; people want to watch live cooking!

Front cooking increases the emphasis on your food service and – given the right balance of equipment – can add huge flexibility to the food offer.

If you've got it, flaunt it! Good signage spreads the word about what you are offering.

It's the Premier League for Varithek FC!

■ Front cooking has very much 'come home' to top-class football.

Just recently, Varithek front cooking units were installed at the **Hilton at St George's Park**, Burton upon Trent, adjacent to the home of English football development, featuring a world-class training facility and a national centre for sports medicine and science.

Set in the National Forest, in 330 acres of landscaped parkland, the centre will be the training base for the 24 England football teams.

Handling the £1m installation of new kitchen facilities at the Hilton St George's Park was Lee Williams, from Sawston, Cambridge, based Intracat. "We selected BGL Rieber for the front of house ventilated cooking station set into the main buffet counter, along with Metos bespoke warewashing equipment. BGL Rieber's understanding of such systems was crucial to their successful equipment installation," said Lee.

Hilton has also opened **The Hilton London Wembley** adjacent to Wembley Stadium and the forthcoming London Designer Outlet. With a Great British theme at its heart, it features furniture and exclusive artwork by British artists and designers throughout.

But the front cooking is German-made Varithek!



'Ready, Steady, Cook!' corporate training and entertaining events at Hilton Docklands.

Executive chef at the £70 million hotel is Phillip Clarke: "It's the first time I have used the Varithek for front cooking. We use the induction griddle for breakfast omelettes and fried eggs; poached eggs we do in a saucepan on the hob. For carvery service, it sits alongside the roast to serve gravy or sauces. We have also run barbecues from it, cooking kebabs and we also use it for stir fries.



The hotel has been busy ever since opening; the customers like it and the interaction with the chefs. I like it because it saves running in and out of the back kitchen all the time!"

• **Hilton Hotels** – have also used Varithek units for 'Ready, Steady, Cook!' corporate training and entertaining events at Hilton Docklands.

SELF VENTILATING

Varithek was also installed at **Manchester City** for the refurbishment of 'Legends Lounge' hospitality area by Caterware.

Varithek solved a crucial ventilation issue. The Club wanted a front of house cooking station for stir-fry's and to cater for its vibrant conference business including breakfast meetings and functions on non-match days.

However, explains Caterware Managing Director Mark Drazen, "A conventional extract system was a non-starter due to site layout restrictions and potential interference with the existing air conditioning systems. The self-ventilation system on Rieber's Varithek solved the problem."



Refurbishment of Manchester City's 'Legends Lounge'.

The Hilton at St George's Park, Burton upon Trent.

New front cooking solution for Ofgem

■ It was a desire to develop a true front cooking experience for its customers that led independent contract caterer Bartlett Mitchell to revamp its facilities at the Office of the Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) headquarters at Millbank, London.

Calling on Ruislip-based catering equipment installers WilcoxBurchmore for assistance, there was already an open kitchen situation where customers could have stir-fries cooked to order, but it was by no means the ideal set-up.

Although orders could be placed directly with the chef at an open counter, the actual stir-frying took place at a gas-powered cooking line along the back wall, denying the customer the chance to fully engage in the preparation of their dish.

Armed with a vision of a cooking station that would strike a balance between improving service levels and increasing energy efficiency, WilcoxBurchmore set about creating a tailor-made lunchtime dining solution within the existing footprint.

Cathy Wilcox, director of the company, worked closely with the caterers to formulate and implement a bespoke design that best answered the needs of the catering staff and the demands of the customers, while at the same time slashing energy use. She also had to bear in mind that with about 1,000 people on site, the nine-strong catering team is tasked with feeding between 500 and 600 customers in the two-hour lunch break on a daily basis.

With WilcoxBurchmore identifying induction as the way forward, the section was equipped with a Varithek front-of-house induction cooking system from BGL Rieber, built into an attractive granite-topped servery.

The self-ventilating unit requires no canopy and features interchangeable slot-in modules for wok cooking, pan work and direct cooking. "The



Story and photos courtesy of Catering Insight.



Varithek is a really nice piece of kit as it has different cooking mediums — it has got induction and a griddle," says Wilcox. "They were looking for design innovation in terms of a solution to the queues they had, but also in providing a different meal experience."

VIEW FROM THE OPERATOR

As the body that regulates electricity and gas markets in Great Britain, Ofgem understandably has to take a rather firm stance on internal power consumption. So when it came to refurbishing its staff food facility, the immediate priority was to assess how it could provide a service in the most sustainable way.

Jim Beaver, contracts manager for Ofgem, says energy efficiency was the most important factor when selecting new catering equipment. "We have government targets for the overall reductions in energy use we have to achieve," he says. "The catering operation runs for two hours solid every day all week; that adds up to a lot of hours over the course of a year and makes a significant impact on energy use. Any kit that comes into the building has to be as energy efficient as it can be."

Additionally, while the kit needs to consume the least amount of power practically possible, it also has to stand up to the rigours of high daily usage during peak dining periods. "One of our key performance indicators is the queuing time for the customer from entering to leaving with their food. It must be no longer than four minutes," he reveals. "It is now a much quicker turnaround and besides halving the time of serving customers, the interaction between them and the chef is now there."

The future of cooking is in front of you!

■ 'Plug in and go' self-ventilating, fully mobile front of house cooking system.

Wok fry, griddle, boil, keep food hot – all with no need for a ventilation canopy!

Varithek units can hold two or three GN-sized cooking modules which can be interchanged in minutes to meet individual requirements.

Ventilation can draw to the back, making it suitable for siting against a back wall; or it can draw to the sides, suitable for open air and mobile applications.

Varithek and Rieber EST hobs can also be built into foodservice



Varithek installed by C&C Catering Equipment at the UK HQ of Deloitte; foodservice facilities designed by Tricon.

counters and serveries – an ideal candidate for retro-fitting – giving new life to old equipment! And with the optional ACS self-ventilation system there is no need for an overhead ventilation canopy.

If you would like a demonstration or further information including reference sites nearby, please get in touch.

Below, different cooking options simply slot in. Varithek Buffet offers a larger servery unit.



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