



MICROWAVES & LIGHT EQUIPMENT FEATURE

CARE HOME CATERING – WINTER 2014

Please attributes any quotes to Kris Brearley, Sales Director, RH Hall

- ***What does the latest generation of microwave ovens offer the Care Home caterer?***

Today's microwave ovens are sophisticated, yet easy to use and produce excellent cooking results in a fraction of the time it takes to cook foods conventionally and their versatility is under estimated. Many foods and dishes can be cooked very, very well in a microwave oven: cakes, sauces, meat, fish, vegetables, fruit, pasta, rice, eggs and jams can all be cooked with great results – you can even roast a chicken in one, but you won't get a crispy, brown skin! However, a duck will cook well because of the amount of fat naturally found under the skin of the meat.

Meat and pastry products are often better cooked conventionally then re-heated in a microwave oven, but with the versatile combination microwave ovens available, these types of foods can be cooked with microwave technology with excellent results.

Microwaves are essential for speed of service – considerably faster than conventional ovens and they also allow a caterer to offer a wider choice of menu. Their versatility also provides advantages and the leading brands are developing models with new features and functionality in response to customers looking for product innovation, so they can be easily operated from a de-skilled base.

Microwaves are very energy efficient too. In fact, when cooking vegetables they use three times less energy than that of a gas hob. Their footprint is also smaller than conventional ovens, great where space is at a premium.

Cooking with a microwave is greatly under-rated. There is a great deal of diversity of dishes that can be prepared quickly and easily from fresh ingredients. Not only that, but more nutrients are retained in microwave cooked food than by any other cooking method. In fact, correctly cooked vegetables contain 85% of their original vitamin content, when boiled they often contain none! A great benefit especially for the elderly where they would only need to eat a little to get more of the vitamins they need.

The levels of microwave cooking performance are continually being enhanced too by new technologies: the development of electronic controls and pre-set programmes are allowing for dishes to be created with even faster, more refined and sophisticated cooking results.

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- ***What features are going to be most important/of greatest value in the care home kitchen?***

If a caterer is looking to invest in new microwaves, they should look at models with variable power, as this will allow more dense food products to be reheated/cooked slower allowing for the conduction of heat to work through to the middle to avoid an overcooked outside and raw centre! The use of variable power works in the same way as your hob and gives you the exact control you need to create speed yet a quality cooked/reheat result.

A further feature to look for is stage cooking. This allows an operator to program in a series of different defrost /cook / reheat tasks to allow a complete process to be carried out at the press of a button. For example, it is possible to defrost then cook and keep warm ready for serve up all in one go. Most leading brand models now have this function as standard.

Depending on the use of the microwave and the dishes/menu offered, a combination microwave oven may be a good addition – it is likely that most caterers have a need for reheat, defrost and cooking tasks and in this case, it is recommended that both a combination microwave oven and a microwave oven be both purchased. A combination microwave oven will not replace the need for microwave oven and vice versa. These two types of oven work extremely well in tandem together. For example, whilst reheating /cooking pastry products using the combination model the ordinary microwave is available for all your straightforward reheat/defrost requirements.

The features available today allow a choice of manual and programmable models and some even allow the chef to enter the detailed names of individual dishes and daily/weekly specials (as with the Maestrowave Combi Chef 7). As the name suggests, the Combi Chef 7 is able to operate in a verity and combination of modes making it the most flexible, efficient and easy to use oven yet! If a caterer wants to bake, roast, grill, steam, defrost, regenerate, microwave, boil or simply keep food warm this is the oven that can do it all.

Despite all the features, understanding is still the key to success with microwave cooking. To maximise usage of a microwave effectively, I think it is paramount that all cooks / caterers are educated as to the full potential of their unit and also be receptive to implementing the alternative cooking techniques required and then they'll be able to fully appreciate the great results that are possible and implement its use more and more in the meals produced by their kitchen.

By fully understanding their microwave and getting the right techniques for each type of food, succulent meat, poultry and fish together with perfectly cooked vegetables that retain taste, texture and nutritive value are all possible. Many of the techniques used in microwave cooking are the same as used in conventional cooking, but with a few minor adjustments.

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- ***What are the other items of light equipment that no care home kitchen should be without, and what should the care caterer consider when investing in new items of equipment such as blenders, mixers, food processors, kettles, toasters, Panini grills, soup servers, juicers, etc?***

It really can be a mine field to decide the best equipment to choose out of the hundreds of brands and variations of equipment out there in the market. It really depends on the type of operation, the numbers to cater for and staffing levels – including whether a chef is in situ or whether the home has a basic catering kitchen/operation. The amount of space available in the home's kitchen is also a factor to carefully consider. Ideally as much of the kit a caterer has should be used daily, although obviously it's not always the case, but there's no point in having lots of individual pieces of kit if they are going to sit on a shelf for the majority of the time! Each piece of kit has to earn its keep and no caterer can afford to have kit lying around under-utilised. Caterers should assess their real needs in line with current and future menu requirements and numbers to cater for too.

Complementary light equipment can take the burden off the prime cooking areas/equipment. There are menu items that can be quickly prepared and served purely using specific pieces of light equipment, this can help spread the workload across the catering staff and increase the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the mealtime service.

Depending on choice, good light catering equipment will be able to provide the complete service up to a certain threshold – if the numbers are split into smaller dining groups due to space restrictions then the need for larger cooking appliances can be limited or even removed.

Energy costs are also a consideration in having various pieces of light catering equipment. Energy costs are rising and will continue to do so. Caterers seriously need to look at running and whole life costs of equipment before they choose them. By choosing the correct specification, quality and brand, coupled with regular maintenance of equipment, there is no reason equipment should not last for 5/10 plus years. Choice of equipment should be based on the long term, not short term too!

Many cheaper imports are flooding into the UK and it can be tempting to go down this route, but unknowingly to many, a lot of this equipment doesn't have any product conformity standards and the back-up of a full warranty. Go for a well-known brand - guaranteed quality doesn't cost you more! Regardless of size or duty, sturdy manufacture is a 'must' and this is what you get by choosing a well-known brand - anything else won't perform or last. Choose a leading brand with an established reputation for good quality, durability and reliability. These brands usually build in great operational features too, which should always be considered.

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For those homes with or without a chef and with limited space, I would suggest that a Combination microwave oven (such as the Maestrowave Combi Chef 7) which is an extremely versatile unit on a small footprint that can perform a number of multiple tasks in one easy to use unit is an essential all round piece of equipment to have in any kitchen. The Combi Chef can be used as a complementary or back-up to other prime cooking equipment. Couple this with the addition of an induction hob for further instant heat plus certain specific complementary pieces such as soup kettles for example, that can perform individual tasks with ease can all be essential depending on the type of menu offering.

Specific pieces of equipment can be chosen to accommodate particular food types and capacities determined by throughput – a thorough audit of what is needed will help maximize equipment usage and deliver maximum nutritional values.

For those homes that have a de-skilled catering base, or for those that want to offer additional flexibility to their operations, the revolutionary iWave® Plated Meals System could be an ideal solution.

Meal delivery service can be dramatically improved, whilst cutting food wastage and energy costs with the unique, fully automated iWave® ‘straight to plate’ foodservice solution. Suitable for chilled, frozen and ambient foods, it’s very economical to run with an eco-friendly carbon footprint, providing a saving of up to 70% over conventional foodservice methods.

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