



## Chicken or Pizza: Which Will Sell Best in Your Stores?

By Maureen Azzato

### CALL TO ACTION: Foodservice 101

- Start with hot foods for breakfast and lunch before bridging into dinner.
- Take it to the next level by bringing in someone who knows the food industry. Good professionals are better at perfecting what entrepreneurs start.
- Think about how you can use chicken as an ingredient across all the dayparts, from breakfast and snacks to dinner.
- Study your market and ask customers what they want before adding any hot food program.
- Avoid handling any raw protein in the store.

Convenience store operators that have mastered the foodservice basics — including hot and cold dispensed beverages, grab-and-go foods and perhaps even customized cold sandwiches and salads — may be ready to take on hot prepared foods. But where should you begin?

Hot breakfast sandwiches are the first logical step since most convenience store operators with strong coffee programs have busy stores in the morning with the opportunity to build incremental sales. Hot finger foods and snack items, such as jalapeño bites, macaroni and cheese bites and mozzarella sticks, can also help operators build credibility in the hot food segment. (For more in-depth coverage on hot snacks, see “Successful Menu Offerings for the Snacking Daypart” in last month’s issue.)

The next logical step is to look at other typically successful convenience store programs, including fried or baked chicken and perhaps even pizza depending on the local competition and the demands of your customer base, according to the *Convenience Store News* How To Crew. But keep in mind adding hot food increases the complexity and costs of operations and should be carefully considered before being rolled out.

“The first thing I would evaluate is sales and profits from the current food

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being sold,” said one retailer member of the How To Crew. “If sales are strong and other food programs are being run correctly, it could be a great indication the store is ready to add more food complexity. If operations struggle to manage coffee and fountain, they will really struggle with hot foods.”

Labor, store size and equipment needs are the three biggest challenges hot food programs present to c-store operators, this retailer added. “Labor can eat up all the profits if the sales start off slow. If you already have the equipment to do breakfast and lunch, that will make it a lot easier to jump into [hot food programs]. Most of the equipment should be interchangeable and allow you to expand into hot foods.”

### DOING CHICKEN RIGHT

Before determining which type of hot foods should be added, operators should fully explore if branded franchise programs or proprietary offerings better suit their operations and the marketplace.

“Doing fried chicken in the South, for example, where it’s practically a religion, can be far more challenging than in areas where it’s less of a staple,” noted How To Crew expert Mathew Mandeltort, corporate foodservice manager for convenience distributor Eby-Brown Co. “It’s equally important to understand the key purchase drivers and attributes of a category.”

How To Crew members, however, are equally divided

on the best direction a hot food program should take in convenience stores given the choice between chicken and pizza. While some say pizza is easier, others say chicken is more versatile and offers more menu options.

Indeed, 75 percent of consumers eat pizza twice a month or more often, and consumers report an average of 3.4 pizza

occasions per month, according to Technomic’s *2014 Pizza Consumer Trend Report*. Meanwhile, consumers eat chicken an average of 12 times a month and the protein ingredient can be used to make a multitude of menu items from barbecue, baked and fried chicken, to chicken fingers, chicken wings, popcorn chicken, hot chicken sandwiches, and the list goes on.

“All things being equal, I think a chicken program would be the way to go because it is so ubiquitous,” Mandeltort said, noting that 89 percent of people consume chicken during a two-week period, and 70 percent of consumers ate chicken from a foodservice establishment with an average of 2.4 meals or snacks in a two-week period. “From an operational standpoint, fried chicken is probably easier to do and it certainly holds better than pizza over time.”

Operators would have to invest in fryers to execute a fried chicken program if they do not have them already, “but if you are going to do a hot food program that translates across dayparts, in for a penny, in for a pound,” Mandeltort added.

Both Mandeltort and fellow How To Crew expert Larry Miller of Miller Management & Consulting Services pointed to many “ready to fry” quality chicken products available that make it easier for retailers to make fried chicken well and safely, eliminating the need to bring any raw chicken into the stores or maintain breeding stations, which increases the chances of cross-contamination. “Then it just becomes a question of maintaining and operating your fryers properly, and cooking the chicken and

### CALL TO ACTION: Foodservice 201

- Start with stores that have high volume and little competition. Having strong stores at the beginning of a program can greatly help the rollout later on.
- Select programs to execute first that leverage existing in-store foodservice equipment in order to contain costs, if possible.
- Consider all the options, including a branded program, for pizza and/or fried chicken.



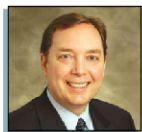
“All things being equal, I think a chicken program would be the way to go because it is so ubiquitous.”

— Mathew Mandeltort, Eby-Brown Co.



“Ground beef, ham and other [pizza] varieties like Hawaiian chicken, white garlic sauce and other types of specialty pizzas can be a very successful draw.”

— Larry Miller, Miller Management & Consulting Services



“What a [retailer] brings to the offer is as important as the offer selected.”

— Ed Burcher, Burcher Consulting

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## CALL TO ACTION: Foodservice 301

- Select high-quality food. Customers will pay a higher retail in c-stores, and quality is one thing they will come back for.
- Invest in the right equipment to execute a pizza program so you can effectively compete with neighborhood pizzerias and new fast-casual pizza chains.

and flash frozen so it goes from freezer to fryer without any of the mess and work of dealing with raw chicken. “Handling and dealing with raw chicken can produce much higher margins than purchasing chicken that is IQF, but the food safety issues with raw poultry and potential cross-contamination

merchandising it properly,” Mandeltort said.




Individually quick frozen (IQF) chicken has made it much easier for operators to get into the chicken business, according to Miller, because it is available in many different preparations. The chicken is typically pre-cut, pre-marinated and even pre-breaded,

that can occur in small areas, like you find in many c-stores, can be difficult to deal with,” he said. “Salmonella and many other foodborne illnesses are traced back to contamination associated with the handling of raw proteins.”

There are also many turnkey chicken programs for operators to consider such as Chester’s International, Krispy Krunchy and Broaster Chicken, which all “take the ‘scary’ out of a fresh chicken program,” Miller said. “They have the experience, systems and background to make certain that the operators do it the right way all the way through packaging.”

The other beauty of chicken is it has application in every daypart — breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, Mandeltort said, noting few operators have optimized chicken as a breakfast offering. While chicken at dinner and lunch are the most popular, 18- to 34-year-olds are more frequently selecting chicken for breakfast and snacks vs. their older counterparts, according to Technomic research.

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## MAD FOR PIZZA

Like chicken, there are many options for operators to execute pizza that do not require from-scratch preparation or hand-stretched dough. “Suppliers have a number of formats available — par-baked crusts, pre-proofed crusts, fully-assembled and fully-cooked crusts — that make it easier for operators to select the product type that fits with their current equipment,” according to How To Crew expert Tim Powell of Think Marketing.

Fresh, quality toppings and flavor are the key attributes consumers seek in a pizza pie, 47 percent of which are purchased for carry out and 33 percent for delivery, according to Technomic.

“While having a chef behind the counter hand-stretching the dough by twirling it over the head and providing theatre can make your program stand out from the crowd, the reality is most folks are looking for a high-quality pie with natural mozzarella cheese, a great-tasting sauce and fresh toppings like tomatoes, mushrooms, onions, olives, peppers and

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high-quality pepperoni and sausage, and other local favorite proteins,” said Miller. “Ground beef, ham and other varieties like Hawaiian chicken, white garlic sauce, and other types of specialty pizzas can

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be a very successful draw.”

Fresh toppings are, in fact, the most important element of a pizza as noted by 84 percent of consumers, according to Technomic

research. “Rich and flavorful sauce” and “cheese flavor,” which tied for second place, were mentioned by 78 percent of consumers polled. Next on the list in terms of importance is

dough or crust texture/consistency and dough/crust flavor. The variety of toppings offered has moved up in importance, noted by 74 percent of consumers, up from 70 percent in 2012. But today’s discerning consumer also wants to know how the pizza is made, with 45 percent saying pizza cooked in a brick oven tastes better than pizza cooked in an electric oven, and 32 percent saying the same for wood-fired pizza.

“So, if you want to deliver a pizza that people are going to want to eat, are you willing to build and bake one the right way? You need to check to see if you have the operational capability to pull off the program,” Mandeltort said. “Do you have room for additional equipment? Additional inventory? You also need to consider how the marketplace is evolving. You may be all gung-ho to do a pizza program, but you need to realize that the fast-growing fast-casual pizza segment is changing how people view pizza.

“Customization, speed of service and an affordable price point are the core attributes of the newest fast-casual pizza concepts,” Mandeltort pointed out. “Made-to-order preparations, a wide variety of ingredients and artisanal quality typify the menu. Can your pizza do that?”

Whether c-store operators choose chicken or pizza, the offering must attract and retain customers, according to How To Crew expert Ed Burcher of Burcher Consulting.

“There are a lot of alternatives in the food-to-go category and what a [retailer] brings to the offer is as important as the offer selected,” he said. Importantly, “what are the ways the convenience store operator is going to bring unique value to the customer for the menu items served?” **CSN**



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