



ED BURCHER

is the president of Burcher Consulting, a foodservice and c-store consulting firm focused on creating and delivering world-class food offerings, operational improvements and store makeovers. Contact Ed at 289.681.6378 or ed@burcherconsulting.com.

You Say Tomato, I Say Heirloom

I recently attended FARE in Chicago and heard speakers talk about innovation and the various forms it can take. I heard examples from not only the c-store industry, but also from restaurant and institutional foodservice businesses. There were several points mentioned across these businesses that, combined, could deliver an “a-ha” moment for your food business.

That is: It is not just innovation, but having the right innovation. And second, for it to matter, the right innovation must be used and implemented well, not as innovation for innovation’s sake.

So what does this have to do with tomatoes?

The Right Choice

While I now make my home in Oakville, Ontario, I lived most of my life in southern New Jersey. I spent my weekends and summers at the Jersey shore as a “kitchen rat” in many types of restaurants. (And no, I don’t know Snooki!) I worked in almost every kind of place: a Greek diner, a pancake house, a pub as a short-order cook, and a fine dining establishment as a prep cook.

Back then, there were no choices of tomatoes, either for restaurants or the home. They were either red or not ripe. And these topped the ubiquitous garden salad with iceberg lettuce that was soaked in cold water, decorated with carrots and red cabbage. On good days, the occasional Jersey tomato made its way to the menu from someone’s garden or the farmer’s market, but usually just the 4-by-6-size tomatoes, and red.

Contrast that to today, when there are

dozens—if not hundreds—of varieties and types, from beefsteak to heirloom, Cherokee purple to black truffle, tigerella to green zebra. We are now accustomed to having these choices, without noticing how far we have come in not only our expectations of food in general, but also in something as simple and specific as the tomato.



That heirloom tomato will pair well with a mozzarella and basil salad. The tried-and-true beefsteak is right for a Panini.

The point of all this? There is not one right tomato. None is better than another. There is a use and application for each kind. It depends on what you are using it for, what type of restaurant, the style of the menu and the expectations of the guest.

Thirty years ago, one type of tomato was enough. But with the sophistication of our palates, the changing demographics and the move to fresher ingredients, one choice does not suffice, or even fit all of the restaurant types and menus.

The same is true for a foodservice offer. What is right for one company, area or region is not right for another. You need

to do your homework to not only improve your success in developing an offer, but to also avoid selecting the wrong idea or program that you saw at a show or another company. Even the roller grill has moved to more than hot dogs.

Where to Start

There are some simple steps you can take to understand, define and articulate what type of offer to develop.

First, be realistic and honest with your capabilities, commitment and store types to deliver the offer you want.

Second, know your target guests and be familiar with their needs and wants. It may have been good to use your intuition or “gut instinct” years ago, but today it’s easy—and necessary—to obtain the facts and data needed to support your feelings. The cost of being wrong on a store design or program launch can dwarf any potential profits.

Last, make sure your store, the environment and the staff support this direction. The décor and support is as important to the believability of the offer.

Develop your offer with these ideas in mind and as the starting point for your food program. You may be able to deliver a good grab-and-go offer because of your logistics, facilities and staff. Or you could launch a Panini program if the demographics and your infrastructure can support it. It really depends!

And just like tomatoes, there is no right offer for all stores. It has to be right for you. It could be a Yellow Brandywine or a Moneymaker. It is simply a question of fit. ■