



Efficiency in Action

Pre-cooked foods can help operators succeed in the back-of-house. BY DAVINA VAN BUREN

IN RECENT YEARS, the front-of-house received a lot of attention. The implementation of technologies that enabled online and self-serve ordering, mobile apps, curbside pickup, and delivery required restaurant operators to make significant investments in these consumer-facing areas.

Back-of-house efficiency is equally essential for a restaurant to run efficiently—but challenges such as staffing shortages and rising

product costs present constant challenges. Restaurant operators must continuously seek new, innovative solutions to streamline back-of-house processes while maintaining quality and profitability.

"These days with staffing issues and product costs, operators must look at all options to help their back-of-house run efficiently and cost-effectively," says Matt Johnson, senior associate brand manager at **Smithfield Foods**.



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“With the right pre-cooked products you are cutting all the back of house complexity.”

One cost-saving strategy that has gained traction in recent years is the use of pre-cooked products. While some may view fully cooked items as compromising on freshness or authenticity, when used strategically, they can significantly contribute to reducing labor and product costs without sacrificing taste or quality.

Pre-pandemic, many restaurants had more extensive menus with a multitude of scratch-made items. The current reality, however, is that high employee turnover can make it difficult to maintain consistency. This has resulted in an increase in restaurants using the “speed scratch” method of cooking, which blends prepared food products with house-made ingredients. Aimed at optimizing efficiency in restaurant kitchens, the speed scratch method minimizes prep and cook times, allowing

kitchen staff to maximize time and space on the make line. Because of the current industry environment, speed scratch cooking continues to gain acceptance and even respect in foodservice circles. After all, making the most of what you’ve got is a value shared by virtually all restaurateurs.

“With the right pre-cooked products you are cutting all the back of house complexity,” says chef Alex Sadowsky of Twin Peaks. “You’re talking 30 minutes. You can really make this thing your own. You want to have a different seasoning. If you want to bring it up in a smoker to get a little bit of extra smoke. However you want to present it to a guest and make it your own—fully cooked products allow you to do that.”

By incorporating pre-cooked items into the menu, chefs can minimize the time and manpower

required for food preparation. This is particularly beneficial during peak hours or when facing staffing shortages, as it allows the kitchen staff to focus on tasks that require more skill and attention to detail.

Another benefit of fully cooked products is that they can help streamline inventory management and reduce food waste. With pre-portioned and pre-cooked ingredients, restaurants can better forecast demand and minimize overproduction, leading to significant cost savings. Additionally, fully cooked products often have a longer shelf life compared to fresh ingredients, reducing the likelihood of spoilage and the need for frequent restocking.

“Pre-cooked, pulled and smoked meats are a great building block to be able to use for other recipes,” says chef Michael Ponzio of Park Ridge Country Club. “It takes on great flavors. It complements other items because it has a great smoke flavor that isn’t overpowering. It’s also a really great addition to easily build and assemble and create new dishes with.”

From a guest perspective, the main advantage of incorporating fully cooked items into the menu is consistency. Consistency is critical in the restaurant industry, as it helps build customer trust and loyalty. When sourced from reputable suppliers, pre-cooked products offer a standardized quality that can be difficult to achieve with in-house preparation, especially when dealing with variations in skill level among kitchen staff. This consistency not only elevates guests’ dining experience, it also reduces the likelihood of food waste resulting from unsatisfactory dishes.

Critics of fully cooked products may argue that they compromise

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on taste and freshness. However, advancements in food processing and packaging technologies have greatly improved the quality of pre-cooked items, allowing restaurants to offer flavorful and nutritious dishes without the need for extensive cooking time or labor-intensive preparation. Additionally, chefs can complement fully cooked products with fresh, seasonal ingredients to maintain a balance between convenience and quality.

“A quality fully cooked product makes it simple and cost effective to prepare a recipe that is uncomplicated and consistent,” Johnson says. “Simply add a preferred spice or sauce to create your signature dish.”

Ultimately, the decision to incorporate pre-cooked products into a restaurant’s menu should take into account factors such as customer preferences, brand identity, and culinary vision. While fully cooked items can undoubtedly contribute to back-of-house efficiency and cost savings, it is essential to ensure that they complement rather than compromise the overall dining experience.

This means quality is key. As such, many operators prefer to work with industry-leading suppliers like Smithfield Culinary who provide products, services, and solutions to help create the perfect recipe or menu.

Smithfield offers three lines of pre-cooked products to assist operators in their speed scratch endeavors. Its namesake pork products—bacon, ham, and sausage—are the brand’s mainstay SKUs. These products come both ready-to-eat (fully cooked) and ready-to-cook (raw). Also popular are fresh items including pork loins, pork chops, and ribs.

Margherita, Smithfield’s Italian line, offers dry sausage products (pepperoni and salami) and specialty meats such as prosciutto and capicola.

Finally, Smithfield Smoke’NFast is a pre-cooked and smoked line including ribs, beef brisket, pulled meats, and barbecue offerings. These ready-to-serve fully cooked and smoked products are perfect for operators who want to offer a fully cooked barbecue item on their menu without the smoking time and equipment.

Smithfield pork products are helpful in almost any kind of restaurant, from 24-hour diners to upscale establishments serving creative cuisine. Not only

can they be used as proteins on breakfast platters, they can be featured during lunch and dinner, too. Handhelds, led by sandwiches, remain the leading entrée for portability, familiarity, and affordability, and blurred dayparts are influencing sandwich innovation: Classic American breakfast sandwiches continue to trend up on lunch and dinner menus, and conversely, sandwich ingredients like brisket and chicken are appearing on breakfast menus more frequently.

Another breakfast item that is rapidly gaining cross-daypart popularity is bowls, which consumers like because of their portability, convenience, and perceived health

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benefits. Breakfast bowls can offer traditional breakfast fare, like eggs, bacon, and hash browns, while lunch and dinner bowls typically combine a combination of protein, grains, vegetables, and sauce to create healthy, portable fare.

Some chefs are using the speed scratch method to create even more complex, flavorful dishes.

"I use Smithfield pre-cooked bacon in ramen and it's absolutely outstanding," says Russell Persinger, a chef at JPS Health Network. "It only takes three minutes to crisp up in the oven, but it is serveable right out of the package. I've been cooking for over 20 years and this is by far the best pre-cooked bacon that I've tasted and cooked with. It added a lot of flavor."

Smithfield hot dogs and sausage dogs are another popular menu choice. Popular with kids and adults alike, these handheld favorites never go out of style.

Margherita, Smithfield's Ital-

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ian line, is a favorite among pizza restaurants and sandwich shops. Technomic's Sandwich Consumer Trend Report showed that younger consumers are driving the need for operators to menu more unique and nontraditional pizza toppings and sauces. Forty-three percent of consumers ages 18-34 say they were interested in trying pizza with unique toppings or ingredients. Breakfast pizza, with ingredients such as eggs or sausage, can help expand variety and meet rising demands for all-day breakfast options, while regional and ethnic twists like cheesesteak

pizzas, pulled pork pizza, Hawaiian pizza, and Mexican/Southwest style pizza can be a niche hit.

When it comes to pizza topping experimentation, older consumers tend to choose pork and beef toppings, while younger consumers opt for leaner proteins such as chicken, according to Technomic's report. The most-ordered pizza toppings are the old standbys of pepperoni, bacon, ham, and pork sausage—but items such as meatballs, steak, and chicken sausage are growing on menus to satisfy today's consumers' more adventurous tastes.

Along with pizza toppings, the Margherita line features products perfect for globally-inspired menus. In addition to items like the classic Italian Sub Smithfield Culinary has a library of delectable recipes like Pasta Carbonara, Muffaletta Salad, Pepperoni Falafel and Tahini Sauce, Pepperoni Quesadillas, Fried Mortadella Sandwich, and Grilled Skewered Meatballs with Honey Chili Sauce.

To develop such recipes, the Smithfield Culinary Marketing team works closely with the Sales and Business Management team to identify voids and opportunities with restaurant operators. They then enlist the Research and Development team to formulate and create new products through rigorous product development and testing.

"We use our Innovation Center, as well as the support of plants to help develop new and innovative products," says Frank Dominguez, corporate chef at Smithfield Foods. "During this process, our cross-functional teams meet regularly with R&D to discuss and test products."

Once a product is developed, Smithfield showcases with chefs



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and at industry events to garner feedback and recipes that highlight new items. Dominguez says three things make a good restaurant and chef-friendly fully cooked item: Products that are on trend and flavorful, products that have been tested and vetted with top chefs and culinary instructors, and products that will help operators increase sales and traffic, and help them drive efficiency of their bottom line.

Smithfield's third product line, Smoke'NFast, has all of these qualities.

With the increasing popularity of smoked meats, the products in this line—which include pulled pork and pulled chicken, ribs, and brisket—are a favorite of barbecue lovers. The only limit is a chef's imagination.

One idea from Chef Michael Ponzio of Park Ridge Country Club was to use Smoke'NFast Ribs to make a cracker-crusted, deep-fried rib finished with a honey-sierra glaze, while Chef Adam Schloemer of Parkland Health came up with topping ribs with a mango-barbecue glaze. At Twin Peaks, Chef Alex Sadowsky noted Smoke'NFast Whole Brisket could be used to create an open-face sandwich with a savory Dr. Pepper glaze.

Both Smoke'NFast pulled pork and pulled chicken come fully cooked for operator convenience and are available in sauced and sauceless options. They offer an authentic barbecue flavor and consistency of performance in items like sandwiches, mac and cheese, tacos, nachos, and more. In addition to great taste, Smoke'NFast products are the perfect solution to trim labor costs and reduce food costs.

"Smoke'NFast products are ideally seasoned and cooked



“We offer everything needed to build a head-turning menu, providing our operators a competitive advantage.”

perfectly for the speed scratch method,” Dominguez says. They allow flexibility so you can adjust the flavor profile to fit almost any recipe. The best part is you don't have to spend hours trimming meats or overseeing the cooking/smoking process, which greatly reduces back-of-house labor.”

When restaurant operators decide to work with Smithfield Culinary, they can rest assured they have support. The company creates a concept trend deck for each customer and develops menu ideation specific to their establishment. Then, the operator selects six to eight choices that Smithfield Culinary prepares at the restaurant's location.

“We diligently look at costs and trends to ensure we can help

our operators manage their businesses,” Johnson says. “We offer everything needed to build a head-turning menu, providing our operators a competitive advantage.”

In an industry where margins are tight and competition is fierce, maximizing back-of-house efficiency is essential for the success of any restaurant. By leveraging fully cooked products strategically, restaurant operators can reduce labor and product costs, streamline operations, and maintain consistency without sacrificing taste or quality. Embracing innovation in the kitchen is key to staying ahead in today's dynamic culinary landscape, and pre-cooked products offer a valuable tool for achieving that goal. ❁