

Roller Grill Trending Up

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Convenience store retailers continue to modify and adapt their roller grill offerings to accommodate an increasingly diversified audience.

By Scott McKinney, Contributing Editor

Foodservice growth led strong in-store sales in the convenience channel, according to U.S. convenience store owners surveyed recently by the National Association of Convenience Stores (NACS).

In terms of foodservice, 68% of retailers said sales increased last year and there was continued sales growth of better-for-you items. It's an upward trend destined to continue.

"C-stores are increasing and improving their offerings, and consumers are taking note," said Ann Golladay, senior project director at Datassential, a firm that conducts food industry market research.

WIDER VARIETY

When it comes to roller grill offerings, consumer interest is taking a wider turn beyond staples like hot dogs, brats and Taquitos, to include all-day meal and snacking options such as a variety of egg rolls, new RollerBite choices, traditional tamales and ethnic sausages.

Some experts agree that there's an opportunity to grow Asian food sales in the c-store channel, including within the roller grill space.

Datassential's TrendSpotting Trend Report on convenience stores, released in December 2018, polled 750 consumers on a variety of foodservice topics and what they would prefer to see at their local convenience chain. Among those who responded, some said they preferred foods from c-stores that can be easily consumed in a car while driving.

One respondent in the survey answered, “I want more interesting grab-and-go items that I can quickly pick up. It would be nice to see more ethnic foods offered.”

Freshness can help guarantee that roller grill can be a significant purchase motivator, Golladay said. Previous Datassential data indicates that other motivators for consumers choosing roller grill purchases include high-quality ingredients, wider selection and combo deals.

Rising consumer interest is also present in the condiments section of U.S. c-stores. “Think of Sriracha’s explosion over the last 10 years,” Golladay said. “The staple condiments are still key,” she cautioned, with ketchup seeing slight growth, mustard staying flat, and barbecue sauce dropping in consumer interest, but specialty condiments like garlic aioli, wasabi and Sriracha are experiencing an uptick in popularity.

TASTERS’ CHOICE

Of course, valued-added options are a key driver for strong roller grill sales.

“Customers continue to look for strong value when making food purchase decisions,” said Robin Murphy, 7-Eleven product director for fresh food. According to Murphy, customers only spend an average of 23 seconds in front of the roller grill, so they are making those decisions fast.

“We know that speed of service is also key,” Murphy added.

In terms of customer taste, Murphy said that customers are looking for spicier options, on the roller grill and elsewhere in the store.

“On the roller grill, products with Mexican or other Latin American influences are showing the greatest growth,” Murphy said.

Roller grill customers are some of 7-Eleven’s most loyal shoppers, and they visit frequently to enjoy offerings such as the Big Bite hot dog, Go-Go Taquito, egg roll or limited-time specialty sausage. 7-Eleven’s growing customer base of Millennials and Gen Zers are driving a demand for chicken products on the roller grill, Murphy said.

Murphy noted that most 7-Eleven stores have two roller grills at the front sales counter, adjacent to the hot foods case, which offers pizza, chicken tenders and wings. There’s a free condiment bar, which has always been a customer favorite and a driver of sales. The condiment bar offers choices including chili, melted or shredded cheese, Pico de Gallo, onions, relish, sliced pickles, jalapeños, and regional favorites such as sauerkraut, sport peppers and more.

Industry observers point to Tyson’s gourmet chicken sausage links, Gouda chicken sausage, and new RollerBite flavors as examples of innovation in the segment.

Richard George, professor emeritus of food marketing at the Saint Joseph’s University’s Erivan K. Haub School of Business, considers roller grills as an underutilized foodservice feature for c-stores that fail to realize the business potential they afford.

“When people walk in the store, they’re thinking, ‘I’m a little hungry, what do I want?’” George said.

Roller grill regulars, such as construction workers, want something quick, easy and filling, so hot dogs hit the spot for them, but there are untapped components of the market—including better-for-you items, which patrons can grab when they’re on the go, he said.

“Roller grills have been around for a long time, and I think this is a chance to introduce new segments of the market to the grill,” George said. “People are looking for freshness, so why not include freshly-made

in-store options, like fruit wraps, oatmeal wraps or low-carb wraps for the Atkins or keto crowd.”

He said still, 64% of roller grill customers purchase grilled items for a portable snack.

FRONT TO BACK

There have been a lot of enhancements to roller grill equipment for both back-of-house and front-of-house service.

Arguably, coffee manufacturers began the shift towards self-service machines, and roller grill manufacturers followed suit. Now convenience store coffee is returning to barista-style, push-button machines behind the counter, while self-service roller grills are becoming more advanced.

Moreover, there has been an expansion of larger roller grill islands among a select number of retailers, with more adding grills that can accommodate both protein and non-protein offerings.

In addition to expanded and dedicated roller grills, more operators are improving signage to promote offerings.

READY TO SERVE

New QuikTrip locations have up to 10 roller grills on a dedicated island to accommodate more choices for its customers.

QuikTrip, which owns and operates more than 700 c-stores in nearly a dozen states, sticks with proven foodservice concepts, including roller grill.

“QuikTrip is more focused on a value-driven approach than trends. We pay attention to trends but tend to stick with proven high-volume items,” said Mike Thornbrugh, manager of public and government affairs at QuikTrip. “Our grills have their own aisles and retail other complementary items around the offer. We try to offer eight to 10 different roller grill items, and we complement them with around eight to 10 choices of fresh condiments.”

