

WHERE FRIENDS

in Stadium Foodservice

It's Not About the Ordinary

Patrons expect restaurant quality food when cheering on their favorite team and stadiums are serving up a food experience.

By John DePaola, Foodservice Resources

Fans aren't looking for an ordinary experience when they go to see their favorite team play and that experience isn't only about how the home team plays. Ho-hum food isn't an option. "Experiencing" the food is just as important as experiencing the game.

So how do you turn one of America's favorite stadium foods, the hot dog, into an experience?

You don't. For many, the hot dog *is* the experience – it's just not the only food option.

While the hot dog may still be the choice of many at sports stadiums across the country, selection is growing. From brick oven pizzas, to hand-carved roast beef, patrons are being offered and expecting more food options.

For years, traditional stadium fare consisted of pre-wrapped hot dogs held in drawer warmers and doled out to

paying fans with no questions asked. While the hot dog is undoubtedly still the king of ballpark foodservices, more and more operations are now serving their hot dogs fresh off the grill. At the venerable Yankee Stadium, freshly grilled hot dogs are the norm in the vast majority of the concession stands, while at SBC Park in San Francisco, hot dogs and specialty sausages are cooked in full view of patrons and are served open in a boat that facilitates the addition of a vast array of condiments.

And let's not forget Wrigley Field where thousands of famous Chicago Dogs are served fresh off the grill with all the classic condiments: emerald relish, fresh tomatoes, a pickle spear, hot peppers and celery salt.

Fans in different cities like their hot dogs served in different ways. Several years ago, there was quite an uprising at Dodger Stadium when the foodservice operator switched from the classic grilled "Dodger dog" to a steamed version. It did not take too long before the outcry brought back the grilled classic.



Somerset Patriots Baseball Club play at Commerce Bank Ballpark in Bridgewater, NJ.

The Challenges of Serving It Up Fresh & Fast

Many stadiums are beginning to anchor their main concession areas with QSR or fast casual concession alternatives. Bringing the food to the front, in an open-kitchen design, assures fans that their food is freshly prepared. This approach, while an improvement for concession operators, places increased demands on space and as a result, square footage requirements are always an issue. The idea is to get as many people through the lines in a limited amount of time and that normally translates into more points of sale, but the question is how to balance sales positions with display cooking and just in time product assembly. Concession sales generate more revenue in a ballpark than anything except ticket sales, but even so, these new approaches still place pressure on stadium designers and architects to have both a high number of points of sales while at the same time, bringing the food to the front and out of the confines of the concession “back room.”

This rise of quick casual dining and high concept foodservice operations has trickled down to large public accommodation facilities like stadiums, both minor league and major league as well as convention centers. This accelerating trend is an extension of the improved large-scale foodservices that began with the new generation of stadiums and ballparks over the last decade.

Of course there are many other food offerings besides hot dogs that have benefited from the new emphasis on quality and freshness. The Gordon Biersch stands at SBC Park serves tons of their famous garlic fries every year. Millions of fans have lined up for the piping hot French fries that are tossed with fresh garlic, olive oil, kosher salt and freshly chopped parsley to create the unchallenged king of the stadium French fry.

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Q&A

with **NAC President**
Chris Bigelow (National
Association of Concessionaires)



Chris Bigelow, FCSI, CFSP
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What are some of the trends you are seeing in foodservice at sports stadiums and arenas?

ANSWER: Sports venue foodservice is becoming much more sophisticated. Exhibition cooking, multiple dining options and high end luxury suite catering are operating side by side with the traditional standards of hot dogs beer and soda. But even the basics are constantly improving; over half of the concessions stands will be vented to allow for charbroiling, grilling and deep frying. It still is a major logistical issue to design the venue for extremely large crowds but service may only be available during a brief two to three hour window. Likewise many of the concessionaires rely on volunteer groups, such as civic and charitable organizations to staff the foodservice sales areas, so equipment has to be easy to use by culinary novices.

How do you work with manufacturers' reps? What are your expectations?

ANSWER: The reps play an important role directly with the concessionaires as well as the foodservice consultants who may also be working with the concessionaire or designing the venue before the concessionaire is hired. The major concessionaires all have equipment specialists on their staff who look to the manufacturers and their staff for product knowledge, production capabilities, product innovation and production demonstration, startup and training after the installation.

Just like the operators themselves, the consultant and designers rely on the reps for initial equipment budgets, and engineering, particularly for ventilation, refrigeration and beverage dispensing systems.

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The reps need to keep the designers up to date with product information during the design phase, interface with any installation problems with the kitchen equipment contractor and most importantly create a smooth transition and employee training period for operations once installation is complete.

The major difference the reps need to understand between sports venues and more traditional institutional accounts such as a hospital, convention center or school, is the limited number of events the equipment will be used in one year. The equipment needs to be heavy duty to withstand large peaks in production but may only be used 6 times a year in the case of a collegiate football stadium, 20 times a year for major league football stadium, 85 times for baseball and 150 to 200 times for an arena.

Do you handle new construction differently than a renovation? Who should the rep call on?

ANSWER: The only real difference between new construction and renovation is the possibility of re-using existing equipment. Reps should be able to assist the operator or consultant in assessing the condition of existing equipment and expectant remaining useful life. Obviously if the same utility systems have to be used in the renovation then the rep needs to be as creative as possible to match their equipment to what can be accommodated however normally part of any renovation is an upgrade in utility services.

The reps should call on both the design consultants that specialize in sports venues such as ourselves but also the major concessionaires of the National Association of Concessionaires and their equipment design specialists. Those major concessionaires include Aramark, Boston Culinary Group, Centerplate, Levy Restaurants, Ovations, Foodservice by MGR, Sodexo, Sportservice and The Swanson Corporation.

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Qwest Center, Omaha, NE



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This emphasis on quality is making its presence known in minor league ballparks as well. In the new ballpark being planned for Lancaster, PA, all French fries served will be fresh-cut boardwalk style fries. The smaller size and lower sales volume of minor league facilities will allow this unprecedented initiative to blaze new territory for minor league ballparks.

Also in Lancaster, the main concourse concessions have been reconfigured into two “concession courts”. These large foodservice areas are recessed off the concourse with a circulation area in front of the foodservice counters instead of being placed parallel and flush to the concourse. In addition to fresh off the grill hot dogs and fresh French fries, these new concession courts will use the new-style hot food holding bins that are frequently seen in McDonald’s and Burger Kings. Proteins like burgers, chicken breasts and sausages are cooked using traditional methods such as griddles and charbroilers. The cooked meat items are then held in the holding bins that are designed for fast access, long-term holding without any loss of moisture, heat, flavor and texture. Attendants then work out of these holding bins assembling small batches of sandwiches as demand warrants. An added feature is the incorporation of high-speed vertical contact toasters that heat and caramelize the surface of sandwich buns improving the taste, texture and temperature of the prepared sandwiches. This just-in-time food production system guarantees patrons commercial quality food that meets or exceeds the quality one expects from QSRs and fast casual operations.

In addition to the standard concession items, each of the two concession courts at Lancaster is anchored by two premium outlets. On the first base side, hand rolled pretzels and grilled premium sausages flank the main, central food counters while the third base side features hand carved roast beef and brick oven pizza. The open design, branded identities, and strong interior design elements of these anchors all add to the retail impact of the concession operations. These new concession courts mimic what is seen in fast casual operations across the country.

Ice Palace, Tampa, FL





FedEx Field, Landover, MD

At the Washington Convention Center, Executive Orders takes the fast casual model to convention centers. A series of seven fast casual concepts, each self-contained and each with a specific and focused menu serves the thousands of Convention Center attendees each year. The concepts are: sandwich and salad, coffee and pastry, Mexican, pasta, brick oven pizza, seafood, Pan-Asian, all-American grill.

The way food is displayed in such concepts lends a positive air to the customer experience. Rather than pre-wrap food items and hold them in nondescript holding cabinets, items are prepared and served in open baskets. These baskets are held on heated granite slabs accented by hanging pendant-style heating lamps. This type of visual display enhances the customer's perception of quality and helps to stimulate sales.

Hot food holding technologies are integral to the fast casual model in large public accommodation facilities. Prepared food is frequently held in the new generation of holding cabinets for items that are assembled to order. At FedEx Field, home of the Washington Redskins, the in-seat service menu for the Club Level (the largest in-seat services in the country), meats are cooked with traditional cooking equipment and Combi Ovens and are held in humidified holding cabinets. As food is ordered from in-seat service attendants, the order is beamed wirelessly using a high-speed data network to one of four service kitchens located in each corner of the stadium and the sandwich is assembled to order and given to a runner to deliver to the seat-holder. The result is a freshly prepared sandwich that is not cold, soggy or otherwise "tired" and is of the quality one would expect in a retail foodservice operation.

Bridgeport Arena, Bridgeport, CT



Q&A

with Food Service Consultant John DePaola

How many equipment bidders do you usually get on a project?

ANSWER: Usually between two and six.

What is the process to get bidders?

ANSWER: These are pretty good-sized equipment packages, so we look to the size and experience of the kitchen equipment contractor (KEC), along of course, with cost. The big equipment purveyors stay on top of things, so they know when a bid is coming out. Also, the GCs tend to work with KECs with whom they have experience and a track record, so that factors in as well.

How long does it take to put a stadium together?

ANSWER: To plan and design a minor league foodservice facility takes four to six months, depending on how much programming is necessary. Major league design projects take much longer, typically 12 to 15 months. Post contract work in either case can take months.

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Concession is the #1 generator of sales next to ticket sales.

Bradley Center, Milwaukee, WI

