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Recapping the NRA Show

New food, equipment innovations point to future of restaurant industry.



Terry Douglass and Eric Ribarits puts skewers of bread in the Marinara Tower at the NRA Show.

BARNEY WOLF

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Back of House, Barney Wolf, In the Store

As the lights went out on the National Restaurant Association's Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show (NRA Show) in Chicago on Tuesday, there was plenty to consider about the future of the industry.

The show featured no shortage of technological advancements, not just in computing hardware and software, but also in equipment and food-safety solutions.

Refrigeration units, ovens, grills, and lighting are increasingly more energy efficient and green. Thermometers are smaller, lighter, and more accurate. Juicers are more productive. Chefs may even see some of their beloved knives being replaced with lasers and other precise and effective cutting tools.

Meanwhile, the food and beverages on display at the NRA Show keep expanding. For instance, long-time show veteran and favorite Vienna Beef, which serves traditional Chicago

hot dogs and other goodies to hordes at its large booth, taste-tested a new sweet and spicy pickle.

At the same time, the grub and drinks are largely getting more nutritious. More companies are offering organic, allergen-free, lower-fat, and lower-calorie items.

“There are so many new, exciting things,” says Derrek Hull, the show’s communications manager. The event “continues to be on trend, and it gives a sneak peak into the future of what the industry will be.”

The NRA is saying that the show had more than 2,000 exhibitors, up about 5 percent from 2012, while attendance was at or slightly above last year’s 60,000 figure.

It’s health care, stupid

Despite the optimism on the exhibit floor, one big issue lurked over this year’s show: how restaurants are going to deal with health care and the Affordable Care Act, also known as “Obamacare.”

The NRA took the unusual step of twice offering a two-part health care–focused educational session—sort of Health-Care Legislation 101 and 201 (tailored to an operator’s size)—during the show.

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“This is all quite complex,” said Michelle Neblett, the NRA’s director of labor and workforce policy, to more than 150 people attending one session. She discussed issues ranging from calculating the number of full-time employees to dealing with insurance exchanges.

Hull says he could not remember an educational session being repeated during the same NRA Show, but the intent was to give all attendees a chance to get the information. “There is a lot of uncertainty” among restaurant operators, he says.

The NRA also created a Health Care Knowledge Center at the show that gave restaurant owners and executives the chance to talk one-on-one with one of several restaurant health-care consultants.

About 200 operators took advantage of the center, with the meetings lasting anywhere from a few minutes for simple questions to 90 minutes for more complex ones.

Chefs galore

The show tends to be a busy event for folks wearing chef's coats.

In addition to 18 celebrity chefs—Rick Bayless and Lorena Garcia among them—showing their techniques at the show's World Culinary Showcase, or those taking part in educational sessions—as Stephanie Izard and Anne Burrell did for Food News Media's "Women in Foodservice" panel—hundreds more were cooking and slicing at exhibitor booths.

Three World Culinary Showcase chefs—Cat Cora, Marcus Samuelsson, and Aaron Sanchez—spent time at the MOZO Shoes booth talking about their footwear collaboration with the shoe company. Meanwhile, Izard and Brian Malarkey talked shoes at the Dansko booth. And at the booth for fusionchef by Julabo, which provides precision fluid temperature control equipment for sous vide cooking, James Beard Award winner Jason Wilson held infused cocktail demonstrations.

Eye toward innovation

Several new ideas were on display at the NRA Show. Among those was Perfect Clime from German-based Burda Worldwide, an electric misting heater that combines a radiant heater and a mister to provide relief in hot or cold weather. There was also Vollrath Products' Mirage induction soup rethermalizer, which is a quick and efficient induction heater used to rethermalize soups or sauces from 40 to 165 F in less than an hour. It was one of the winners of the NRA Kitchen Innovations Awards.

Ecolab's booth featured an antimicrobial fruit and vegetable treatment that eliminates E. coli, listeria, and salmonella from the surface of fresh-cut produce and in wash water.

Taste of the unusual

The Marinara Tower turned some heads at the NRA Show. Developed over the past year by a small company in Steamwood, Illinois, the Tower is an Italian interpretation of the chocolate fountain that spews marinara sauce instead of chocolate. It can be used with bread, meatballs, sausage, and other foods on a fondue-like stick.

“We’ve received quite a bit of interest from all kinds of people” at the show, said Robert DeHaven, who helped develop the tower with founder Samantha De Maria Ribaritis. “It would be great for all kinds of events and even buffets.”