



# The Producers

## Playing your part in a foodservice show

BY ANDREW MAGEE

amagee.freelance@cspnet.com

**O**n a recent trip to Arkansas, Dr. Richard George walked into a Krispy Kreme for breakfast. The store lighting shined bright, the floor was clean enough to perform surgery on and the scent of deep-fried dough tickled the good doctor's nostrils. The sharply dressed young man working the counter seemed to blend in perfectly with the rest of this picture of foodservice perfection.

"Want a hot, fresh Krispy Kreme doughnut?"

Not a *bad* greeting, Dr. George thought. He wished the doughnuts would have been less stale, but he acknowledges that he's finicky. As a professor of food marketing at St. Joseph's University, Philadelphia, and a consultant to foodservice titans such as Wawa Inc. and Quick Chek, the guy has high standards.

"The problem is that he said the exact same thing to everyone who walked in the door," Dr. George says of the employee. "It was so programmed. A good foodservice program should be just like a Broadway play: If people understand their part and their role in the play, they can

really make it fly. Otherwise, it's just another cost that doesn't have a great return."

Dr. George doesn't blame the Krispy Kreme kid. Expanding upon the Broadway analogy, he says it's up to retailers to direct their play and, if they do it right, they'll find the best actors. "Where would you like to work?" George asks. "At a place that has some feel to it, or at a place that is sterile and all interaction is recited from memory?"

Convenience store operators are producing foodservice "shows" more than ever. While grab-and-go still dominates the industry, more retailers are plunging big dollars into elaborate foodservice offerings by slicing

and dicing food right before the customers' eyes. To be believable, retailers need a little showmanship and a lot of money because, as with any professional stage production, the actors don't come cheap.

"I think, especially as a convenience store, it legitimizes you as a food place," says Mike Murphy, vice president of foodservice at Whitehouse Station, N.J.-based Quick Chek. "The customer can see you making it right in front of them, they can get it the way they want, they can see the freshness and they can see the cleanliness."

At BP, Tom Terlecky, food offer development manager for the Houston-based chain, and his colleagues choose a simpler approach for a number of reasons. The major oil had already dabbed in made-to-order (MTO) in the Eastern United States with its BP Connect format.

"But labor is clearly a factor in any made-to-order business," he says. "It's going to be your single highest cost and, therefore, the higher your break-evens are going to be."

Toward that end, Terlecky notes, "Our ampm format is designed

around ease. The customers don't have to wait in a line and they can choose their own condiments to make it their way. It also creates simplicity in our operation because we're producing products that are not customized."

Some industry leaders such as La Crosse, Wis.-based Kwik Trip Inc. have never seriously considered a more elaborate prepared-on-site program. "Most of those programs are very labor-intensive," says Scott Servais, foodservice zone leader. "What has worked for us is the grab-and-go. Customers come in, they grab their two junior cheeseburgers, they load them up at the condiments bar, they grab their 20-ounce soda or whatever they're drinking, they head to the register and they're out of the store."

Murphy acknowledges that Quick Chek's way of doing things costs more money, but he sees it as a means of survival. "It's partially because of the market," he says. "We're in the Northeast, where there are so many mom-and-pop-type delis, and that's what the customer is accustomed to.

Whereas Kwik Trip, the markets they're in, I don't think they have that type of competition. I think we're almost forced to do it in our market."

### To Brand or Not to Brand

Whether a retailer wants to or needs to develop a more elaborate foodservice offering, the first task, says foodservice expert Maurice Minno, is to develop a brand or a theme and incorporate it into the entire store.

"You can't just take a sliver of the store, carve it out and say you're going to create some theater there with your foodservice offer," says Minno, president of MPM Group, a Palm Springs, Calif.-based consulting firm, and a co-founder of foodservice design firm ISUS [Inventive Strategies & Unique Solutions]. "You have to think holistically about the physical environment of the store and how that foodservice component relates to the rest of the physical environment."

Missing from most convenience foodservice programs, Minno says, is a total commitment to a brand or

theme. "The sensorial cues that bring the brand to life are missing. Consumers want to see fresh food being handled safely and properly," he says. "A brand that's truly alive with a personality has all of the theatrical elements connected with it: sight, sound, smell, touch and taste."

For example, Minno cites Maverick Inc., on whose board he sits. Maverick's brand—Adventure's First Stop—is a good example of a retailer that, in his opinion, is thinking holistically. "Beyond the other highly successful foodservice purveyors in the convenience channel, Maverick has created a total store environment that relates to their brand promise," Minno says. "In their beer caves, you walk in and see icicles hanging. Outside of the beer cave, you see a snowboarder mannequin. Employees are called 'Adventure Guides.'"

But the best example of a fully-realized foodservice brand, Minno says, is Starbucks, which set out to make itself the "third place" for consumers. The consultant served as vice



**NIGHT AT THE THEATRE:** J.D. Carpenter Cos.' ShortStop chain embraced theatre for the food concepts at its newest stores. "To my mind, it's a very cool example of a foodservice stage set in a mid-level c-store concept," says consultant David Brewster, who worked with the retailer. The design team aimed for a sophisticated and low-energy mix of ambient, task and accent lighting that aims to be both functional and decorative. The store's transparent exterior and interior lighting highlights the store's foodservice concepts, Grill Fresh and Java Mill.



president of fresh food at Starbucks in the late 1990s.

"Their stores aren't 'home' or 'work,'" Minno says. "They're the 'third place' where someone can be infused into this environment that's been created by lighting, color, the sound of music and the barista machine and constant sampling. That's what's missing from many c-stores in the United States today. They haven't captured the essence of a

tive food choice that a customer has ... Find out who your competition is and what they are doing."

Lawshe points to a recent experience he had with the chicken QSR Chick-fil-A Inc. as an example.

"I was in an architect's office and Chick-fil-A [employees] come walking in wearing cleanly starched uniforms passing out coupons and shaking hands," Lawshe says. "It was very well received. I would

imagine that one of those people have already had their free Chick-fil-A sandwich. That's the out-of-the-box marketing that you have to do in the foodservice business."

To compete with that distinctive branding, Lawshe says, c-store opera-

tors need their own unique flavor.

"Too many people, especially in our industry, rely on the vendor-supplied product," he says. "Even if it's a good product ... that's the theme another company created. Is it really who you are and what you're trying to do?"

"We always try to incorporate something local that matches with their corporate culture," he continues. "You can use one of those programs, but you should make it your own by personalizing it and creating a theme."

Contrary to Lawshe, foodservice expert Dean Dirks of Gig Harbor, Wash.-based Dean Dirks Associates doesn't see anything wrong with piggybacking on someone else's success.

"The trouble with doing your own concept is the branding," Dirks says. "Bob's Subs' does \$6,000 a week compared to a nearby Subway that does \$10,000 per week because of brand awareness. Yet, the labor is the same. You don't have to pay royalties if you build your own brand, but you don't get support either. Personally, I don't mind paying royalties because the existing brand is less risky than trying to build your own brand."

Dirks is a fan of foodservice models that call for the food to be made in plain sight of the customer because it ensures that people get exactly what they want. "In a hamburger chain, 30% of the complaints are about incorrect orders," he says. "That can't happen in the Subway model."

## Get Fresh

The made-to-order model ensures that the customers are leaving the store with a product made to their exact specs, but history has shown that it also ensures headaches for c-store operators. "There aren't a whole lot of people who are terribly successful at doing that," says David Brewster, a Wadsworth, Ohio-based designer and consultant, and a co-founder of ISUS.

"It takes employees with a whole lot more skill than pumping gas or operating a cash register," he continues. "There's a lot of adherence to HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) regulations. It's not something I advise anyone to 'just do' because it requires employees with a skill set that costs a lot more money than the average c-store employee costs."

Made-to-order also requires a total commitment to "fresh." In addi-



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**MAURICE MINNO**  
MPM Group

brand that relates to foodservice and foodservice as theater."

[Most experts attribute Starbucks' recent shutdown of 600 sites to poor real-estate selection, not its retailing concept.]

Convenience store operators interested in developing a more sophisticated foodservice offering must look at businesses such as Starbucks as rivals, says Michael Lawshe, CEO of Fort Worth, Tex.-based Paragon Solutions, a retail and design consulting firm.

"Too often, [c-store] people look at other convenience offerings as the competition," Lawshe says. "To me, that's dumbing down the competition. The competition is any alterna-



**LAYERED EFFECT:** Consultant David Brewster cites Wawa's former Express coffee concept for its use of "very high end" theater. In particular, the retailer incorporated many different types of light sources for a sophisticated end result, including fluorescent, low-voltage, quartz and regular incandescent.

tion to the obvious—keep the lettuce bin full and create an immaculate service area—Brewster says that "creating garbage" is a surefire way for a retailer to convince customers of its commitment to fresh. He recalls a fruit-stand operator who appeared to spend as much time inspecting and throwing away product as he did filling orders for the long line of customers.

"You can theatrically put stuff in and take stuff out of the case, although empty displays are a real tough thing that I struggle with as a designer," Brewster says. "Nothing can say 'tired,' 'dreary' and 'not clean' as much as an empty display case. It's a black hole in your theater set.

"On the other hand," he notes, "an empty display case might be a way of saying that our stuff is so good and so fresh that we're sold out." You can put a "sold out" sign in the case, he says, or put a visual display into the empty spot.

Another way a retailer can communicate fresh is proper lighting.

"Most convenience stores don't do anything with lighting other than try to illuminate their store with funny-colored fluorescent lights," Brewster says. "When you're shaving in the morning and you look into a mirror lit by a flickering fluorescent light, you look like you died yesterday. That's how the stores often look." The best lighting, he says, is high-output fluorescent compact lighting set at 3,000 degrees Kelvin.

### The Stage Crew

To Brewster, nothing ruins a good show like poor lighting. Fellow designer Lawshe sarcastically describes his own pet peeve. "Nothing is more appetizing than the hum of refrigeration when the fan is a little out of whack and you're eating your stale chicken," Lawshe says.

"We have to stop accepting mediocrity. You have to create the sound with good music. If you have a seating area, you can create little sound barriers like little water treatments. It doesn't have to be an entire separation from the store, but it can be a partial separation that lets people know they're in a restaurant now."

The placement and type of seating also creates a restaurant atmosphere. "Try not to do too much of the low seating, especially if [customers are] in traffic lanes," Lawshe says. "There's nothing more uncomfortable than sitting down and your eye level is at someone else's seat level."

Most consumers like to people watch, so Lawshe says it's wise to place seating near windows. "Spend a little money on landscaping to create the visual separation as well," he

says. "If a customer is sitting near a window, what have you done out front? Is it just gum on the sidewalk and a couple of parked cars? Or have you introduced a little bit of greenery? It doesn't have to be complex. A little bit goes a long way when it comes to that."

Lawshe says he's getting more requests for outdoor seating designs that include elements such as pergolas, ceiling fans and water features.

"What you've done when you create something like that is not only create that theater for the consumer, but you've created a visual for the consumers driving by," he says. "It's free signage and it's cheap signage."

Another way to incorporate theater and free signage is to utilize all the technology available to the modern convenience store. "We're bringing in more [plasma/LCD] screens in addition to the music," Lawshe says. "But it can't be a purely capitalistic approach in which you're hitting them over the head with commercials. It needs to be a combination of things: music videos, CNN and other things that are going to attract their attention."

In essence, the consultant advises his clients to create theater for customers from the minute they enter the lot. "When you walk around a theater, what do you see? You see 'Now Showing' and 'Coming Soon' signs," he says. "That's theater. That's showmanship. That's what we're lacking.

"We have to promote what we're doing at the pump, at the window and in the store. You're setting the tone." ■

# Chef Finds Passion in Foodservice

## Summarize your culinary job history and education:

Training from the Florida Culinary Institute in West Palm Beach. Worked as a chef at The Breakers in Palm Beach and at Charley's Crab in Jupiter, Fla. Returned to hometown of Columbus, Ohio, as executive chef of Fisherman's Wharf. Owned and operated Isabella's Café in downtown Columbus until coming to work for Eby-Brown.

## What was your very first foodservice-related job?

Dishwasher at the Colorado Cattle Co. in Columbus when I was 17 years old.

## Why did you get into foodservice as a career?

After graduating college with a degree in business administration, I opened a real-estate holding company that was successful but not very satisfying professionally or emotionally. I sold the company and worked as a bartender to find what I was passionate about. Spending time in a restaurant led me to the kitchen, where I found an outlet for my creativity.

## Describe your company's current foodservice program:

Eby-Brown manufactures sandwiches and distributes a variety of fresh items for the grab-and-go category.

## What are your biggest foodservice challenges?

In an environment where new products and concepts are constantly evolving, cold-chain management can be a real challenge. Handling temperature-sensitive products within the same facility takes expertise in logistics, quality control and food safety.

## What other chef inspires you and why?

Cameron Mitchell, chef and founder of Cameron Mitchell Restaurants, in Columbus. I admire his entrepreneurial spirit and his dedication to creating "Raving Fans" out of customers, employees and suppliers.

## Favorite restaurant:

Bern's Steakhouse, Tampa, Fla.

## Describe your most memorable meal:

Eating fresh fish with red beans and rice in Jamaica with a

NAME	Mathew Nickel
TITLE	Corporate executive chef
COMPANY	Eby-Brown Co. LLC
HEADQUARTERS	Naperville, Ill.



family I had just met. The food was the freshest I have ever tasted, and although the cooking techniques were very traditional, the meal exploded with flavor.

## What would we find in your refrigerator at home?

Nothing that requires much preparation. Fresh fruit, smoked salmon, maybe a homemade soup or stew, and definitely leftover Chinese food.

## What's the best town or city for great food, and why?

I love Chicago because of the variety. I really dig Miami because of the fresh seafood and the mixture of Caribbean flavors. But I would have to pick New Orleans: The melding of country and classical French cui-

sine with mainland American ingredients create a viscerally sensual palate.

## Describe your biggest kitchen disaster:

As a cook, emptying a commercial fryer into a plastic bucket which, of course, melted, sending hot grease all over the kitchen floor, melting drain gaskets, and eventually the soles to my boots.

## What's the hardest lesson you've learned in foodservice?

If you don't learn from your mistakes or if you let them destroy your confidence, you're bound to be miserable.

## What three words sum up your foodservice style?

Fun, creative, energetic. ■

# St. Louis Retailer Makes What He Loves

## Summarize your culinary job history and education:

Attended the School of Hard Knocks, Burns and Ouches; expertise in everything from gourmet to fast food.

## What was your very first foodservice-related job?

I worked in my mother's kitchen, but my first paying job was when I was 15, working as a cook and hamburger flipper at Original Tommy's World Famous Burgers in Los Angeles.

**Why did you get into foodservice as a career?** I love the passion and working with my hands. I love food: It is what connects us all in life, and the cultures are the food, and that is my life and fun.

**Describe your chain's current foodservice program:** Pizza, gyros, pressed sandwiches, salads and more.

**What is your favorite item to order within your own foodservice program?** All the food is what I love. My mother told me many years ago, "Make sure all the food is what you love,

in case that is all you have to eat."

**What are your biggest food-service challenges?** People—employees and customers. Both have their own individual needs and wants.

**What other chef inspires you and why?** My children and I watch the Food Network daily, and especially enjoy Ina Garten, "The Barefoot Contessa." She is amazing. I enjoy the creativity and passion of all the people in the world.

**Favorite restaurant:** I have no favorites—all the different food keeps me happy. But if you're ever in St. Louis, I strongly recommend visiting Oceano Bistro, Yia Yia's, Iron Barley Restaurant, Blue Elephant Royal Thai Cuisine, Wasabi Sushi Bar or Eleven Eleven Mississippi.

**Describe your most memorable meal:** Anything my mother, wife, aunts or any family member cooks. They specialize in Middle Eastern foods with a lot of flavors, which you're able to eat

NAME	Amer Hawatmeh
TITLE	Founder and CEO
COMPANY	St. George Oil, dba Coast to Coast Markets
HEADQUARTERS	St. Louis
NO. OF LOCATIONS	4



in so many ways—with your hand or dipping with breads. The verity of the vegetables, meats—lamb, chicken, beef—and the spices are the best in the world.

**What would we find in your refrigerator at home?** A lot of leftovers, and then all fresh products to make more leftovers.

**What's the best town or city for great food, and why?** Where the cultures of the world are: Chicago; Paterson, N.J.; Los Angeles; New York; San Francisco; Savannah, Ga; and New Orleans. Paterson, N.J., is the Asian world outside of Asia: Arabs, Indians,

Iranians, Israelis and then everybody else in the world, including Eastern Europeans, South Americans, the islands of the Caribbean and so much more.

**What's the hardest lesson you've learned in foodservice?** Learning how to make a customer happy. What they want mostly is quantity, a lot more flavor and lower prices. My desire is to give it all, to achieve a long and loyal customer relationship.

**What three words sum up your foodservice style?** Good, quality, now. ■