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Staying True to its ROOTS

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When it comes to freshness, minutes count. Within 24 hours of being plucked from the ground, vegetables such as colorful peppers, crunchy carrots and crispy celery are on refrigerated trucks, traveling to one of Souplantation's and Sweet Tomatoes' 17 central kitchen facilities to be washed, sliced, chopped, prepped and cooked for a variety of salads, soups and sauces.

Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes treat guests to an all-you-care-to-eat salad bar that features more than 50 fresh ingredients, including specialty-tossed salads like Caesar Salad Asiago, which are made fresh every 20 minutes, and prepared salads, such as Tuna Tarragon and Citrus Penne Pasta Salad with Chicken. In addition, a hot buffet features a baked potato bar and eight varieties of made-from-scratch soups, pizza and pastas. Desserts, plus a variety of handcrafted muffins, focaccia breads and brownies, are baked fresh throughout the day.

With the exception of lettuce and tomatoes—which are shipped directly to the restaurants for maximum freshness—Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes prepare the majority of the food at their central kitchens. Due to the sheer volume of ingredients, it is simply more efficient this way.

"We have rows and rows of people chopping broccoli and carrots all day," said Andy Simpson, Senior Vice President of Development at Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes. "Cutting that many pieces of vegetables in the morning at a restaurant would be impossible. Filling up a 50-foot-long buffet with cut vegetables, you'd need an army of people doing it."

Central kitchen truck drivers then deliver the soups, vegetables, pasta and sauces to each restaurant seven days a week. The restaurant staff assembles the various salads and pastas, fills up the soup tureens and stocks the buffets for guests to enjoy.

Within 48 hours, the harvested vegetables are served to more than 33 million satisfied guests annually.

Behind the Scenes

In many states, the restaurants are clustered around the same city, with their central kitchen nearby or even attached, which minimizes delivery times. Some of the larger states—California, Arizona, Texas and Florida—have restaurants scattered around different cities. The central kitchens in these states require a carefully orchestrated process to prepare and deliver their menu items to restaurants daily.

In Texas, for example, nine restaurants are divided between Dallas and Houston, and all rely on the central kitchen in Fort Worth.

Starting at 2 a.m., the central kitchen staff is hard at work prepping food to be delivered to the restaurants the next day. The facility's two trucks must be on the road by 5 a.m. to ensure delivery to all the restaurants before they open at 11 a.m. At 2 p.m., the facility closes for the day.

The \$5-million Fort Worth central kitchen houses some enviable industrial equipment, including three 2,000-gallon digital brine tanks. Water storage tanks located outside the facility hold water at a constant 32 degrees. The tanks maintain the water's cold temperature while jets cycle the water to quickly chill prepared soups and sauces.

"We can bring an item that's 200 degrees to 40 degrees in under three hours," said Ben Russell, Manager of the Fort Worth central kitchen. "With the older models, you have to physically monitor the temperature and manually agitate the bags. This is carefree. I have a display that tells me the temperature of my holding tanks, the jets agitate the water and they are 100 times more efficient."

The central kitchen also includes industrial food processors, two 20-gallon pasta and potato boilers, four 60-gallon soup and sauce kettles, two 60-gallon chicken stock kettles and four 30-gallon chicken soup kettles. There are separate refrigeration rooms for raw meat, produce and bulk, pre-prepped and finished-good items. A digital display located outside Russell's office monitors every piece of equipment.

"It's an impressive facility that was built with future growth in mind," Simpson said. "The company is hoping to expand in the Dallas market."

Surprisingly, only 20 employees process the ingredients and cook the menu items for the nine Texas restaurants that serve a total of 6,500 guests a day. Because the central kitchen is not attached to or located near a restaurant, Russell realized many of his employees have never seen how the food they've prepared looks in the restaurants.

"The employees who work at connected central kitchens eat the food for lunch every day," he said. "To instill a sense of pride and accomplishment, I gave my team vouchers so they can take their spouses to see and enjoy their food."

Taking Care of Business

With all 129 restaurants relying on its central kitchens, the company goes to great lengths to ensure the industrial equipment that washes, slices, bakes, boils and chills the food is operating efficiently and that emergency processes are in place when unavoidable failures occur.

Consider the fact that the central kitchens made 19 million gallons of soup last year. One central kitchen in Southern California makes 45 percent of the company's soup—that's soup for 54 restaurants. If that location suffered a failure that could not be rectified immediately, the impact would be immense.

To protect against critical equipment failures, the facilities team keeps extra stock of critical equipment for next-day replacements at the company's distribution centers in Atlanta and San Diego. These critical items include soup kettles, cooking and refrigeration equipment, ice machine and double-stack ovens, to name a few.

The company worked with several manufacturers for special payment terms in order to have additional back-up equipment on hand.

"We looked back at our history and knew we're going to go through a certain number of double-stack ovens; so we now have ovens in our distribution centers, which allows us to replace them as they go down as opposed to spending money on replacing ovens that are still working but nearing the end of their life," Simpson said. "One central kitchen has six large-sized food processors that run 16 hours a day every day. You lose motors on them pretty regularly, so we to have quite a few food back-up food processors ready to go."

In addition, the facilities team sourced the best vendors to handle repair and maintenance calls. When issues arise, any facilities manager can access a Web-based list of qualified service providers.

"We're trying to make sure we can sleep at night, knowing nothing is going to happen that we don't have a backup plan for," Simpson said.

Before critical back-up equipment was on hand, the facilities team had to think proactively about equipment failures. Every quarter, they would review service histories to identify equipment that was nearing the end of its useful life and replace it.

"In a perfect world, where money grew on trees, equipment would be replaced whenever you got nervous about it; before it goes down," Simpson said. "But the reality is that's a very difficult financial decision to make. An oven may look like its on its last legs but can last another two years. Now, we can let equipment die and replace it the next day."

Uncompromising Support

To do their part to ensure Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes remains an efficiently running and successful brand for the next 35 years and more, the facilities team keeps their operators top of mind.

"We come in every morning and think about how we're going to make our operators feel well supported," said Casey Elliott, Director of Facility Management at Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes.

Elliott and his team are currently planning a 24/7 call center. While there are automated work-order systems that can do the job, Elliott likes the idea of a call center because it offers a high level of support with a personal touch.

"There's nothing quite as calming as a human voice on the other end of the phone," he said. "There will never be a substitute for it." Elliott clearly loves his job. For him, a great perk is working with industrial equipment.

"It's a lot of fun dealing with big equipment," he said. "This is the kind of big, fun equipment that geeks like me like to deal with."

Freshness Front and Center

As anyone in this industry knows, legacy brands tend to prefer traditional methods of doing business, but eventually, they all need to modernize operations and refresh their image to stay relevant.

"Believe it or not, some of our systems are still written for DOS," Elliott said.

Since the first Souplantation opened in San Diego in 1978, the company has been invested in expanding the brand and opening new locations.

"When a company is growing and the dollars and opportunities are in sight, sometimes it's difficult to slow down with new builds and attend to the existing restaurants," Simpson said.

However, within the last year, the company's priority has shifted to refreshing the existing infrastructure and addressing large deferred maintenance projects such as parking lot resurfacing and roof and HVAC replacements before the company starts expanding again.

"Those projects are not the sexy things or the customer touch points and are often pushed to the wayside, and they catch up with companies that are 20 and 30 years old," Simpson said.

To address these issues, the facilities team will prioritize capital spending and try a new cross-functional approach that involves the entire company.

"With a limit on how much capital we can spend in a year, we have to make tough decisions, and we're trying to involve the whole company in a discussion about the best use of our money," Simpson said.

The company is also striving to stay relevant to its guests. While the company's core value of serving healthy, fresh and customizable food—along with some options that are naturally gluten-free and sugar-free—could not be more relevant, the restaurants were lacking in terms of interior design and food display.

"What we hear most is people grew up with the brand and liked it, but forgot about it," Simpson said. "Some of that is due to the restaurants not looking modern anymore."

The refresh includes extensive changes that modernize how the food is displayed and new décor that highlights the fresh ingredients.

Leveraging the natural, vibrant colors of fruits and vegetables, baskets and caddies full of oranges, red peppers and lemons are placed throughout the restaurants. Beautiful large-scale murals call attention to the fresh ingredients, highlight the family farms from which they were harvested and remind guests their food is farm-to-table in two days.

The freshness of the ingredients and food remains the top priority. Even production efficiency takes a backseat to freshness.

To demonstrate the company's commitment to freshness, an equipment supplier recently offered to sell larger soup kettles to allow the central kitchens to make larger amounts of soup and store them days in advance. While making more soup ahead of time would be operationally easier, the team felt uneasy about not serving the freshest soup to its guests.

"Even though, theoretically, the product holds for a few days, we feel more comfortable making soup on a daily basis," Simpson said. "We'd rather serve soups that are made literally yesterday."

While the salad buffet has always offered fresh, high-quality ingredients, the hot buffet bar with the pizza and pasta needed some flavor enhancements. Charged with creating bolder flavors and enticing new additions, a new culinary team is raising the bar for buffets in order to attract new customers. New items include grilled chicken and steak skewers, Mighty Leaf teas, and local craft beer and wine.

Five restaurants have already been refreshed at a cost of \$300,000 each. Five more are planned in 2013, and 20 or more will be completed next year. The refreshed locations have already brought in more families, a highly sought-after market segment, as well as first-time customers.

In addition to the refresh, a 6,200-square-foot prototype will open in Chino Hills, Calif., in October. The exciting concept is a break from tradition and resembles New York City's Chelsea Market, an upscale food court and grocery store. It will still offer the full salad bar that guests have come to expect, along with more add-on items and to-go options.

A Lasting Legacy

It's an exciting time for Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes.

As the refresh program continues, the restaurants will look as fresh as the ingredients and food that guests have been enjoying for the past 30 years. The prototype brings new, exciting opportunities and takes the company even further into the future.

And all the while, the central kitchens will be there, working hard behind the scenes, to deliver the wholesome, highest-quality menu items that make Souplantation and Sweet Tomatoes the freshest place in town.