Five on Five

Five foodservice designers discuss five trends and "movements" making waves this year.

By Amelia Levin, Sr. Associate Editor -- Foodservice Equipment and Supplies, 7/1/2008

Ask any designer about the top "trends" in foodservice design and the words "sustainability" and "green" almost always come up today. For the purpose of this feature article we asked a group of five industry designers to go beyond the standard green rhetoric when discussing emerging design trends and received some refreshingly new ideas taking shape in the last year.

These "evolutions" in the foodservice design world extend one step beyond simply switching to energy-efficient lightbulbs or filtered tap water from bottled, although those are very important steps for operators to take. Instead, these mini evolutions extend into the realm of holistic and efficient design, waste management, sophisticated dining spaces, and the effect that incorporating more natural, local foods into menus has on kitchen design and equipment.

LEED Building Design Emerges

"LEED is definitely not a trend," says Ray Soucie, principal of RSA Foodservice Consulting in Portland, Ore., who obtained accreditation as a LEED-certified foodservice consultant. "LEED is here to stay and it's becoming more and more widespread across the country."

For a quick recap, LEED stands for The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), a rating system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council to "encourage and accelerate global adoption of sustainable green building and development practices through the creation and implementation of universally understood and accepted tools and performance criteria."

While LEED has been around for the last decade or so, it has really picked up speed in the last year, beyond California and the Pacific Northwest, who have been influential on that front. Now, cities in the Central, Southern and Eastern regions of the country continue to show more interest in the program. Boston and Washington, D.C., for example, have zoning ordinances that mandate some green building practices for new construction, according to Soucie.

"Lately, there seems to be a global contest for cities to be recognized as the LEED design center of the world," Soucie says. "That has included Portland and Seattle and also Europe and China are spending a lot of development money to convert to more

sustainable design. In fact, Portland is in the process of building a sustainable design center to open in the next two or three years."

The trend manifests itself by virtue of the fact that foodservice consultants, architects and other related players are "designing buildings more holistically, in terms of working more as a team and considering both foodservice- and non-foodservice-related aspects of the building construction, Soucie says. "The thought process driving this is the time is now and we need to start designing for the future now because if we don't we'll run out of what we need."

Soucie's last words basically define the concept of sustainability, the idea that as we use the resources of our communities and planet, we must find ways to replenish those resources so they're not lost. LEED building design, therefore, emphasizes the use of recycled and recyclable construction materials, and certainly, the purchase of energy-efficient and water-saving products and systems. It also involves specifying products manufactured within 500 miles from the ordering point to offset carbon footprints and save on gas, an especially growing concern as oil prices continue to climb.

While Soucie is one of only a handful of Foodservice Consultants Society International (FCSI) members with LEED credentials, that number continues to grow. "It would be great to someday start a meeting with certain things about LEED already understood by everyone, so there are no educational processes or hurdles to overcome," he says. "As LEED grows, we as consultants need to take a step back and revise our specifications in order to 'walk the green talk.' As we move forward the bar gets raised a little higher."

As the group of LEED-focused foodservice industry members grows, the opportunities for LEED involvement continue to increase. The U.S. Green Building Council, according to Soucie, continues to feverishly work to pinpoint some confusing aspects of the program, such as the types of LEED certifications to which organizations apply. The Council plans to expand the program to include more types of foodservice operations.

"Foodservice falls under a lot of different categories — there's LEED for new construction, LEED for remodels, or LEED for interiors and LEED for retail," Soucie says. Colleges and hospitals with multiple foodservice points, including cafeterias, retail outlets and catering programs, need to determine which type of LEED to apply for, and the Council has been working to improve those nuances, Soucie says.

Natural, Healthier Foods and Mass Production

It may sound a little hokey, but all of a sudden it seems people are a little more spiritual, becoming more connected with the environment, its effect on food production, cooking and the food we eat, which is way overdue, says Howard Stanford, principal of Kamau Sage & Associates in Indianapolis. “Everyone's talking about 'going green,' but beyond that, we seem to be adopting a more holistic approach toward preparing food, and that's what we should have been doing in the first place.”

Howard Stanford, Principal, Kamau Sage & Associates, Indianapolis

Increasing numbers of operators across all sectors are incorporating more all-natural, wholesome foods and/or locally sourced foods into their menus, such as farmer's market quality produce, free-range chicken and eggs, grass-fed beef and leaner meat products that require shorter cooking times due to their lower fat content.

“Rather than pre-cooked, more operators are opting for 'à la minute' cooking, or as close to cooking to order as possible,” Stanford says. “It's more than a perception of freshness, it is a means to preserve the healthiness of foods closer to their original state.

“It's always been about not overcooking the food. The quality of the food we eat maintains our health and well being. With that as the ultimate goal it just makes sense to adjust our preparation and cooking techniques based on what we know is the solution.

“The task is how to cook more and maintain consistency in flavor and taste. Of course that's nothing new, but try it with, for example, a Native American menu, which is much more than food-driven, it's meant to be a spiritual experience for the chef and client. Creating that for 1,000 people takes a little homework.”

Stanford is referring to a conversation he had with Chef Walter Whitewater who won the 2008 Black Culinary Alliance James Lewis Award. Chef Whitewater's cooking philosophy stays true to his roots as a Native American, focusing on holistic, natural cooking like that discussed earlier.

Therein lies the design challenge: How do you feed masses of people in huge buildings like hospitals where they really need this healthier food? How do you prepare large amounts of food while maintaining all the nutrients that you really need? The fear among many non-commercial foodservice operators that rely on pre-cooked, rethermed meals for high-volume service is how to maintain this production level using more fresh product and à la minute cooking instead.

Stanford poses three possible solutions: 1) try to convince the masses that less is better; 2) create a menu with smaller, healthier-sized portions that will still satisfy customers; and 3) create design solutions to provide the ability to feed this group of healthier-

focused consumers. The biggest challenge is how fast can the change be done at a facility, such as a hospital, without skipping a beat?

“Within the last years there have been so many new equipment and design developments to cook high volumes of food, the challenge now is figuring out how to use this equipment for an even more natural/healthy style of cooking for the masses, or developing specific equipment to do this,” Stanford says.

This “trend,” Stanford says, also relates directly to a lifestyle that increasing numbers of Americans have adapted in light of overwhelming research showing we're the most obese country on the planet. “Considering the exploding population and diminishing food supply, we have no choice but to change how we cook, what we eat, how we eat and the size of our meals in order to be healthier as a country,” Stanford says.

Waste Management/Composting

Tony Clevenger, President, Clevenger Associates, Puyallup, Wash.

“Composting never used to ever come up but now waste companies offer it,” says Tony Clevenger, president of Clevenger Associates in Puyallup, Wash. “More communities are composting and even so much as coming out with equipment that will perform accelerated composting on-site. Whereas with traditional composting, waste takes weeks if not months to break down; with this equipment, companies can break down waste in hours.”

The concepts of composting and recycling have generated more buzz in the last year or so as companies scramble to reduce their carbon footprints and the amount of waste they dump into landfills, especially in the foodservice industry, which goes through massive amounts of waste each day. Colleges and universities seem to be the leaders on this front, including University of California-Davis, University of New Hampshire, and Kendall College in Chicago. Organizations such as these have implemented composting programs and even use the compost material to fertilize soil for on-campus or off-campus gardens. Food that's grown in these gardens is then used in the menus produced for the students and staff, even further completing the sustainable cycle.

Clevenger says the accelerated composting equipment is still in the beta-testing stage; however, a number of his clients have already expressed great excitement about the product. In addition to breaking down waste matter at faster speeds, the equipment can also break down proteins and meat.

Switching from styrene to more natural biodegradable disposable products and serviceware has also been high on operators' radars. Many have switched to corn-based plastics for disposables, paper towels and napkins made from recycled materials, and other biodegradables. “We do a lot of work with the Microsoft campus and they've now

switched from a styrene product to a compostable product for serviceware in their cafés," Clevenger says. "They have also begun working with a firm in Redmond, Wash., that's going to pick up all compostable products."

The popularity of composting continues to build in the greater Seattle area, but for smaller operators in other parts of the country, third-party composting service is not always available, which facilitates the need to bring this function in-house. "The composting process is just embryonic in my experience, and to see how it plays out is going to be interesting to watch," Clevenger says. "It's not widespread right now, but it's being driven by both a desire for profitability and a desire to do good. Our client base includes many B&I operators and since employees are asking their companies about recycling and composting, they're motivated by in-house pressures to do the right thing."

In addition to B&I, Clevenger says that he's talked with a number of hotels interested in implementing composting/recycling programs. He also sees fast-food chains, which go through tons of disposable products each year, having a huge opportunity in that market.

Comfort Dining

"Exhibition cooking is no longer a trend, it's an expectation," says Jim Webb, principal of Webb Design in Tustin, Calif. "What we're seeing is a community and socialization eating around food." Webb points out that Whole Foods, Eatzi's and other grocery stores have picked up on the trend. "People want to interact with smells and flavors, but they also want to be comfortable."

Jim Webb, Principal, Webb Design, Tustin, Calif.

In other words, operators are looking to create dining spaces that not only showcase kitchens, but which also represent virtual extensions of peoples' own dining and living spaces at home. "Whereas comfort food has been a trend in the last few years, now the new trend is comfort dining," Webb says. What comes to mind for Webb is people hanging around on couches, drinking coffee and reading magazines in front of fireplaces, and watching the news in front of flatscreen TVs. Many B&I and college and university operators have created lounge-like spaces in their dining areas to create this sort of "coffeehouse culture" of comfort that's joined forces with the "foodie" culture.

For example, Olive & Ivy Restaurant & Marketplace in Scottsdale, Ariz., has a wine and coffee shop at the front entrance with a sophisticated grab 'n go, convenience area, and in the back, a sophisticated, $40-check-average, full-service restaurant with lots of exhibition cooking. And, some colleges and universities favor dining spaces with various "mircroenvironments," Webb says.

In an 800-square-foot space a college foodservice operator might position the servery, with multiple, upscale food stations and exhibition cooking, as the "spine" of the design

that's adjacent to a quieter dining areas with couches, booths, lower ceilings and softer lighting like a living room. Next to that, Webb says, customers might find a more social area near a cooking station, with louder sounds, hi-top and communal tables, bright lighting. And another space might include a collection of two-tops for romantic diners or friends looking to reconnect.

Some operators also feature chef's tables, which seat 12 to 15 people in an area located in or attached to the kitchen that allows a view of the chefs at work. “Again, there's that desire to link people with the food they eat,” Webb says. “Often, people who eat in the same servery or cafeteria day-in and day-out can experience food or menu fatigue, but it's also possible to experience dining fatigue. The goal is to give people more opportunities to have fun connecting with food and people, and to select dining spaces that fit with their mood day by day or week by week.”

This is an especially important concept now given the sophisticated tastes and preferences of younger generations, who, according to Webb, go out to eat at restaurants perhaps more than other age groups. “We're having to liven up in some of our more institutional facilities, not make them feel so regimented,to keep up with the demand,” Webb says.

Efficient Remodeling

Mark Godward, Principal, SRE, Miami

“There's been a huge emphasis these days on effective and efficient remodeling, more than rebuilding,” says Mark Godward, president of Strategic Restaurant Engineering in Miami. “There are still some efforts to design new prototypes and the next generation of buildings, but in these slower economic times, many operators are looking for ways to retrofit existing kitchens rather than focus on new building.”

Operators seek more ways to make their environments more appealing and to drive sales into additional day parts, Godward says. This may include trying new or more contemporary products and design aspects, and making changes to menus like adding pizzas to a menu or in the case of McDonald's, adding espresso drinks.

“There is a lot of emphasis on spending capital dollars on facilities that are already doing relatively well to spruce them up a bit or speed up service,” Godward says. “Many are taking these slower times to think about their food and processes, how they make the food, where they make it and when they make it.”

And, as steady labor becomes more difficult to come by, companies look to enhance the efficiency of their processes to do more with less, or purchase equipment that requires less manpower and training.

“It's a good time to regroup and think through current operations and make things that work well even better,” Godward says. “Companies can't afford too many risks right now and are looking to invest in things that will produce quick returns.”

Of course, the “green” concept finds its way into this conversation. “In these times, though, companies are looking not just to be more 'green,' but also to be 'green and lean,'” Godward says. “It's difficult for many companies to invest in green initiatives that increase their costs. But there are a lot of initiatives that can be undertaken that are also lean.” For example, he says, an operator might look more closely at the amount of frying they do in a day, and maybe eliminate the need for an additional fryer, thereby saving energy. Maybe the same goes for a grill, two-tier oven or even refrigerators.

“Do you really need all that space and equipment, or can you do without it and still function at high-volume levels?” Godward says. Carefully examining all the factors of an operation, reducing temptation to expand or overbuy, and tightening up processes and budgets help operators become more efficient in design, operations, and even in the “green” sense of the word that's been one of the top, ongoing trends in the design and operations world.