

Developing an effective production system is the single most important investment of your time in your nutrition services operation. A well-planned and well-managed production system is key to your success. Although keeping things simple is an important consideration, having production staff work directly from the posted menu is not recommended—no matter how small the operation. Data collection and organization is critical to a good production system. Correct data allows for better forecasting, ordering, and more productivity.

Components of a Production System

The components of a production system are all based on the menu.

A production system is defined as a set of written instructions to produce all food items needed for the day. These instructions include:

- Production sheets
- Steam table diagrams
- Standardized recipes
- Order guides

(Continued on page 34)

Using a Production System

to Control Costs and
Improve Quality

by | *Wayne Toczek*

Wayne Toczek is CEO of Innovations Services, Norwalk, OH. He's author of *The Dining Experience*, *The Customer Experience*, and *The Employee Experience*, and co-author of *Food Service Tune Up* and *Safe Dining for the Highly Susceptible Customer*. Contact him at (419) 663-9300 or visit www.innovaservices.info

Surrounding the production system is a set of steps and skills that keep the operation running smoothly and help manage costs and maintain quality. These steps and skills include:

- Accurate forecasting
- Consistency
- Portion control
- Pre-preparation
- Production meetings
- Batch cooking
- Proper handling of leftovers

A production system that's properly set up will enable an operator to produce a consistent, high quality product and manage cost. It is critical to constantly monitor and evaluate the results achieved from following the production sheet and answer these questions:

- Was data collected correct?
- Was the forecasted number of meals accurate?
- Were portion sizes as served correct?
- Were the recipes followed?

Production Sheets

Production sheets basically outline the job routine for production staff. The production sheet should contain all the information staff needs to prepare the meals for today and to organize supplies and make preparations for the next day or two. Depending on the size of the facility, it may guide the work of the day at one workstation, several workstations, or the kitchen as a whole. It is also the place

to record deviations from the plan for the day, if they come up.

Production sheets should help and guide your overall production system, which entails these steps and skills.

Accurate Forecasting

Forecasting is not just for meteorologists. Accurate forecasting of production will help keep you out of trouble with your customers, your staff, and your boss. Many factors affect the amount of food your department should prepare for any given day, but with common sense and an understanding of the factors, the “over or under” production can be controlled. In situations where you are tracking customer counts, spending, and charges, consider a point-of-sale (POS) system. This can provide very

around you. Various factors affect the amount of food that will be consumed. For example, if it is a very hot day in your area, perhaps cold items will be more in demand and should be available.

Consistency

An old foodservice saying is “You are only as good as your last meal.” A key ingredient in any foodservice establishment is consistency. Will the meatloaf taste the same today as it did last time and will next time? Your customers expect to know whether or not they like an item that's on the menu—not that they like or don't like it when a certain cook makes it. Is there a problem with the item? Is a recipe available and followed? Is the recipe extended or scaled to the correct amount for all ingredients and in



“Portion control is another critical step to ensure that you have enough food. Portion control requires some specific equipment.”

useful data and offer many nice features and benefits.

Forecasting means estimating how much food you will need without having all of the information you would like to have about the situation. A good operator will forecast the amount of food based on information—past and present—that may influence the needs for the day. To determine your estimate, consider prior cycle usage, today's census, weather, payday, events inside or outside your operation, day of the week, holiday, and other factors you think are relevant, compared with the same factors for past cycles. In other words, to make a good forecast you must be aware of happenings in the world

accurate measurement sizes? Are all recipe ingredients available? How do you know ingredients were ordered? Once you have answered these questions, make sure you follow-up with the action needed to prevent the same problem. Organizing data can be complex and time consuming, and POS systems with expanded capabilities can offer an efficient and organized manner of tracking this data and even incorporating it into your production system.

Portion Control

Portion control is another critical step to ensure that you have enough food. Portion control requires some specific equipment, such as:

- Scales, pound and ounce sizes
- Measuring pitchers, quart and gallon
- Measuring cups, dry and liquid
- Measuring spoons
- Scoops, spoodles, and ladles in sizes needed to serve your menu

Pre-Preparation/Freezer Pulls

Fail to plan and you plan to fail. Do you remember ever trying desperately to thaw a huge mass of product so it could be prepped for a meal? It happens all too often and results in shortcuts being taken that put food safety at risk.

Make a list of items to be pulled from the freezer two days prior to preparation day. Transfer this information to your production sheet...and don't forget, orders for those items must be in house the day before they need to be pulled.

Production Meetings

Production meetings should be held either daily or weekly, depending on the skills of your production staff and the complexity of your operation. Meetings provide opportunities to discuss all the components of the production sheet, any upcoming events, recipes, substituted products, meal changes for the week, and any equipment concerns impacting production. A culinary tip or two can also be shared with or by your production team during this meeting.

Batch Cooking

Batch cooking is preparing the same menu item several times during the meal service to ensure that the last customer gets the same quality product received by the first customer. This is most commonly used with menu items that have short cooking times, such as vegetables or items that will not maintain quality if held for extended periods of time, like fish or fried foods.

Timing is everything when it comes to giving your customer the best possible product and reducing waste. A good example of batch cooking is Mc-

Donalds French fries: an average store may go through 1000 pounds a day, but employees do not cook them all at once, they cook them in batches and time it correctly so there are always fresh hot fries.

Proper Handling of Leftovers

Management of leftovers should follow ServSafe guidelines: proper storage, labeling, dating, and reheating procedures. Here are a few tricks:

Portion soup in muffin tins and freeze. Once the soup is frozen, place the tins in resealable bags, label and date, and use for individual portions as needed.

Freeze items in resealable bags and in workable sizes. This will allow quick freezing and thawing. Label and date.

It's important to keep track of refrigerator and freezer temperatures. Use a chart to record temperatures daily

and include the initials of the person testing temps. Complying with HACCP principles can be a paperwork monster. Some systems on the market today can track, document, and alert managers to concerns in a proactive manner. Don't forget to dispose of items not used by the discard date.


Steam Table Diagrams

Steam table diagrams are a great way to ensure that steam table wells are used to the greatest advantage. Presentation should be considered if in a retail area; speed, ease, and accuracy of service should be the primary factors in situations where the customer does not see the steam table. Wells should be filled or covered if there is an empty segment. The configuration should factor in separation of hot and cold wells.

(Continued on page 36)

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Standardized Recipes

Use standardized recipes which list ingredients and cooking instructions for menu items. A standardized recipe has been adjusted to produce a volume of product that matches typical foodservice needs in your operation and the cooking equipment you use.

Using standardized recipes is critical to producing quality food. When recipes are carefully followed, the menu item will taste the same, regardless of who is cooking.

Recipes help in the management of food cost—the buyer knows how much to purchase, the cook knows how much to make, leftovers are reduced, excess food is minimized, and the menu item has the expected nutrient content.

Order Guides

An order guide can ensure ordering efficiency, stabilize inventory, limit substitutions due to run outs or overstocks, track and document product costs, help keep food cost on target, and allow a substitute to place an accurate order in the absence of your usual person. In addition, order guides contribute to food quality and safety by ensuring you order known products whose characteristics are suited to your recipes and production methods. When setting up your order guide,

- Complete a comprehensive inventory list of items required to produce the menu. Organize the list by storage area, in order of items. This list should flow from inventory sheet to storage shelves (“sheet to shelf”) and should not include dead stock.
- Set up the order guide on the computer so it flows in the same manner as your inventory list throughout all storage areas.
- Print a master copy; this will be the base for your order guide.
- Establish par levels for all par stock items and enter them on the master order guide.

- Take the menu and group the days together that equal an order. For example, if you have a five-week cycle menu and you order twice a week, you will have 10 groupings of orders. Order specific non-par stock items. Amount ordered should be:

- **Amount needed** for the order cycle
- **Minus** amount on hand
- **Plus** amount to be used prior to and including delivery date
- **Equals** amount to be ordered
- Use inventory list to complete a monthly inventory on the designated day each month.

Tip...Keep a separate order guide for your china, flatware, and serving utensils. Include par level, type, pattern, vendor, and any other specs that will help you order the same items.

Summing it Up

A well-designed system will help you effectively manage your food produc-

tion. Great systems are on the market and by understanding the features and how they can apply can offer automation and save time. POS systems can be more than a cash register. They can be advanced and cover many of the manual competencies of a production system in addition to the complex tracking and accounting information. A complete production system will directly impact

- Food cost
- Food quality
- Productivity
- Sales
- Budget
- Your job security
- Your department’s reputation
- Customer perception
- Worker satisfaction

Carefully plan a production system that meets your department’s needs, and you will save time, money, and improve customer satisfaction. **DM**



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