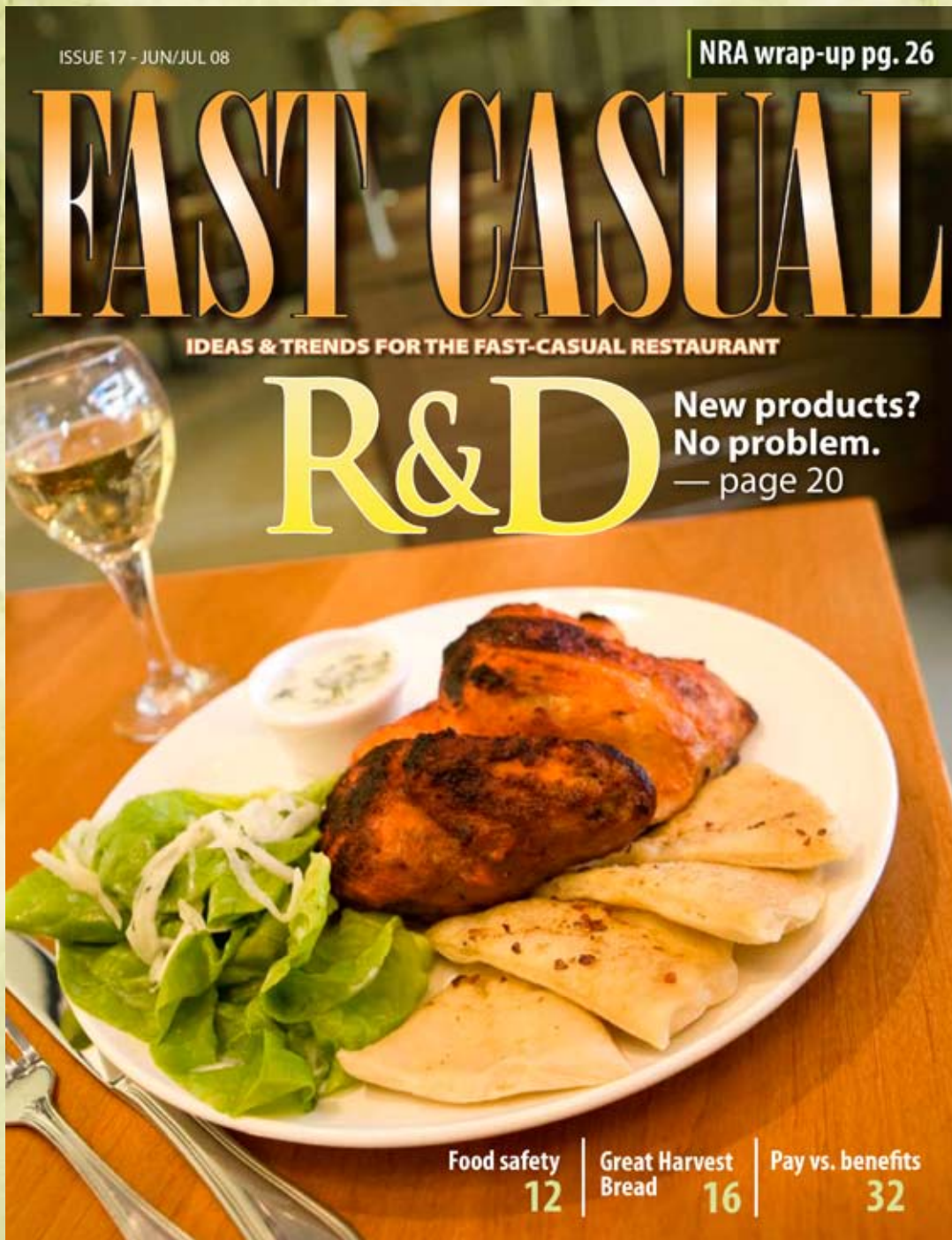


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equipment

richard slawsky

Heating things up

Deciding what type of oven to use boils down to fuel cost and availability

Whether to use natural gas or electricity to power ovens is one of the first questions operators ask when considering the type of equipment to buy for a new restaurant.

Determining what type of fuel source an operator plans to use involves taking a hard look at the numbers. Restaurant location, fuel availability and long-term operating costs all influence the choice between gas and electric ovens.

According to Jim Villemaire, director of research and development for the FOCUS Brands concept Schlotzsky's, one of the first things to consider is where an operation will be located.

"If you are opening up in places like a mall, an airport or some other non-traditional location, there can be differences in what's available," Villemaire said. "The main factor is often the build-out costs."

If an operator is opening in a location that requires both fire suppression and a hood for anything that uses gas, sometimes on the front end it can be less expensive to go with electric, Villemaire said. In other situations, gas-powered equipment may be the preferred choice.

Schlotsky's uses three basic pieces of equipment, Villemaire said: a cheese melter, which is typically a combination gas and electric conveyor; a pizza oven, which can be either a combination gas/electric or a straight electric conveyor, and a bakery oven, some of which are straight electric and some of which are combination gas/electric.

"Our concept is 37 years old, so there are a lot of different pieces of equipment out in the field," he said.

Look for rebates

If either type of oven can be installed for about the same effort, the next thing to consider is long-term operating costs. The region of the country an operator is located in can determine how expensive it will be to operate a particular piece of equipment.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, it's cheaper to operate natural gas-powered kitchen equipment in California, Hawaii, Alaska and in the upper Northeast States. In the rest of the country, it's cheaper either to operate electric-powered equipment or the costs are roughly the same.

When it comes to overseas expansion, Schlotsky's prefers to use electric ovens, Villemaire said.

"Some parts of the world have problems with the reliability of the gas supply, and that is one of the things to consider if you are planning on expanding into certain countries," said Joel Maurer, product manager for Eaton, Ohio-based Henny Penny. "What supplies are available can help you decide if you want to source gas versus electric equipment."

Operators also should check with their utility providers before purchasing equipment to see if there are incentives to buy one type over another, said David Sager, product line manager for Troy, Ohio-based foodservice equipment maker Hobart. For example, San Diego-based Southern California Gas Co. offers rebates of up to \$25,000 for restaurant operators who purchase new gas-powered equipment for their businesses.

"Operators need to find out who is their electric or gas supplier, are they doing any rebates and whether they help with installation costs," Sager said. "That is

FAST FACTS

According to Energy Star, using a qualified commercial dishwasher can save businesses an average of 90 Btus and \$850 per year on their energy bills along with more than \$200 per year and 52,000 gallons per year due to reduced water usage.

becoming more and more popular with both gas and electric companies throughout the country."

Look at the long term

Everything else being equal, there's not much difference in performance between electric ovens and gas ovens, equipment manufacturers say.

"We developed our equipment to be the same as far as performance, quality and reliability, so that customers have the flexibility and convenience of not having to worry about that. It makes it easier for them to focus on their own operation," Maurer said. "We are used to dealing with customers who have operations that include both gas and electric so it is not usually an either/or but a both/and situation."

Gas equipment tends to cost more initially because of the extra components and complexity involved in such equipment, although cheaper operating costs may compensate for the higher initial investment. Electric equipment generally is less expensive but may cost more to operate in the long run.

No matter what the choice of fuel supply may be, it's important to work with a reliable equipment supplier, Maurer said.

"We design equipment to not have any issues, but if there are, it is good to know that someone is there to be a partner," he said.



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