

Leaving Hand Breading in the Dust!

Ted's Montana Grill harnesses new technology to deliver on its promise of made-from-scratch freshness and quality.

Ted's Montana Grill likes to keep things authentic beginning with the food. The 54-unit restaurant chain with operations in 19 states features an entire menu of fresh items that are made from scratch daily. Or, as the company likes to claim, "No freezer. No microwave. No boil-in-the-bag. No pretense."



Among the most popular side items on the menu at Ted's Montana Grill are Salt-n'-Pepper Onion Rings, served with a special horseradish dipping sauce. They're the perfect complement to such signature dishes as the Premium Bison Burger and Springer Mountain® Beer Can Chicken. Justly famous, the Salt-n'-Pepper Onion Rings are yet another way the

chain is able to differentiate itself from competitors in its category.

In order to offer a unique and fresh made-from-scratch product, Ted's Montana Grill prepares its onion rings in each of its restaurant kitchens, rather than purchasing a frozen pre-breaded product. The onion rings are prepared daily, using a proprietary batter-and-breading recipe.

Serving a freshly made product required extra effort and labor in the kitchen, explains Randy McAdoo, director of purchasing for Ted's Montana Grill. "Due to the popularity of the onion rings, a problem we faced was our ability to mass-produce onion rings by hand," he says. "We used to have employees hand-battering and breading onion rings all day long in order to keep up with customer demand. We were even taking managers-in-training away from their managerial duties to hand-bread the onion rings."

At first trying to experiment with speeding up the hand-breading process, this caused other problems. "We found that the faster we hand-breaded the rings, the more inconsistent the final product was for the customer from a quality control standpoint," McAdoo notes.

The need to improve efficiencies while maintaining onion ring quality and consistency led Ted's Montana Grill to acquire batter breading machines for its kitchen operations. The company purchased several breading machines from the manufacturer, Bettcher Industries, and after a successful trial period, decided to install them systemwide.

The batter breading machines do a great job in improving labor efficiencies. A foodservice operator is still involved in the onion ring-making process, but the machines replace the "muss and fuss" of the hand-breading procedure with a much cleaner operation that also produces a consistent-quality product. Perfect for breading onion rings at Ted's Montana Grill, Bettcher breading machines are also used in other foodservice establishments like Sonic Drive In, Frisch's Big Boy, and Runza for fresh-breading onion rings.

Other foodservice establishments utilize the batter breading equipment for a wide variety of menu items such as poultry products (bone-in and boneless chicken), vegetables (mushrooms, zucchini, eggplant), and seafood products (fish filets, shrimp, crab cakes, calamari, etc.).

At Ted's Montana Grill, Chris Raucci, corporate chef, is very pleased with the performance of the batter breading machines. "Quality is superior using the Bettcher breader. When the equipment is in motion, it continuously sifts the breading which minimizes dough balls. It also helps keep seasonings evenly distributed throughout the breading, whereas before the seasonings would settle and cause some of the onion rings to be too salty." An added benefit: Minimizing moisture absorption in the breading reduces clumping and cracklings, thereby extending the life of the frying oil.

Another key benefit experienced with breading machines is in the volume of onion rings that can be made. "Hands down, the Bettcher breeder is faster than what our best employees could ever produce with hand-breading," says Raucci. "We now have the job completed before the lunch rush begins, rather than continuing all day long. We utilize the extra hours saved on the cooks line to get the food out to our customers, hotter and fresher than before." Although individual restaurant results vary, depending on the sales volume, McAdoo reports that 20 to 30 hours of labor are saved per week per restaurant, contributing to a very attractive equipment ROI.



In addition to the highly tangible benefit of labor savings, McAdoo reports that employees are happier using the batter breading machine. "They prefer using the breading machine over hand-breading the onion rings ... it's actually more important for them than whether the air conditioning is working! Of course, that's not too surprising. If you've ever hand-breaded food, you know it's a hard, tedious, messy and thankless job," he maintains.

Improving working conditions for employees is a strong factor in reducing employee turnover in the restaurant industry. The batter breading equipment helps out in this respect. Says Raucci, "In the past, our employees would complain if they had to hand-bread the food. Now, they compete to see who'll be able to use the breading machine."

Kitchen cleanliness will always be a challenge for restaurant operations. To this end, the batter breading machine promotes a much cleaner work area when compared to hand-breading. According to Raucci, in the past, prep employees had to walk carefully so as not to track flour and crumbs throughout the kitchen. With the batter breading machines, this problem has become essentially a non-issue. And the machines themselves are designed for easy disassembly for hand- or machine-washing, making cleanup fast and thorough.

For new employees, operating the batter breading machine has proven to be quite easy. Ted's Montana Grill finds that providing around 20 minutes of hands-on training, combined with reviewing instructional handouts, is all the training most employees need in order to operate the equipment properly.



For Ted's Montana Grill, the various benefits of using breading machines for preparing its signature Salt-n'-Pepper Onion Rings really comes down to two basic ones. "For us, it's reducing labor cost and improving the consistency of the product's quality," McAdoo maintains.

No doubt that's true. Because in today's market where restaurants are facing higher minimum wage labor rates and as consumers are being more careful with their out-of-home dining expenditures delivering better food quality at a lower cost seems like the easiest decision in the world.



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