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BEYOND THE PLATE

EVERYONE
LIKES A
SHOW-OFF

Make a
statement
with a
functional
showpiece

BY MONICA GINSBURG



To make a statement, restaurants are reaching for the big and bold, grabbing attention with showpieces that bridge form and function. From behemoth imported pizza ovens to towering custom-made espresso machines, show-casing equipment can create buzz, reinforce the brand and boost the bottom line.

The Wow Factor

Tossing out the white tablecloths and jackets, Chicago restaurateur Tony Mantuano brought the bar center stage at his revamped Italian fine dining restaurant Splaggia. At the focal point: a hand-operated red prosciutto slicer on a red pedestal from historic Dutch company Berkel Inc.

"It's a connection to the past in the way the machine is designed, and the bright red color attracts people's attention," Mantuano says. "They walk in and are amazed. It's like looking at an Italian sports car."

But Mantuano says the \$8,000 slicer isn't just for show. The precision of the machine, which is operated by a flywheel, is unsurpassed. Since its debut in May, prosciutto and meats have become top sellers in the lounge. "Our customers want to be part of the experience," he says.

And when his newest restaurant, River Roast, opened in July, Mantuano sat a smaller \$5,000 countertop model next to the salad station where it is visible to the entire establishment.

"I feel like we're doing justice to the Italian culture," he says. "It's a sign to our guests that we take what we're doing seriously."

Making an Investment

Atlanta's European-inspired Café Intermezzo coffeehouses are known for their freshly ground coffee and dozens of housemade pastries. The showstopper, however, is their custom-crafted, four-head La Marzocco

espresso machine encased by three towering brass-domed cylinders.

"The machine is big and bold and helps paint a picture of who we are," owner Brian Olson says. "It's the focal point of the whole place."

And it's a workhorse which Olson says he needs to keep up with his three busy restaurants. Two baristas can operate the machine at the same time for faster service, and its consistent performance is critical for a high-demand, rapid-production environment.

An additional bonus: Its appearance shows the restaurants are serious about coffee and quality.

At \$40,000 per machine, Olson says it takes

him two years to recoup his investment, a timeline that's helped by high profit margins on specialty drinks. An average cup sells for \$3.50, and 88 percent of that is gross profit, he says.

Straight to the Source

Dino Santonicola, executive chef at the four Cane Rosso pizzerias in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, says true Neapolitan-style pies require three things: fresh, authentic ingredients; well-trained pizza makers; and the best equipment available.

For Santonicola, who attended culinary school in Italy and has worked in some of the most highly regarded pizza restaurants, that

means a 5,000-pound, igloo-shaped, wood-fired brick oven made to order by Italian company Stefano Ferrara Forni.

The ovens run from \$15,000 to \$30,000 and turn out about 600 thin, chewy-crust pies per night. The original location, which opened in Dallas in 2011, features a red tiled dome with the red dog logo in the middle representing owner Jay Jerrier's red dog (Cane rosso means "red dog" in Italian). A granite bar and counter around the perimeter provide the best seats in the house.

Making The Right Statement

Display the piece properly. There's no use in hiding an \$8,000 piece of equipment. Splaggia's Tony Mantuano says, "If I put this in the back in the kitchen, it would be a waste of money. You have to be able to show it off and build a menu around it."

Take chances. Big equipment is a big investment, but Marjorie Druker says the gamble paid off at The Modern Rotisserie. "You become the expert when you have a statement. Our statement is 'we make it here.'"

Train, train, train. Dino Santonicola says it can take up to a year to train employees to properly operate the ovens at Cane Rosso, which require a consistent temperature for quality and efficiency. "If you're going to do it, do it the right way or not at all," he says.



Executive Chef Dino Santonicola shows off a pizza oven, which is also a statement piece.

"There are many less expensive pizza ovens that are easier to use," he says. "For us, it's a necessary piece to produce an authentic product."

Bigger is Better

You can't miss the chickens rolling around the oversized purple floor-to-ceiling rotisserie at two-year-old The Modern Rotisserie in Newton, Massachusetts.

And that's exactly what co-owner and executive chef Marjorie Druker wants.

"I knew I needed a bigger than average rotisserie," Druker says of the French-made \$15,000 piece of equipment. "And I didn't want to be like everyone else."

The restaurant prepares 100 free-range chickens a day, and fresh chickens are put on every hour. To improve efficiency and boost flavor, potatoes and other vegetables roast simultaneously in the top and bottom baskets. Druker credits the French-inspired rotisserie style of cooking for the chicken's shellacked skin and fall-off-the-bone meat, and for providing a point of interaction with her customers.

"The open format of the rotisserie lets our customers watch as the chickens rotate and cook, sizzling away and creating a delicious aroma," she says. "Many of our customers like to pick out their chicken right as we're taking them off the spit. It's hard to walk out of here without one." ■

Monica Ginsburg is a Chicago-based business writer.