BY TOM O'BRIEN

Holding the lines

IN THE MOST BASIC SENSE, WARMERS AND holding cabinets keep food warm. But as with most equipment purchases, finding the best one for your operation isn't simply a matter of deciding which is cheapest. With an almost dizzying array of models from which to choose, it may take more planning than you think to find the best choice.

Hold it

The primary use for a holding cabinet is, obviously, holding cooked food. The benefit of this equipment for a busy operation that has to churn out a lot of orders in a short amount of time is clear. "A lot of holding cabinets are designed to take food and put it in 'suspended animation,' where it's staying just about where it was when it came out of the sauté pan or off the grill," explains Robert Simmelink, executive chef and business development manager for Alto-Shaam, Inc.

HENNY PENNY HHC-903

Another benefit to holding cabinets is that they can serve as a "waiting area" for food that's partially prepped. Simmelink uses a braised lamb shank entrée as an example. "There's no reason that you can't cook it during the day," he says, "and then hold it in the cabinet. It's already hot at 160°... and you can just refire it quickly before it goes out to the guest."

VULCAN'S VHP15

Some foods work better than others in holding cabinets. "A lot of meat products—items like prime rib and meat loaf—work well, as do vegetables," says Jim Sherman, sales and marketing manager for holding and transport at Vulcan. "In most cases with meat and vegetables, you'll do well as long as you're keeping your time and temperature reasonable." Fried foods, he says, tend not to hold up as well in heated cabinets.

CARTER-HOFFMAN CH6

Buy It

Holding cabinets are one category where it can really pay to find Energy Star-rated models. According to the EPA, an Energy Star-qualified holding cabinet can save an operator anywhere from $340 to $960 annually on energy bills.

Part of that savings comes from insulation, as both insulated and non-insulated holding cabinets are readily available. Beyond the energy savings that insulated cabinets provide, they can also be a good choice if the cabinet is in a relatively open area, because the outside of an insulated cabinet stays cooler to the touch.

Because of the heavy—and not-always-careful—use it gets, durability is especially important in a holding cabinet. "Look at how it's built, how it's put together," advises Sherman. "Look at the quality of the handles. Anything that sticks out gets beat on. If you're going to move it around a lot, check the coasters."

The heat distribution system within the cabinet also merits a close look. The more that heated air circulates around the food, the greater the chance of the food inside drying out.

Warm it

For smaller operations or under-counter usage, the holding cabinet's little brother—the warmer—may be the better choice. Warmers can either be freestanding or built in, and normally have either two or three drawers. Some manufacturers offer convection models. Many warmers come with two heat settings: A lower setting for keeping breads and rolls warm and a higher setting for meats and vegetables. Sliding vents on the drawers can help adjust the amount of air that circulates in and out. Just as in full-size holding cabinets, durability is essential in warmers. "They're meant to be abused on the line," says Simmelink.

HATCO FLAV-R-SAVOR FSHC-6W1

SELECTED HALF-SIZE HOLDING CABINETS AT A GLANCE

MANUFACTURER/ MODEL	SIZE (H X W X D)	HUMIDIFIED	FEATURES/OPTIONS
Alto-Shaam 500-S	33 1/16 in. x 17 7/8 in. x 26 3/8 in.	No	Energy Star certified; pass-through option available; stackable design; digital temperature control; antimicrobial handle
Hatco Flav-R-Savor FSHC-6W1	32 1/8 in. x 25 3/8 in. x 29 1/2 in.	Yes	Energy Star certified; stainless steel or glass door available; stackable design; digital temperature readout; insulated side walls
Henny Penny HHC-903	37 1/2 in. x 24 3/4 in. x 31 3/4 in.	No	Energy Star certified; pass-through option available; digital temperature control; five programmable timers
Carter-Hoffmann CH6	38 1/2 in. x 24 in. x 35 1/4 in.	No	Digital temperature control; top-mounted; removable heating system
Cres Cor H-137-SUA-6C	43 in. x 28 3/4 in. x 34 3/16 in.	No	Energy Star certified; field reversible door; optional key lock handle
Vulcan VHP7	36 3/4 in. x 21 in. x 26 3/4 in.	No	Energy Star certified; fixed racking; field reversible door