

# PREPARED SEAFOOD GETS A PUSH

Advanced equipment is designed to spur in-store preparation.

BY JEFF BANOWETZ

## KEY POINTS

● Sales of prepared seafood are up in a down fresh seafood market.

● Retailers are using steamers for low- and high-volume in-store cooking.

● Infrared devices are intended to maintain moisture.

The way consumers are buying their seafood is changing—and creating new opportunities for merchandisers.

In the midst of declining overall seafood sales, prepared items are on the rise.

Nielsen Perishables Group, a Chicago-based fresh food consulting and research firm, reports that sales of fresh seafood were down 1.5 percent for the 52 weeks ended Nov. 26, 2011.

Sales of prepared seafood—which account for 17 percent of the seafood market—rose 6.4 percent during that period.

While consumers may be buying less seafood to cook themselves, they do have an interest in eating seafood if it's prepared well by someone else.

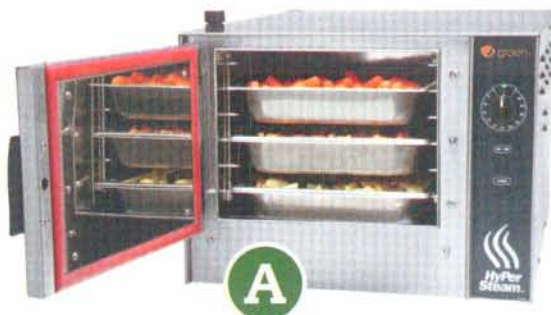
Indeed, Mintel International Group Ltd., a London-based market research firm, notes that 24 percent of large households indicated anxiety over cooking seafood right. With seafood prices rising, the fear of ruining an expensive piece of fish is another factor working against sales.

But with more consumers willing to buy prepared seafood, it is important that seafood department operators have the appropriate equipment, including steamers.

Dan Somers, executive director of the Portland-based Maine Lobster Council, for instance, notes that many supermarkets in the Northeast will steam lobsters for free.

While relatively inexpensive countertop steamers are used for lobster, crab and shrimp, more advanced steamers, like the HyPer Steam from Jackson, Miss.-based Groen, are designed for high-volume cooking.

The generator device features an automatic fill and drain, so there's no lugging water to the unit.



**A** Countertop steamers, like the HyPer Steam from Groen, support value-added seafood development.

**B** Vulcan Food Equipment Group is marketing grills that are intended to better maintain cooking temperatures.



"A generator-based steamer creates the steam outside the cooking cavity," says Jim Embrey, Groen product specialist. "That allows the waste from high-fatty protein and preservatives to go down the drain."

Maintaining a consistent temperature on a grill also is critical in cooking fish and other seafood to avoid overcooking. Products that support that effort include the IRX Infrared Charbroiler from Vulcan Food Equipment Group, Louisville, Ky.

The infrared platform allows much more usable space on the grill (by eliminating hot spots and cold spots) and results in lower energy costs.

"In a traditional charbroiler, a high-energy air wash removes moisture from whatever you're cooking," says Tim Welsh, Vulcan sales development manager. "It dries out the food. With infrared cooking, the food retains much more moisture. It tastes better and is easier to cook correctly."

Vacuum tumblers, meanwhile, also can be used to efficiently create prepared foods.

Tumbling is used to marinate seafood (or meat or poultry), with the vacuum causing the product to absorb the marinade more thoroughly. The result is juicier and tastier seafood.

It also provides an opportunity for retailers to highlight unique, ready-to-cook items that are easy for customers to take home and throw on the grill or in the oven without any work on their part. ●