



# Tools of the Trade

## We Can't Live Without Our...

Operators identify the trusty tools they find indispensable in the kitchen.

BY PATRICK WHITE

**T**here is no single item in the kitchen that is most essential to prepare school meals. Just as it takes teamwork among child nutrition staff, it takes numerous tools and equipment to get the job done. But that doesn't mean operators don't have their favorite products! *School Nutrition* asked more than 100 school nutrition professionals to name the most important devices in their kitchens—the tools they couldn't live without.

Plenty responded with a note that the most reliable and indispensable kitchen resource is the dedicated school nutrition staff. "I have to say that the one thing I could never do without in a production kitchen has to be a sharp-minded staff member who can think while working and address any and all changes that may arise—and they do! Truly the best 'tool' to have for any operation," declares Toni Fisher, director of food and nutrition services emeritus with Evanston Township High School in Illinois.

"The 'items' we can't live without are the friendly, outgoing, caring, totally awesome foodservice staff," agrees Nancy Coughenour, SNS, director at Shawnee (Kan.) Mission Schools. "We feel our employees are the most precious commodity, because

without them we have nothing." And Susan Baier, child nutrition director for Green Bay (Wis.) Public Schools, says she places a premium on "face-to-face communication—sometimes the computer just doesn't have that personal touch."

While we all can agree that this is a profession where people make the ultimate difference, there was plenty of enthusiasm for some essential inanimate objects. The passion for certain products that help many of our responding operators to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their school nutrition programs comes through loud and clear. Following, in their own words, are descriptions of some of the tools they depend on daily. You will notice some repeated citations (Sunkist Sectionizers!), but, for the most part, you will find a wide range of equipment being lauded. Perhaps you will be introduced to a solution that one day will prompt you to assert, "How did I ever live without that?"

**What's HOT?** Lyman Graham, foodservice director, Roswell (N.M.) Independent Schools, doesn't need a crystal ball to forecast what school kitchens will look like in the decade ahead. "I would say [we can't live without] the new SelfCooking Center® by Rational. These are ovens that do it all. They are the ovens of the future for schools," he asserts.

Kathleen Poor, SNS, foodservice director, Twin Valley Community Local School District, in West Alexandria, Ohio, also focused on an essential item for serving hot foods: "Our favorite piece of equipment is our Blodgett combi oven/steamer. We use it to steam frozen vegetables every day. In combi mode, you can roast meats that come out tender and juicy. If our convection ovens are full, we







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can switch to just oven mode and use it as an oven."

Toni Fisher insists she can't identify just one item. "My mind is racing here as I find so many things are critical for a well-functioning operation," she notes. "I first thought of the Lincoln Impinger oven that bakes so many things well, especially pizza, fish, meatballs and meatloaf, as well as breaded meat items and potato products—so well, in fact, that the breaded products and potatoes taste almost fried, yet are still tender and juicy. One great feature is the fact that there are no 'hot spots'—or 'cold spots'—as you might find in conventional or convection ovens. Each pan flows evenly through the impinged air compartment on a conveyor, and the timing is precisely the



same for each pan as it goes through.

"Because it stacks up to three high, yet the top oven is not even as high as a double-stacked convection oven, it also prevents those nasty burns that can come from reaching too high for a pan on the top shelf of that double-stacked oven, or even having some pan grease spill down on you, as you pull that pan from the higher shelf. It produces massive amounts of food while taking up a very small footprint, so important in most [school] kitchens. Because there is no door to open to retrieve the food, it maintains an even temperature at all times—and throws very little heat out into the work area," she explains.

Fisher cites another must-have: "My other thought was to say that a good French knife is indispensable for so many kitchen operations, but that led me to the Chef'sChoice electric knife sharpener as the back-up to that sharp knife. The sharpener has been a great addition to our operation, as it prevents the dangers brought on by a dull

knife, yet is simple to operate in order to achieve a keen edge."

**Scratch That** Kay Hauser is foodservice director for St. Johns Unified School District, a rural Arizona system that, she says, menus a blend of scratch-cooked items and prepared products. "We could not live without a proofing cabinet. In addition to bread dough, it is the backup to our serving line, saves steps to the oven and maintains heat/quality better than an oven," she notes, adding, "I just ordered a new one—a Vulcan—for an elementary school, to replace one that went out a month ago. I changed brands this time, hoping to get a brand that we can obtain replacement parts as needed on time."

Another key tool in Hauser's operation is "our big Groen electric/tilting pot (40-gal. capacity). It cooks everything for us: beans, mac and cheese, spaghetti and spaghetti sauce, sloppy Joes, taco meat, gravy, red enchilada sauce, refried beans, etc."

Finally, she points to a small, but equally essential device: plastic bowl scrapers, important for her team's work with bread dough and pizza crust. "I get them from SAF Yeast Company."

**Staff, Steamers and Slicers** Allison Bradford, SNS, child nutrition programs director, Anoka-Hennepin (Minn.) School District, didn't want to presume that she knew the answer for her team on the front lines. "I went straight to our child nutrition site supervisors for their input on your question," she notes. Diane Pietrzak, child nutrition supervisor, Roosevelt Middle School, cites the steamer—as well as "a good group of team players."

Her colleague Bobbi Olson, child nutrition site supervisor, and Olson's team at Anoka Middle School for the Arts, also paid homage to their steamer. "We have decided that we could not live without our Vulcan steamer. The reasons I got from my staff were that it is easy to use and clean [and] that various items that used to be put in ovens before for longer periods now can be cooked in less time. And [the result is] a much better product overall."

Two of Anoka-Hennepin's supervisors shared great enthusiasm for a handy tool that was lauded from coast to coast. "Right







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off the bat, I would say the Sunkist Sectionizer would be one thing that we would not like to go without," says Carol Tyler, child nutrition site supervisor, Coon Rapids High School. "We use it every day. We are adding more and more fruits and vegetables on the line all the time, and cutting our own really saves on cost and labor."

Dawn Richard, child nutrition site supervisor, Johnsville Elementary School, agrees. "In this day and age where everything is about fresh fruit and veggies, and trying to get kids to eat them, why not

make them look fun to eat? I would have to say my 'I can't live without item' would be my Sunkist slicer," she reports. "I find this item so versatile: I can cut cucumbers to mushrooms, apples to oranges; it allows me to change the way the fruit looks with different slicing blades; and I can slice 10 pounds of cucumbers in minutes. One day we can offer cored oranges and the next sliced and show our customers how to turn them into smiles with teeth!" It's clear that Richard understands that students need encouragement to keep eating fresh produce. "Some [cooks may] feel it is too time-consuming to cut up all these fruits and veggies, [but] I like to think I am going that extra mile for my customers," she says.

Down in Columbiana, Ala., Maureen Alexander, SNS, child nutrition program coordinator, Shelby County School District, also gives a shout-out to the popular slicer: "The first thing that comes to mind is the Sunkist Sectionizer that we purchased for most all of the elementary schools initially. After word got out, all grade levels wanted one and [we] have ordered multiple blades





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*This is a profession where people make the ultimate difference. Still, there is a passion for products that help improve efficiency.*

for different items. It is relatively inexpensive and an awesome tool for all kitchens at all grade levels!"

Carrie Woodruff, SNS, foodservice director, Lima City (Ohio) School District,

also put the Sectionizer at the top of her list. "We actually have three Sectionizers from Sunkist. They are so wonderful—the apples are cut and cored and the oranges are wedged," she notes. "There is a slicer, too. It will slice strawberries, tomatoes, kiwi, eggs, etc. With the new proposal to increase fruits and vegetables in the meal pattern, this product will be invaluable."

**Must-Have Miscellany** Woodruff and her team also identified other essential tools. "The Autobag PaceSetter bagger allows fresh bread, cookies and muffins to be sealed in an easy tear-off baggie. The bag sizes are 6x6 or 6x8 and are pre-perforated so the students can easily get to the item inside. It has a sealer, bags are on a roll and it is as fast as the person bagging," she cites, noting that the equipment was "included in our new building construction bid. [It's] a must-have if you are lucky enough to get new equipment."

And the Lima City team also can't do without their "holey pans," says Woodruff. Technically called False Bottoms, according to the Wasserstrom catalog, the pans hold foods above the pan bottom for draining and maintaining food quality and have 3/8-in. diameter drain holes with 7/8-in. diameter finger holes for easy removal from the pan. Jill Luke, manager at the district's Unity Elementary, says, "I personally couldn't do without the 2-in. long pans with the holes in them. Everything is better when we use the combi steamer, and the pans with holes are the pans of choice for me." Becky Schulien, manager at Independence Elementary, agrees, noting, "I like holey pans for meatballs and burgers. The grease drains, and you don't have that swimming in your pan."

Pans were top of mind for the team at Green Bay (Wis) Public Schools, reports Foodservice Director Susan Baier. They cite the multi-purpose value of "a full-size—18x26—sheet pan. You can never have enough, because we use them as shelves in cabinets, for pre-panning food for meals and as covers for foods in the blast chiller and coolers," she explains. "The majority of ours are Vollrath."

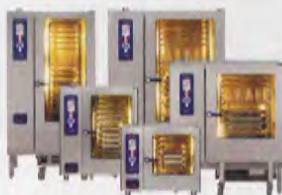






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Baier's staff also identified the following items as crucial to their productivity:

- "A three-tiered cart, no matter what brand or size. We purchase Lakeside stainless steel carts and dollies, as well as some Rubbermaid carts for light-duty work."

- Klever Cutter box cutters from San Jamar. "These cutters are NSF-certified and a safe way to open boxes."

- "Terry cloth rags!"

Julie Tunseth, the child nutrition director in Grand Forks (N.D.) School District, also visited with her managers to answer this question. Their essentials included computers, steamers, Sunkist slicer-and-wedge machines and the pass-through hotbox.

**Best, BAR None!** "Our programs can't live without our Cambro food bars," says Jane Johnson, child nutrition director for the Crane Elementary School District in Yuma, Ariz. "We have been using them since we first introduced our fruit and veggie bars to students in 1995. They are portable, no electricity required. Just fill the base with ice before putting in your serving pans. And it's easy to drain once the ice has melted at the end of serving."

One product feature Johnson appreciates is that the bars "are adjustable for height and available in different sizes. So, we have some for elementary-sized kids and some for our middle school sized-kids." In addition,

she notes, "They are on wheels that lock, so they are easily rolled into the cafeteria for serving and back into the kitchen for cleaning at the end of the day. And they stay put during serving with the locking wheels."

Cambro salad bar containers also were cited by Paula Pohlkamp, supervisor of child nutrition, North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale School District, St. Paul, Minn. "We have found the sizes—both depth and width—to be flexible in our serving needs by allowing us to put out a greater variety of items."

Pohlkamp is another fan of the Sunkist Sectionizer, acknowledging that it helps prevent injuries. Her team also finds Hatco hot water dispensers to be especially beneficial. "They dispense hot water, which can be used in soups, mashed potatoes, rice and pasta. This eliminates time by not having to boil water," she notes. And Pohlkamp would be remiss if she didn't add the PayPAMS credit card and meal activity software to her list of must-haves. "This allows credit card payments, which saves time on entering checks and cash," she explains, adding, "It also eliminates check fraud and theft issues—and parents have more insight into what their child is eating."

**A Long List?** Do some of these products make your best-of-the-best list? Does this article make you think of other tools that you find essential? Consider continuing the conversation on SNA's School Nutrition Network at [www.schoolnutrition.org/snn](http://www.schoolnutrition.org/snn). This online community is a great place to share solutions to common challenges. And even if this article doesn't prompt you to expand your ANC Exhibit Hall "shopping" list, it does give us the opportunity to stop for a moment and express gratitude for the tools—and people—that make our jobs easier. **SN**



**Patrick White** is a freelance writer in Middlesex, Vt., and a former assistant editor of this publication. Sectionizer photo on page 100, courtesy of Dawn Richard/Anoka-Hennepin Schools. Other equipment photos courtesy of Rational, Vulcan, EdgeCraft, Vollrath and Cambro.