

HOT FOOD REVOLUTION

Hot food display specialist Flexeserve's units are a common sight in the stores of some of the UK's biggest chains. With the company launching a highly-anticipated addition to its product family, *FEJ* paid a visit to its Leicestershire HQ to get the lowdown on the technology and an inside look at its market-leading facilities.



There will be many foodservice equipment manufacturers out there for whom any best-laid plans for a major product launch in 2020 will have been quietly put on the backburner or executed with less fanfare than might ordinarily be expected.



IT UNLOCKS GROUNDBREAKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE WORLD OF FOOD DELIVERY, TAKEAWAY AND PICK-UP”

But for Hinckley-based Flexeserve — an independent division of The Alan Nuttall Partnership — the roll-out of a significant new addition to its equipment portfolio couldn't have come at a more appropriate time.



Customers that use its flagship Flexeserve Zone will be well aware of its ability to achieve different temperatures within the same unit. Now, it has taken the capability of its unique hot air circulation technology a step further with the Flexeserve Hub, which can hot-hold large quantities of packaged products.

The system, which has already been deployed by two major customers (*see panel opposite*) promises game-changing benefits in terms of maintaining food quality, improving energy efficiency, reducing waste and extending shelf-life. “Flexeserve Hub is a major step forward for us — and the

world of hot food,” says Flexeserve’s CEO Jamie Joyce. “With it, we’re offering our technology to new types of operators and meeting the growing demand for hot food. Flexeserve Hub unlocks groundbreaking opportunities for the world of food delivery, takeaway and pick-up — and it can be used both front and back-of-house.”

One of the main objectives in the design of the Hub was to facilitate more efficient cooking — enabling operators to cook in large batches and then hot-hold back-of-house or display front-of-house. In practical terms, this means a kitchen can prepare and store best-sellers and scheduled orders outside of peak times, for much faster delivery and pick-up.

“There’s an opportunity to improve the quality and food security of hot food at the point of consumption as well,”



says Joyce. “This is because food orders, of any shape or size, be it boxed pizzas or order bags, are kept fully packaged at optimum temperature in an enclosed unit, until they are collected.”

CASE STUDY: FIRST OPERATORS TO USE THE FLEXESERVE HUB REPORT IMPROVEMENTS IN QUALITY AND CAPACITY

Two major UK customers have already been using the Flexeserve Hub within their operations prior to its official launch. Although they can’t be named, their experiences of the equipment provide an insight to the ways in which it can support new operational models.

Firstly, a supermarket chain has been using Flexeserve Hub as part of a hot food-to-go operation. Capacity has enabled it to dramatically increase the volume of product it can hot-hold by around 50%. In addition, it can also achieve consistent product core temperature, which wasn’t possible with its competitor units.


With the new unit, the supermarket is enjoying long hold times and high capacity — meaning it doesn’t have to be frequently restocked — as well as excellent energy efficiency, food quality and food security.

The other customer is using Flexeserve Hub back-of-house, staging hot food products in the kitchen, ready for quick service. In this situation, Flexeserve Hub

significantly relieves pressure on the small, busy team within the kitchen that prepares food for hot-holding front-of-house.

Previously, orders were prepared in the kitchen and awaited labelling, outside of the oven, for around 20 minutes. This meant that before going into Flexeserve Zone front-of-house, these warm products were cooling and condensing — compromising their quality.

Now, utilising the capacity of Flexeserve Hub, products can be hot-held straight out of the oven by the ‘tray-load’, with no cool down, and labelled in batches before they’re returned to the unit. As a result, products are then labelled tray by tray, without their core temperature dropping. And with the labelling all done, Flexeserve Zone can be stocked up with products of optimum quality and temperature. This is all achieved without adding to labour costs in the kitchen.

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Flexeserve’s success in the UK food-to-go-sector saw it achieve sales of £12m in 2019, a 50% increase on the previous 12 months. The pandemic certainly hasn’t knocked its ambitions, with Joyce revealing that it remains on course to exceed that this time around.

Partnerships with prestigious chains such as Greggs, Pret A Manger, Marks & Spencer, Asda and Sainsbury’s perhaps serve as the biggest endorsement of its equipment — and with the industry undergoing a cultural shift Flexeserve expects the Hub to help it expand the profile of customers it supplies.

The company thinks the unit could have an influential role to play within multi-brand ghost kitchens, where orders for different operators need to be prepared independently but stored together for collection by a delivery driver, as well as among QSRs struggling to offer really good quality collection and delivery services.

Before now, if hot-holding was part of a kitchen’s operation, it will

EDITOR'S VIEW: INSIDE FLEXESERVE'S NERVE CENTRE

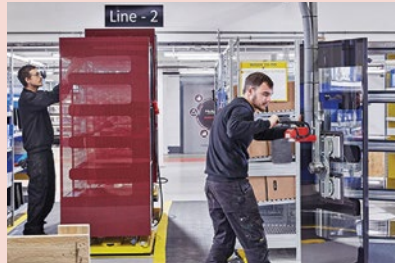
Visits to manufacturing facilities at home and abroad are a fairly common occurrence for the *Foodservice Equipment Journal* team, but it's fair to say that the restrictions placed upon all of us since March have meant a reduction in such outings for the time being.

So it was valuable to have the opportunity to see behind the curtain of Flexeserve's UK operation and discover what makes the company tick as it prepared to officially launch its new Flexeserve Hub recently.

With all the appropriate social distancing and safety measures in place, CEO Jamie Joyce and customer experience director Warwick Wakefield provided us with a comprehensive overview of the company's strategy and ethos.

Flexeserve's production facilities have remained open throughout the pandemic, driven by demand from the UK and overseas — the US is set to become a major focus for the business in the months ahead, says Joyce — and a relentless focus on new product development.

The company believes there are five key elements for achieving what it calls "true hot-holding" where food temperature and



quality are maintained. These are the product, the cook method, the packaging, the technology and the in-store service. While outsiders may perceive the business as an 'equipment manufacturer' it actually works with customers on a solutions-led basis to ensure each of those five points is met.

Flexeserve boasts a state-of-the-art test kitchen at Hinckley, where its team of experts advise customers on menu development, cooking methods and packaging optimisation. During our visit, it was testing how the flagship food product of a leading chain reacted to different temperature regimes.

Downstairs is the R&D floor, where design engineers are working on future product developments and testing new food-to-go concepts.

A purpose-built laboratory — thought to be the only one of its



kind in the UK — simulates the thermal environments in which the units may be placed. Over time, this set-up has allowed it to refine the pioneering hot air technology at the heart of its equipment through rigorous testing methods.

On the factory floor, meanwhile, every product is assembled by skilled engineers using the highest quality components and manufactured in compliance with ETL Intertek and CE standards.

Under Joyce's leadership, Flexeserve has embraced Lean manufacturing principles and introduced new automation to drive efficiencies. From the move to recyclable heavy duty cardboard packaging to the modification of loading bays to simplify the despatch process, it's the small details that count where this inventive brand is concerned.



The Flexeserve Hub aims to improve the quality of hot food at the point of consumption.

have almost definitely been to keep individual ingredients warm. With Flexeserve Hub, kitchens can now move to hot-holding whole packaged food orders.

Warwick Wakefield, customer experience director at Flexeserve, says the versatility of the Hub is central to its value proposition.

"Being able to hot-hold both front-of-house and back-of-house within a premises is something we're seeing many operators begin to desire or consider," he explains. "This would involve hot-holding with Flexeserve Hub in the kitchen, and restocking a front-of-house Flexeserve Hub or our industry-leading Flexeserve Zone heated display from there."

So, what's next for the business?

Its immediate focus is on making operators aware of how products such as the Hub and Zone can support new and existing ways of working, but its R&D team are constantly exploring fresh ideas based on their anticipated evolution of the market.

Cloud technology is almost certain to play a part in future developments given that the next generation of cloud-based controllers are already utilised within the Hub.

With major food-to-go retailers benefiting from Flexeserve's unique technology, the Hub's ability to support growing areas such as delivery and click and collect makes it a product whose time has truly come. **FEJ**