

Frozen pastry products - an opportunity or a threat?

Speaker: Nigel Meadows Sales director, Vandemoortele (UK) Ltd

79th Conference - Belfry Hotel, 6th/7th November, 1995

Have you often wondered whether there's too much gobbledegook in this industry? About where products originate from - and not enough concern about product quality and good old fashioned freshness.

Who invented the Belgian Bun? I can assure you it certainly wasn't the Belgians - they've never heard of it. Do Manchester tarts really come from Manchester? Swiss buns from Switzerland, Chelsea buns from Chelsea?

We all know that some of the best croissants aren't necessarily made in France. Who really cares? What's all this hang-up about Danish from Denmark? The Danes call them Wienerbrot - true testimony to their origin.

A relative newcomer to Scandinavia, Wienerbot arrived in Denmark following a row between the Danish government and the bakers of Copenhagen who reckoned they were being underpaid. The hapless artisans eventually found themselves out on their ear and their jobs were given to outsiders - Austrian craftsmen brought in from Vienna.

So any real baker knows the classic product started its life in Vienna and some of the best Danish is made here in Britain. And whether made from a ready-to-bake dough or ready-to-prove dough piece, or for those around us with the skills, from a sheet or square. Those of you who really care about your craft and business will know the better moist, Viennese style Danish technically is superior, stands up to handling from oven to counter, and stands the test when it comes to sales performance.

Over the last 40 years certainly there have been many changes in this industry. In my early days when working with a premix manufacturer I remember suggesting to an old friend that we should be doing something different to fill fermented ball doughnuts other than with raspberry jam.

I was firmly told: 'That's nothing new it's been done before.' And how very true are those words. Everything goes in cycles. Just look at the different types and fills we see in doughnuts today.

One area that hasn't changed and continues to grow is the customer's demand for perfect pastry products.

What has changed, and is constantly changing, is the way they are made. In the 90 minutes it takes to produce pastry from scratch a baker has the opportunity to do so many things. He could spend the time looking at automatic machinery to make the pastry himself, the investment necessary to buy the machinery, or searching for and testing the right margarine to make his pastry. But then he still needs to spend even more time:

- finishing
- deciding on recipes
- selling and promoting the products

The key argument from the craft bakery sector against using frozen pastry is that it tends to detract from the baker's traditional skills and training. If the consumer wants to demand a plain unfinished piece of pastry then that would probably be true.

At the end of the day the baker is surely in business to make a profit: to produce what the customer wants profitably.

In order to prosper in these tough trading times, skill and creativity is needed to produce a wide range of tempting products.

How many times have I heard that 'a good attractive product sells itself' and how true that is when it is sold at the right time, in the right place and at the right price. And why are bakers so afraid to sell at that right price? We see so many customers going into outlets other than the bakery fixture and regularly paying around £1 for a sweet or dessert.

In this industry there still is a bank of incredible skill. We should not be afraid to use that skill to 'add value' to products. How many times do I hear 'We haven't got time to finish it like that'? But often it is that finishing time that really adds value to the profit margin.

What price will consumers pay for freshness? We could spend a fortune on market research trying to find out - then not really know. One simple way to test this is to try these products in the business. Whether baking bread, frying doughnuts or baking pastries, the impact on a business of producing at point-of-sale is enormous. Equally there can be benefits for large volume speciality producers who need to supply a wide range of different finished products fresh daily.

I am not advocating a total frozen pastry regime for every business. There are many stages in the frozen pastry process. At each stage there are products which can offer benefits in a baker's business from the hands-on craftsman to full scale industrial production.

Whether using ready to bake preformed products or for the more craft oriented, using pastry in blocks, sheets squares or shells, the use of frozen pastry products can ease the introduction of new lines.

Why do we have to leave it to people like Haagen Dazs's to cream off the better margins when we have the potential to do it ourselves?

It is not an easy task to be continually ringing the changes to your products. However, modern day consumers demand change. Each time this means working out new recipes, experimenting with them, revising them and then hoping eventually they will sell.

The staff factor - we've all heard it so many times - can be eased by using frozen products.

Consistency is guaranteed time after time - all the hassle and variations in production are taken right out of the equation by using frozen pastry.

With frozen pastry comes an all inclusive insurance policy. How many times have bakers had a bad day's run through poor pastry?

The time saved by not needing to make pastry whether shortcrust, puff or Danish from scratch can be put to really profitable use. In the time it takes to produce puff and Danish products from scratch many products can be made up, proved and baked. And this is when the true craft skills come into play, by making quality end products. So what are the product opportunities open to us?

1. Croissants
2. Seasonal opportunities
3. Pre-formed opportunities
4. Multi-portion/merchandising opportunities
5. Craft opportunities

Everybody's business is different (thank goodness) and demands different applications for frozen pastry products. Some may just bake off frozen savouries, but increasingly in these modern bakery times there is the need to review and identify where frozen pastry products can create opportunities.

So let us not get too hung up about the gobbledegook, let's not forget the skills and knowledge that we have, let's not get hung up on origins and let us concentrate on offering the two great strengths we have; quality and freshness. If we do, we can look forward to a future of prosperity over the next 40 years.