



OPERATIONS

Watchful Eyes

Top 400 chains use ingenuity to control food costs.

By Erin J. Shea, Associate Editor

At Saladworks, what constitutes an ounce is in the eye of the beholder—or, as is so often the case, the worker who wields the tongs.

“We don’t weigh our portions,” explains Paul Steck, senior vice president and chief operations officer for the Conshohocken, Pa.-based chain. “We rely on standardized equipment to portion out items. One grab of chicken with our tongs should be about 2 ounces.”

That’s the beginning of inconsistency. “If we get someone who is a little heavy handed, he or she may end up grabbing 3 ounces’ worth,” says Steck.

While changing commodity prices are a factor in the battle to control food costs, operations such as Saladworks are to some extent at the mercy of a philosophy that asks them to choose between doing things as intended or changing a system entirely. While over-portioning challenges a chain’s food-cost, that’s a price it says it gladly will pay.

“Our customers don’t want to see us weighing food,” Steck says. “If we took things behind the scenes, to measure everything beforehand, it wouldn’t work well with [the experience] we’re trying to give our customers.”

Controlling food costs requires that operators show moxie, operational discipline and creativity. While locking in contracts with suppliers continues as ammunition against fluctuating food prices, the largest restaurant chains use imagination to get the most out of their money while still maintaining customer satisfaction.

TRAIN GANG

To err is human, to train is divine, a truth that is plainly seen in any kitchen.

“We don’t have robots working for us,” says Steck. “We have to make a game out of training our team to be able to pick up our equipment and know intuitively how large portions are.”



Caesar salad is among popular choices at Saladworks, where staff is trained in portion control to keep food costs in balance.

28.2%
Average food cost as percent of sales among Top 400 limited-service chains providing such data. For Top 400 full-service chains, average food cost was 30.4%. (R&I Top 400)

Saladworks food costs are based on specific recipes, Steck says. Despite this, with dozens of salads from which to choose, and a “create-your-own” option available, the human error variance plays heavily into the chain’s bottom line.

“We sell upwards of 500 salads a day,” he says. “When you spread that over 75 units, the costs add up pretty quickly.”

“We accept some of this variance knowing that we have real, live human beings making salads in front of our customers.”

Frequent visits to the stores to train staff on portion control helps, Steck explains. “I’ll walk into a store, have an employee pick up a pair of tongs and show me how close the portion they grabbed is to the correct portion,” he says of the process. “Constantly working with employees on portioning out everything from lettuce to proteins is the best way we know how to control food costs while keeping our philosophy the same.”