



FOODSERVICE FORWARD

**Insights, Recommendations, and Inspiration
to Thrive in the New C-Store Era**

Ruiz®
FOODSERVICE

The State of C-Store Foodservice

We are in the midst of a monumental shift in how people perceive and interact with C-stores. Today's consumers are making intentional stops and seeking out high-quality, craveable, convenient food options that fit their lifestyles and budgets. Expectations around value, variety, and experience are rising fast. With the right insights, product assortment, and equipment, there is a tremendous opportunity for C-stores to capitalize on this movement and become true food & beverage destinations.

To better understand what's driving this evolution, Ruiz Foodservice recently conducted a survey of C-store decision makers to gather input on the key forces shaping the future of foodservice. The findings appear throughout this white paper and reveal a clear picture of where the industry is headed and how operators can stay ahead.

SURVEY RESULTS

Presently, operators are facing multiple pain points in their hot food programs, highlighting the need for changes that lead to more efficiencies.

What are the biggest challenges you face with your hot prepared food program?

FOOD WASTE / SPOILAGE

66.7%

COST CONTROL / PROFITABILITY

43.6%

LABOR / STAFFING ISSUES

38.5%

MANAGING FOOD QUALITY / CONSISTENCY

38.5%



Evolving Consumer Preferences

While the top reasons for consumers to purchase prepared foods at C-stores are convenience (76%) and variety (49%),¹ new, innovative flavors are also increasingly important.

These Three Consumer Segments Make Up 64% of C-Store Prepared Food Spend:³

71%

OF CONSUMERS ARE EXCITED ABOUT NEW FOOD & BEVERAGE TRENDS IN 2025²

“I LOVE food from convenience stores. There are so many fun, delicious, fast choices, and I’m always looking to try something new.”

1. C-STORE FOOD FANS

High willingness to pay for **QUALITY**

Skews **MALE**
HIGH INCOME

IDEAL ITEMS
hot burritos, hotdogs, taquitos

32%
of C-store foodservice spend

24%
of the population

“I’m fiercely loyal. I love my rewards points, and my favorite items are part of my daily routine.”

2. DISCERNING REGULARS

18%
of C-store foodservice spend

11%
of the population

Highest willingness to pay for **QUALITY**

Skews **HIGH INCOME**
URBAN

IDEAL ITEMS
hot sandwiches, nachos

“I know my tried-and-true —and I know the prices.”

3. TASTE-DRIVEN VALUE SEEKERS

PRICE-CONSCIOUS

Skews **YOUNGER**
LABORERS

IDEAL ITEMS
pizza, taquitos

25%
of C-store foodservice spend

23%
of the population

SURVEY RESULTS

Operators see consumers asking big things of them – premium, fresh foods that are also affordable and fast.

In what ways do you think consumer expectations of C-store foodservice are changing? Consumers increasingly expect:

PREMIUM FOOD AT AFFORDABLE PRICES

79.5%

HEALTHIER/FRESHER OPTIONS

56.4%

GREATER CONVENIENCE / SPEED

53.8%



Competing for Share of Stomach

C-stores are competing with each other as well as going head-to-head with QSRs, coffee shops, fast-casual chains, and even grocery stores for consumers' daily food and beverage spend. As the lines between C-stores and traditional foodservice choices continue to blur, the most forward-thinking operators are stepping up to meet this challenge.

According to recent attitude and usage research,³ C-stores beat QSRs on one of the most critical consumer demands: variety. Every year, Ruiz Foods hosts a C-store foodservice forum and conducts a consumer panel. The 2025 participants stated directly that they think C-store food is just as good, even better in some instances, than QSRs. And when it comes to value, C-stores are already on par.

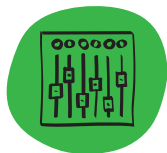
By leaning into this competitive edge and continuing to improve food quality, C-stores have the potential to become true alternatives to fast food, not just in speed and price, but in the diversity of offerings.

With an edge over QSRs in key areas, C-stores can stand apart even more by focusing on food quality, value, and speed.

WHY CONSUMERS CHOOSE C-STORES

When asked why they shop at a particular C-store, consumers cite key factors like location, price, and quality.³ Elevated foodservice can amplify all three. A hot, on-trend, freshly prepared meal served quickly at a convenient location offers unbeatable value. Delivering consistent quality builds trust — and trust builds loyalty.

To continue gaining ground on QSRs, C-stores must embrace innovation across the board. That means:



MORE CUSTOMIZATION

Let consumers personalize their orders with mix-and-match options, sauces, and toppings.



ELEVATED CONDIMENT STATIONS

Think beyond ketchup and mustard. Offer spicy, global, or premium sauces that add perceived value.



EXPANDED COMBO OFFERINGS

Bundle beverages, sides, and snacks in compelling ways that deliver convenience and savings.

Key Strategies for Success

As consumer preferences shift and competition grows, C-store operators have a valuable opportunity to stay a step ahead by embracing innovation. That means transforming foodservice from a convenience into a compelling reason to visit. The most successful operators will be those who innovate boldly, execute consistently, and respond quickly to changing demands.

MENU INNOVATION THAT MEETS THE MOMENT

Today's consumers crave variety, customization, and flavor-forward options. Successful foodservice programs don't just offer meals — they offer choices. Operators should embrace flexible menus that adapt to trends, accommodate regional preferences, and appeal to diverse dietary needs. From global flavors to on-trend, craveable options, menu innovation keeps consumers engaged and coming back. Even small updates accompanied by proper marketing and messaging can have big results.

Staying on top of evolving consumer tastes and foodservice trends is key to anticipating the next growth drivers. Check out recent flavor trends that caught our eye.



“I always go back to my favorite store to see what new foods are available.”

2025 C-STORE FOODSERVICE FORUM CONSUMER PANELIST



BALANCING WASTE AND PROFITABILITY

While increasing food availability may lead to slightly higher waste percentages, the long-term benefits outweigh the costs. A well-stocked roller grill boosts overall sales and drives repeat visits. The key is finding the right balance by offering enough assortment to maintain consumer interest while efficiently managing inventory. For more insights, see our [recent blog post](#) on how perception helps create a food-loyal consumer base.



PROFITABILITY AT THE CORE

The beauty of today's foodservice opportunity is that it doesn't require building a full kitchen from scratch. Roller grills, ovens, and warmers make it easier to offer hot, high-margin items with minimal labor. Whether it's grab-and-go breakfast bundles or afternoon snack packs, small additions can yield big results.

Foodservice margins are consistently higher than those of other in-store items⁴



SMARTER DECISIONS THROUGH DATA

Today's operators have unprecedented access to data that can guide smarter decision-making. Leveraging insights around sales patterns, seasonality, and customer behavior can help fine-tune foodservice strategies and set the stage for long-term success.

Leveraging Roller Grills in the Evolving Landscape

As the C-store foodservice landscape pivots toward more expansive programs, roller grills continue to prove themselves to be foundational assets. Their simplicity, versatility, and profitability make them uniquely equipped to thrive amid current and future operational demands.

OPERATOR SENTIMENT & CURRENT EQUIPMENT LANDSCAPE

Our survey results reveal operators recognize the value of equipment now and in the future, with 71% of respondents desiring more equipment expansion or are currently evaluating their options.



SURVEY RESULTS

What is your current foodservice equipment situation?

43.6%

NEED MORE EQUIPMENT FOR EXPANSION

35.9%

HAVE OUTDATED OR REPAIR-NEEDING EQUIPMENT

35.9%

FEEL FULLY EQUIPPED AND UPDATED

28.2%

ARE EVALUATING EQUIPMENT OPTIONS

LOW-LABOR, HIGH-REWARD: A CORE ASSET FOR OPERATIONAL SUCCESS

With labor continuing to challenge C-stores (nearly 40% of our operator survey respondents said labor and staffing issues are their biggest current challenges), roller grills offer dependable, simple, scalable solutions. One employee can oversee multiple menu items with minimal training or oversight, making roller grills an ideal tool for stores running with lean teams. They embody the kind of streamlined, automated equipment that will remain vital as operational complexity increases.

To better meet evolving operational and consumer needs, many retailers are upgrading their hot food equipment to Flexeserve hot cases. These units are designed to improve the consistency and duration of hot food holding, allowing stores to maintain product quality for longer periods without compromising safety or appearance.



A KEY PLAYER IN THE FOODSERVICE EVOLUTION

Roller grills are not just for hot dogs and other traditional C-store fare. Forward-thinking retailers are elevating their roller grill programs with destination-worthy offerings. These high-turn items can become a springboard for other trend-forward menu development. When paired with updated signage, digital menu boards, loyalty program outreach, and craveable LTOs, roller grills can easily pivot to align with shifting consumer tastes.

EXPANDING THE MENU: BEYOND THE BASICS

One of the most powerful evolutions in roller grill strategy is the move toward more innovative, on-trend offerings. Customizable choices, ethnic/regional flavors, and sweet applications open the door to broader daypart coverage and new consumer segments. Operators can also efficiently test new choices using LTOs that offer low risk and high visibility.

[Learn more about creating buzz with LTOs in C-stores.](#)



CUSTOMIZED OFFERINGS ELEVATE THE EXPERIENCE

Today's roller grill consumers still crave speed, but they also demand quality. Roller grills earned their space in C-stores by meeting both needs in delivering hot, fresh food instantly, without the wait. It's important to maintain and expand grills to keep this important consumer coming back.

Enhancements like curated condiment bars, fresh topping stations, and branded packaging can elevate the roller grill experience into something that feels intentional and high-quality rather than utilitarian — aligning with the overarching movement we're witnessing.



INTEGRATING WITH BOH PREP AND HYBRID MODELS

As more C-stores invest in small back-of-house prep areas, roller grills can complement these spaces by serving as a finishing or holding platform. Tornados® and other roller items can serve as a base for creative builds — think “Tornados® tacos,” “roller bowls,” or combo meals paired with fresh-prepped sides. This hybrid approach allows operators to bridge grab-and-go ease with made-to-order customization.



Planning for the Future of C-Store Foodservice

While roller grills offer immediate value, their true power lies in how adaptable they are to long-term shifts. By keeping an eye on upcoming disruptors and innovations, operators can begin to shape a roadmap that ensures relevance and profitability in the years ahead.

DISRUPTORS ON THE HORIZON

Operators can anticipate a wave of change driven by everything from rising costs to evolving consumer demands. As new technologies, behaviors, and competitors emerge, staying ahead means recognizing the disruptors before they fully take hold.

SURVEY RESULTS

What do you think will be the biggest disruptor to C-store foodservice in the next five years?

RISING FOOD AND LABOR COSTS

76.9%

CHANGING CONSUMER PREFERENCES / HEALTH TRENDS

51.3%

THIRD-PARTY DELIVERY

20.5%

QSR COMPETITION

20.5%

FORECASTING THE NEXT 5–10 YEARS

As consumer expectations change and technology reshapes the landscape, C-store foodservice is poised for a significant transformation. These three key developments are expected to shape the decade ahead:



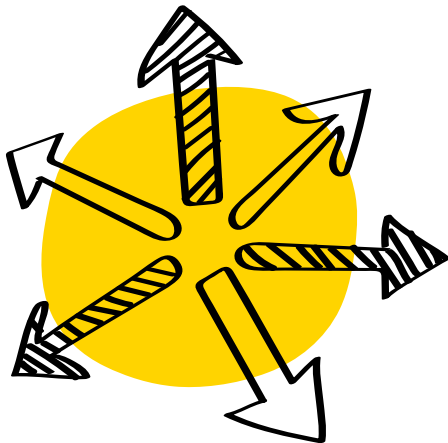
HYBRID FOODSERVICE MODELS

The traditional divide between made-to-order and ready-to-eat is fading. Operators are increasingly embracing hybrid formats that blend the speed of grab-and-go with opportunities for customization. This approach meets the needs of time-strapped consumers while offering a more personalized experience.



MOVING BEYOND THE CLASSICS

Younger, more diverse consumer segments are driving demand for food that reflects their values and tastes — not just pizza, chicken, and hot dogs. They seek higher quality, freshness, and new, innovative flavors and forms.

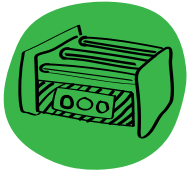


EXPANDED FOODSERVICE FOOTPRINTS

As hot food becomes a bigger draw for traffic and revenue, operators are rethinking store design. To support broader menus and more efficient service, it's wise to invest now in larger kitchen areas, dedicated prep zones, and updated equipment layouts, whether through renovations of legacy stores or the design of new builds.

FUTURE-PROOFING WITH ACTIONABLE UPGRADES

Operators don't have to wait to adapt. Here are a few strategic steps to help future-proof roller grill programs today:



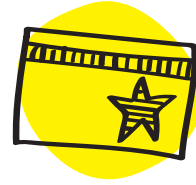
Upgrade merchandising with clean, modern displays and digital menu boards.



Test new flavors that align with broader trends (global, desserts, indulgent).



Introduce customization with condiments, toppings, or bundle choices.



Leverage loyalty programs to talk about roller grill items like featured menu picks.

INNOVATION BEHIND THE CURTAIN: WHAT'S COMING FROM MANUFACTURERS

Equipment and product manufacturers are advancing rapidly to meet the shifting demands of convenience foodservice. Roller grills, once considered a purely utilitarian fixture, are now being thoughtfully integrated into broader hot food station designs. As a result, roller grills are shedding their reputation as basic tools and emerging as essential, tech-enabled components of modern, consumer-facing foodservice programs.

On the product side, innovations include:



Expanded daypart offerings, including breakfast, desserts and late-night snacks



Internationally inspired recipes designed to stand out and drive trial



Recipes and applications that use traditional roller grill items in new ways

Operators who partner closely with manufacturers will be well-positioned to pilot new products and test cutting-edge setups, keeping them ahead of competitors and aligned with changing consumer expectations.

Embracing Change for Growth

The landscape of C-store foodservice is progressing rapidly, and with that transition comes opportunity. The insights shared throughout this white paper point to one clear truth: operators who embrace change and adapt strategically will be best positioned for long-term success.

From low-labor equipment solutions like roller grills to smarter product assortments and evolving consumer expectations, the most successful C-store programs will be built on a foundation of flexibility, innovation, and insight. Whether it's rethinking the menu mix, investing in more dynamic merchandising, or exploring new flavors and formats, staying ahead means staying open to what's next.

At Ruiz Foodservice, we're committed to helping operators navigate today's challenges while planning for tomorrow's success. That means sharing forward-looking data, developing on-trend products, and working alongside operators to shape foodservice programs that win.



Let's start a conversation about how we can all thrive in this new C-store era.



1 CSP, Meet Consumer Demand by Adding Variety to Convenience Store Food Items, September 2024

2 Datassential, 2025 Trends

3 Ruiz Foods C-Store Consumer A&U, January 2024

4 NACS Magazine, Foodservice Sales Stack Up, May 2024

<https://www.nacsmagazine.com/Issues/May-2024/Foodservice-Sales-Stack-Up>