

Nobody screams in a cyber-kitchen
Chili's adds computers to better coordinate its food service

By KAREN ROBINSON-JACOBS Staff Writer

Published February 22, 2004

There's a lot less yelling these days in the kitchens of Chili's Bar & Grill.

The new quiescence is due in large part to a \$6.9 million computer system. Software helps time when cooks prepare each item so that a Caesar salad doesn't wilt while waiting for the steaks to be grilled.

"This is a great way to organize the chaos of a restaurant with all these food items," said Doug H. Brooks, president and chief executive of Brinker International Inc., the parent of Chili's. Mr. Brooks met last week with reporters and editors of The Dallas Morning News.

"At the end of the day, the cold food comes out cold, and the hot food comes out hot," he said.

With the kitchen display system, or KDS, food quality is better, patrons are happier and servers are less inclined to shout at the chefs, say officials at the chain.

"It's a lot better coordinated than the printer system" the company used before, said Leon DeWet, vice president of business development for Dallas-based Brinker. "It's made the kitchens a lot quieter."

The KDS program involves installing up to six computer monitors in various cooking and serving stations in each of the 735 company-owned Chili's restaurants. About a dozen franchised restaurants have similar systems.

When a server enters an order for a table, the computer calculates how long each item should take to cook.

The cook with the item that takes the longest to prepare - say the griller of a 20-minute steak - receives that order first. Remaining items are shown to the cooks in descending order of cooking time.

"In the old days, three years ago, when the order was sent to the kitchen, all stations started cooking at the same time," said Bob Murphy, vice president of nontraditional development for Chili's. "So the nachos, which take about five minutes, would have been ready for 15 minutes," waiting for the steak.

"The single biggest benefit of this system is that it significantly increases the quality of the food," said Mr. Murphy, who helped develop the system.

With the new system, the items typically finish within two minutes of each other, Mr. DeWet said.

In addition, with a series of color codes, the manager can see which items are taking unusually long to prepare.

"If a manager sees something flashing red, he knows he's in the weeds," Mr. DeWet said.

Mr. Murphy stumbled upon the technology in early 2001 while finding equipment to ramp up the chain's to-go business. The company selected a system developed by Louisville-based Q SR Automations Inc. (QSR is trade lingo for quick-service restaurant.)

Similar technology was already being used at some fast-food restaurants. Together, Mr. Murphy and QSR officials worked on honing the devices to work in a casual dining kitchen.

The company began testing the system in early 2001 at a Chili's in Carrollton. The systemwide rollout began in June 2002 and was complete by May - more than 4,400 computer monitors and many, many yards of cable later.

Currently, Chili's is the only Brinker brand to use the system, although others are looking into it.

"The managers will tell you that they get a lot fewer complaints about the food quality with the new system," said Mr. Murphy.

E-mail: krobinson@dallasnews.com

