

Limited Service, Unlimited Possibilities

QSR

magazine.com

Kids Want to See Robots in Foodservice

2009-05-02 — Forget a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Right now, in a school cafeteria near you, students have some 21st--or maybe 22nd--century ideas about the ways they'd like their food cooked and served.

As part of its Dream Kitchen survey of school-aged students via the whyville.net online community, Y-Pulse LLC found that a surprising number of youngsters think that a state-of-the-art school foodservice operation would include robots and a virtual smorgasbord of automatic equipment.

"It's kind of *The Jetsons* or *Star Trek* meets the lunch line," says Sharon Olson, co-founder of Y-Pulse, which maintains offices in Chicago, Illinois, and Alexandria, Virginia. "Some responses along these lines are far-fetched to be implemented right now in school foodservice settings, but the answers are fun to read and show that students are technologically savvy and big thinkers about the role automation plays in their lives. Some suggestions for automation may even be do-able down the line."

Examples of students' thoughts on next-generation gadgetry include:

- "The kitchen would have robots to cook, so that it could be made really fast."
- "Robots would run the kitchen. There would be mixers and ovens and stoves and microwaves, etc."
- "Automatic serving machines would serve perfect portions. After being a regular customer in this 'dream kitchen', the technology would recognize your favorites and least favorite foods. You wouldn't have to stand in line, and it would always be moving because there would be no traffic."
- "There would be an ice-cream machine, and you would push a button for what flavor you wanted and you would get it freshly made....There would also be a robot that tended to your every need, and he would give you all your orders on time! Plus, there would be wireless internet."
- "It would also be cool if we had a computer where you could order and a robot brought you your food."
- "There would be a juicer with a touchscreen and a pasta maker that would make noodles and cook them. There would be a touchscreen so you could choose what you wanted for lunch."
- "A machine that you can tell what you want to eat and it will automatically give the food to you. This machine has a built in dishwasher, oven, and garbage can."

Tami Cline, co-founder of Y-Pulse and longtime foodservice industry consultant and former foodservice director, says students' requests for automated features like beverage dispensers, ice cream machines and invention ideas like automatic pizza toppers are also linked to their interest in choice. "This is a generation that wants to be able to pick what they want and expect to do it with automatic equipment," Cline says. "And while some of the ideas are more entertaining than realistic at this point, the answers give you a glimpse into the minds of tomorrow's consumers, who will not only order from foodservice operators but some of whom will end up managing such operations."

And, as Cline points out, from a practical standpoint, automatic equipment also can help ensure consistency and accuracy.

Y-Pulse LLC, which conducted the Dream Kitchen survey, is a research and consulting firm that specializes in helping companies in the food business better understand tomorrow's tastemakers today. It is a certified Women's

Business Enterprise, with offices located in Chicago and Alexandria, Virginia. For more information on Y-Pulse, their services offered or upcoming studies, please contact info@ypulse.org, at 312.280.9061.