

# Warm Up for winter



## Stock up your shelves and promote your HMR for your winter food sales to sizzle

By LAURA DURHAM

As the leaves turn brown and the days get shorter, we are all reminded that winter is approaching. But there's no need to let the cold weather keep your customers away and take a bite out of your sales. Rather, use promotions and hot food specials to drive traffic into your store.

### Cold news

Winter is on its way and with the cold weather, comes a great opportunity for store owners to position themselves as a place for customers to escape the cold, enjoy a hot meal or drink and shop for

their essentials. Your customers will be on the lookout for hearty meal solutions at affordable prices – both the ingredients to cook at home and the ready-made solutions from your hot meals department (HMR) to save them the trouble.

### Customer behaviour

"The store doesn't actually change the offering of winter foods on the shelves, so much as our customers automatically change the way they are buying," says Fabio Rodrigues, GM of Cambridge Foods, Tembisa (previously Savemoor Cash & Carry).

Stew and soup ingredients – stocks, powder soups, stewing beef etc – all become popular in the cooler months.

"Our bread sales also grow as customers buy more to bulk up their meals," he adds. The store bakes 10 000 loaves a day.

"During winter our cold drinks unfortunately decrease a lot as well," says Rodrigues.

Robin Wood, MD of Val Grand Products says that hearty meal accompaniments, such as their Texan Corned Meat range, does well all year round, regardless of seasonal changes. Of course, tinned products and meat alternatives, like soya mince, offer customers value-for-money and versatility, which is important when they are limited with ingredients.

### Stick to tradition

The menu at their hot food department does not change dramatically according to the seasons. "Pap and stew is popular all year round," says Rodrigues. Other popular meals are the curries, vetkoek and pies. There is also a sit-down area available but the store is busy and the commuter customers prefer to buy their meal as a takeaway. Lunchtime is their busiest period.

He also says that their customer base tends to stick to things they know – although they would be willing to try new dishes and see how the customers respond. "We will also advertise the winter lines more in order to get customers interested and buying," he says.

*Cambridge Foods, Tembisa (previously Savemoor Cash & Carry) sees its bread sales also grow as customers buy more to bulk up their meals. The store bakes 10 000 loaves a day.*



## Bulk catering

"Our soups actually did surprisingly well over Christmas when our customers were doing bulk catering," says Theo Pieterse, store manager at Nkosi Hyper, Tembisa. He notes that sales of starch – maize meal, rice and samp – picks up enormously during winter. This is no doubt due to customers' desire for wholesome and bulky meals to keep them warm from the inside out. Even pasta noodles are becoming more popular and rice has become a staple cupboard ingredient due to the rising maize costs. Soya mince – as a cheaper alternative to mince meat – also does well in winter.

"In our hot foods department, the beef and chicken stews do extremely well," notes Pieterse. Customers have the choice of a starch to accompany the plateful. He also says that customers are unwilling to try new things and so it is easier to stick to a standard menu throughout the year. The department gets busy early morning (the store opens at 7am) and late afternoon with the after-work trade.

Part of Nkosi Hyper's business is a wholesale butchery, which operates off the back-end of the store. Pieterse says the wholesale / retail split is 30 / 70. One



*Theo Pieterse, store manager at Nkosi Hyper in Tembisa, says that their customers are hesitant to try new dishes – so they stick to the traditional offering, like pap and stew, that appeals to taste buds all year round.*

department they are lacking, he notes, is a bakery – which might put off some customers. The enormous Cambridge Foods across the road would therefore appeal to some customers. But, "the neighbourhood store feel and personal service from our staff brings customers in regularly for their top-up grocery shops," says Pieterse.

## An independent look

A different look at winter foods is the independent hot foods outlet or container in the township. Angela Chizindza runs Angela's Takeaways from a container, just a little way away from Nkosi Hyper and Cambridge Foods. She sells traditional Mozambican and Portuguese foods, such as

beef and chicken stew and fish, "just like I would prepare it in Maputo," she says. She's been running the takeaway from a container for three years now, and she serves each dish for R20 with a choice of either rice or pap. Even though passers-by could choose to go to either of the neighbouring stores, the small operation – accompanied by a fruit & veg hawker next door – is enough to support Chizindza and her family. "My regular customers are Mozambicans like me – they come for home food," she says.

## Safety in food preparation

Hot foods departments (HMR) goes through vast quantities of oil frying chips, chicken, battered fish and onion rings, which are so popular with customers. Clinton Scriven, national food service sales manager at Willowton Oil suggests that an outlet only frying chips could use between one and two 20-litre drums per week. Outlets making a range of battered products could use between five and ten of these drums per week.

"In today's times where more and more pressure is being placed on the amount of tasks we all need to get through in a day, not much time can be spent sitting and eating meals so generally fast food (the majority of which is fried) is the solution," says Scriven. A large portion of both rural and urban communities don't fuss about what they eat health wise," he adds.

There is a lot that store owners can do within their HMR departments to ensure the safety and quality of the oil used – and resulting cooked product. There are various types of oils in South Africa from reputable companies that are HACCP, ISO or similarly accredited. "These should be the preferred



*Angela's takeaways, which serves a selection of traditional Mozambican cuisine, appeals to locals on the lookout for 'home food'.*

## Winter foods feature

options when looking to buy oil, due to the quality standard. You get oils that can last one day and oils that can last five days. The problem comes in when we try make the one day oil last for five days," says Scriven.

### How to test your oil

"Safety of oil is measured technically by the levels of breakdown materials found in used frying oils," Scriven explains, "these are PTGs (Poly-Triglycerides) which has a legal limit of 16% maximum and PCMs (Polar Compounds) which has a legal limit of 25%



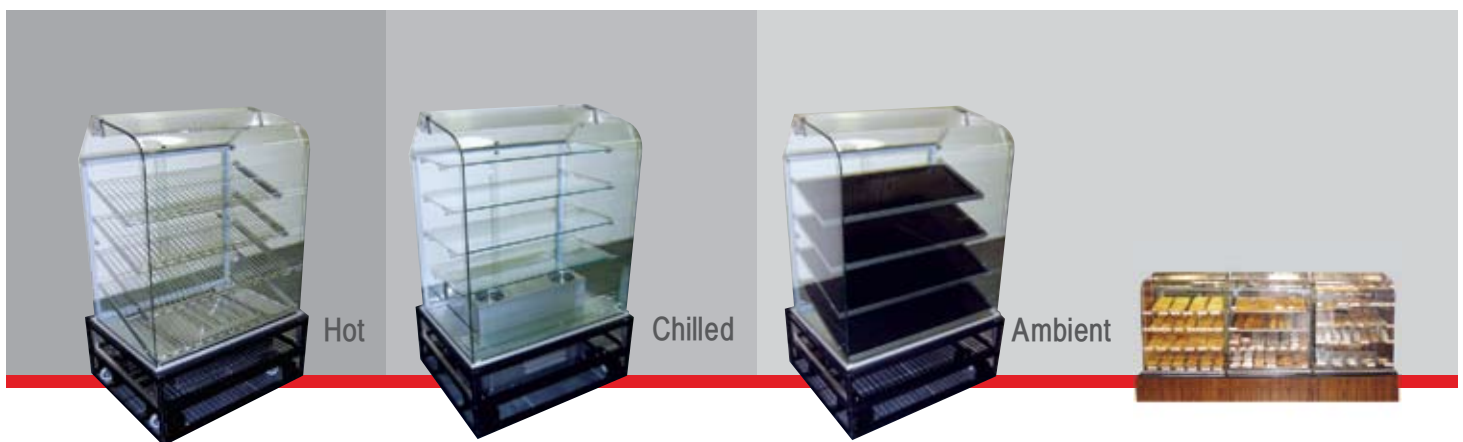
Your customers are looking for something to fill them up but at a reasonable price – offer a selection of meal combo deals to choose from.



maximum." He suggests the following to test whether oil can be reused or should be discarded:

- **For soft oils** – sunflower, soya, cotton, canola and maize – the 'Eye Test' method can be used. This is done by scooping oil out of the fryer (temperature must be very low - 20°C or less or off) and held up to the light. If the oil is dark in colour and you cannot see any light come through then the oil is ready to be discarded.

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- **Testing of palm oil** [Correctly known as Palm Olein] is slightly different as the natural colour of palm is reddish brown, due to the high levels of beta-carotene, so as soon as you apply heat to it, it changes back to its natural colour. Because of this the 'Eye Test' method won't work and shortening strips need to be used which test the oxidation level of the oil.

In order to ensure you get maximum frying life out of your oil, HMR managers must always ensure that food is fried at the correct temperatures: Palm Olein at 185°C and Sunflower Oil at 170°C.

"Skim all floating particles off the tops of the oil after frying product and filter your oil daily," he advises. "Always ensure the drums you receive from oil vendors are sealed (many lids have three seals, if one is broken do not accept!)."

### Tips to boost your winter foods offering

- **Bulk it up.** Customers are looking for meals that are wholesome and filling – something to warm them from the inside out. Make sure your HMR department caters for this with its selection (think stews, curries, pap, samp & beans and vetkoek).
- **Taste something new.** Customers tend to what they know and traditional dishes sell well. But there is an opportunity to differentiate yourself from your competitors by offering something different.

What about making a batch of something new, for example, macaroni cheese or fish curry – and give customers the opportunity to taste a small forkful (without having to buy it first)?

They might leave with their usual pap & stew this time...but next time they might dare to try that taste again.

- **Price wise.** Customers are looking for something to fill them up but at a reasonable price. Consider offering different combination sizes at different prices. For example, package one vetkoek and mince R5; two vetkoeks and mince for R10 etc.



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*Curry powder, chakalaka and spice are all integral parts of a winter meal because of their ability to burn and warm – make sure you have a wide selection of flavours, sizes and brands to cater for every dish.*

- **Sit-down.** Although most of the customers at the HMR counter might be getting a takeaway, the option of being able to sit down – even in the most simple of table and chair settings – will appeal to some, especially older customers and those with young children.
- **Something to drink.** Cold drink sales tend to sink in cold weather so boost these sales by offering a combo deal with a meal from your HMR. For example, pap

& stew plus a coke for R15; chicken & chips plus a mug of tea for R20.

- **Packaged for travel.** Many customers stop off at the HMR on their way to or from work, which means they need to travel with their purchase afterwards – either by foot, taxi, bus or train. Make sure your packaging is sturdy and travel friendly and will not spill and burn the customer. Perhaps add a few cents to the price and include a plastic bag with every purchase, and a paper serviette or two. **WB**