

Speedy yet

Microwaves offer a versatile, space-saving way of cooking, but make sure you have the right model to fit your requirements and stay the course

The launch of microwaves was as essential a part of the '80s as Duran Duran, Margaret Thatcher and ra-ra skirts. But the machines have come a long way since those days of enormous space-invading machines used to heat up Le Menu meals to enjoy in front of *Dallas*.

Today's microwaves are compact, robust and filled with plenty of electronic wizardry – enough to keep even the most technically-minded chef happy.

There is a wide range of machines out there, from heavy-duty compacts to gastonorms and combination microwaves.

But it is essential pub caterers don't assume that cheaper domestic microwaves will do – domestic ovens are not built to withstand the kind of repeated use they would get in a commercial kitchen.

Core temperatures may not be achieved and food will not cook properly as the components in domestic machines are not designed to be used quite as intensively.

Commercial ovens also have the warranty and service back-up that is essential for any catering situation.

Patrick Bray, managing director of supplier Regale, says pub caterers should think about the cost of the unit over its life span, not just the initial cost.

He says key considerations should be whether the machine is powerful enough to do the job chefs want it to? Will the oven stand up to rigorous use? How long will it last? Do you know and trust the brand? Will you get a good service back-up should it fail?

Malcolm Ball, sales manager at commercial kitchen design and supply company Space Catering Equip-



ment, says power is a big consideration. An 1,800W microwave is going to do the same job as a 1,000W one, but in a much faster time.

Ball says: "If you need a quick blast of power and speed is of the essence, then heavy-duty microwaves up around the 1,700/1,800W mark are where you want to be."

In Bray's view, "a good guideline for microwaves is a 1,400W output to regenerate or reheat ambient or chilled food, and an 1,800-plus Watt output for frozen food."

If speed isn't too much of an issue, but budget is, then you can choose from the vast range of low to medium-duty ovens that are around 1,000W. These machines are much

simple



Merrychef: the 402S is fast and takes up less space than standard kit



Panasonic: just one of the brands on offer from Regale



If speed is needed, then microwaves around the 1,800W mark are where you want to be

faster than their domestic counterparts. Bray also points out that if you have a higher wattage oven you can easily adjust the controls to use less power, but if you have a low-powered oven you cannot increase it.

For busy pub environments the

build quality of microwaves is vital, as doors are being opened and closed frequently, and less robust ovens will soon give up the ghost.

The capacity of the machine is also a key consideration. If you do lots of cooking in small quantities it might be worth having two compact ovens that are stackable. Alternatively, if you need multi-portions and use gastronomic containers, a microwave with a bigger capacity is needed.

You also need to consider whether you want manual or programmable controls for your machine. Manual controls are simple, clear and accurate to use. But programmable controls are good where fixed menu items are heated regularly and consistency is important.

With these machines, set timings can be programmed, ensuring all operators achieve the same result – which is particularly useful if you have unskilled or frequently changing staff.

The other type of commercial microwave is the combination, which not only cooks and reheats food with the speed of a microwave, but also uses convected heat to help brown and crisp some dishes. Many large pub operators use both types of microwave in their kitchens as they offer more flexibility, especially when menus change so often.

Enodis offers Accelerated Cooking Technology machines. Its Merrychef 402S machine combines three heat technologies in a compact unit, to deliver food cooked at speeds up to 15 times faster than a conventional oven.

Simon Merrick, Merrychef UK business director, says: "It is a small footprint, table-top oven that can do the job of two or three traditional pieces of kit, freeing up additional space and cooking much faster, too."

So which brands should you consider? Space Catering's Malcolm Ball says: "Japanese manufacturers still dominate the market with Sharp, Sanyo and Panasonic producing top machines, but other brands, including Samsung, Litton and Amana, are also widely respected.

"Merrychef even has a range of microwaves with doors that pop up rather than opening on a hinge – another handy feature."