

# Hot stuff

**A few manufacturers are proving to be the key suppliers to effective school kitchens. Carla McKenzie visited the MKN factory in Germany to view its products first-hand to find out the secrets of its success**

The kitchen equipment market in the UK is a lucrative one. It is very competitive, not least because most of the world's big equipment brands are owned by five major companies. Here, we profile independent German company MKN, whose cutting-edge technology is transforming kitchens across the globe with innovative equipment.

Founded in 1946 by Kurt Neubauer, the factory provides 450 jobs in the German town of Woffenbittel, some 15 miles from the old east-west border. The factory also has one of the last nuclear shelters to be built, which is now the car park but is capable of housing many of the Woffenbittel population, should the unthinkable occur. MKN might host a cold war relic, but this business is certainly not one: it is focused on delivering design innovation, making a measurable difference to planet, purse and performance.

## Private matters

Turning over €76 million, privately owned with an extensive range of 700 plus products, we were given exclusive access to the designers and the manufacturing



*Demonstrating the MKN products*

team behind MKN's range of new generation combination ovens, the FlexiCombi and the award-winning FlexiChef, a pressurised Bratt pan.

The first stop on our factory tour is the demonstration

kitchen. We join a British company, JLA, as executive chef Ludger Mai puts the FlexiCombi combination oven and FlexiChef through its paces. For readers not familiar with this equipment, a combination oven will deliver volume cooking by combining humidity, temperature and time, which improves the cooking quality and yield when compared to its conventional counterparts.

A pressure Bratt pan is a commercial cross between

**"Cutting-edge technology is transforming kitchens across the globe with innovative equipment."**

frying pan and a pressure cooker: in broad terms, this style of cooking is fast, reducing cooking time to minutes versus hours, improving flavour and nutrient content through its non-friction cooking technique and improving product yield.

The FlexiCombi is not just a smart-looking combi, it is also an intelligent piece of equipment that adds a different approach in a kitchen.

## First out

The first products out of the combi oven are some perfect pastries. Chef Mai ran through the features which make this one of the most user-friendly combis on the market:

- with the smart FlexiRack capacity concept, the FlexiCombi offers 50 per cent more capacity than conventional combination ovens, yet the footprint is broadly the same. The MKN machine does not house a boiler for its water and uses this space to gain cooking capacity;
- energy/resource saving is up to 28 per cent less than conventional combination ovens due to the triple glazed door;
- the adaptive cooking chamber senses the loading and product condition by measuring the chamber temperature and humidity, and then adjusts the cooking times to compensate and ensure consistent delivery;



*Pressure cooking with FlexiChef*

- a handheld barcode scanner enables auto-programming from food box to oven or from head chef to remote regeneration oven;
- innovative capacitive software delivers touch-screen technology which is as easy to use as a tablet PC;
- the combi technology is pre-loaded with recipes and programmes and has an automatic time to serve feature, a user can multi-load products and the combi will calculate the cooking time and prompt the user when to put in and take out a product;
- a user can now measure and display the energy and resources used for each recipe cooked; and
- the self-cleaning operation known as WaveClean reduces water use by 36 per cent on previous generations of MKN combination ovens.

## Test it

My fellow guests at this demonstration are new to this technology and are quick to test the features of the equipment, underpinning the easy-to-use intuitive nature of the FlexiCombi. Chef Mai begins the demonstration of the FlexiChef, and my fellow guests watch with surprise

**"This style of cooking is fast, reducing cooking time to minutes versus hours."**

as he plans to deliver a perfect soup in five minutes. One minute is taken to sauté the base ingredients for the vegetable soup, the FlexiChef then automatically dispenses just the right volume of water, the lid closes and the FlexiChef comes up to pressure.

In the four minutes that it takes for the soup to cook, chef Mai shares some of its features:

- FlexiChef cooks at 117°C, and at a pressure of 0.8 bar, it reduces cooking time by up to two-thirds on its conventional counterparts;
- capacitive touch-screen technology has been used here too; it is the same look and feel as the combi, advantageous for the kitchen as only one operating system is used;
- up to four different temperature zones, depending on the size of the pan. Its unique Turbo PowerBlock reduces resource use as it acts as an energy reservoir and is able to apply energy only where it is needed; and
- it is the first piece of horizontal kitchen equipment to have a self-cleaning function.

The lid is unlocked and a perfect vegetable soup is ready for tasting: my fellow observers enjoyed the ease at which great food is delivered from this versatile equipment.

## At the head

Dirk Hartung is head of process and quality management at MKN. He explains that the quality management of the product begins before the design, with a risk assessment that embraces both internal and external factors, after which the design parameters are then set and agreed. Levels of attention to detail are high and every component of the equipment is considered for its robustness and longevity; spares are held for at least ten years after a product ceases manufacture.

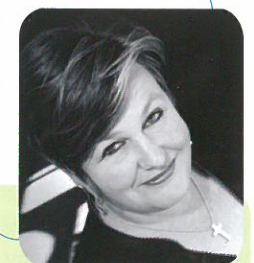
The new generation of easy-to-use FlexiCombis come with spares and a self-diagnostic combi "doctor" to speed up repairs, but readers can be comforted by the fact that worldwide warranty repairs for MKN are at less than one per cent, which is testament to quality management.

## Each is unique

Each kitchen has its own unique requirements, but these products are worthy candidates for consideration in any kitchen refurbishment. The only word of caution would be that the Gastronorm Trolley handling system should be introduced to support the combi, which has 1.5 Gastronorm-size capacity in contrast to the typical 1.1 Gastronorm.

In the UK, the credentials and credibility of the MKN brand have been recognised in the House of Commons and House of Lords kitchens.

In independent education, Canford School and Headington Preparatory School have both installed the FlexiChef.



*Carla McKenzie is managing director of MYA Consulting.*