

## Wine device a hint of ‘smart’ evolution to be explored by FS/TEC session



**(Dec. 18, 2008)** The 2009 International Foodservice Technology Exposition, or FS/TEC, again is co-located with The NAFEM Show equipment extravaganza. That happened first in the fall of 2007 and this time occurs Feb. 4-7 at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Fla.

To leverage the equipment brainpower on site, FS/TEC organizers have planned a Feb. 4 educational session in which high-level executives from major manufacturers will discuss the convergence of technology and equipment today, tomorrow and five years out.

FS/TEC is managed and produced by Nation’s Restaurant News with Robert N. Grimes of Accuvia.

So-called “smart” equipment — or cooking, holding, serving and cleaning devices matched with computer brains and data networking capabilities — have been in development for years. Some observers are disappointed by what they perceive as slow progress in the march towards equipment that, for example, not only self-diagnoses a breakdown in the making but also puts in a call to the distributor for the necessary replacement parts in advance of the problem.

The FS/TEC equipment session will feature Rick Caron, chief technology officer of the Manitowoc Foodservice division of Enodis; John McDonough, president of ITW Food Equipment Group - North America; and Detlef Münchow, president of Electrolux Professional Food Service. I suspect that when it’s over, we will have heard a compelling update on the blending of equipment and computer technology once envisioned by some as a revolution but now viewed by many as a more evolutionary process.

Of course the great thing about evolution is that over a long haul, the cumulative effects of a great number of little changes can seem revolutionary. Expect some of these “Wow! Didn’t see it coming, but should have” moments during the FS/TEC presentation.

In fact, there are already some converged devices in the world, including one I was recently made aware of called WineStation by Napa Technologies LLC of Santa Clara, Calif.

In dangerously casual terms, I’d describe WineStation as a Cruvinet-style, inert-gas-and-temperature-control wine holding and delivery system on steroids with a Mensa membership. It’s got so many software and silicon amenities that Napa Technologies provides each buyer with a laptop computer with wireless networking capabilities and unique virtual private network connection to their WineStation, an external smart card writer and reader and bar-code scanner.

The WineStation system is modular and can feature from one to dozens of four-bottle “stations.” On the most basic level, it uses Argon gas and programmable temperature ranges to keep wines in near-pristine states for extended period to reduce waste and protect profits in wine-by-the-glass situations.

But beyond those functions, WineStation also dispenses multiple programmed pour portions; tracks and reports on customer selections; and scans label and inventory information directly from bottles or cases for supply management purposes. The user-facing high-resolution LCD displays can be programmed to show pour and pricing information, tell users about the characteristics of a wine being poured or point out what foods pair well with each selection.

Well-known chef-restaurateur Todd English has a WineStation in his Olive's branch in New York, as does the independent, table-service operation Bella Mia in San Jose, Calif. The device has seen use at the Marion Oliver McCaw Hall in Seattle by the SAVOR Catering arm of convention and cultural arts facility management firm SMG and at the TD Banknorth Garden arena in Boston managed by the Sportservices arm of Delaware North Cos.

James MacDonnel, of Weston Fla., is owner of the East City Grill restaurant and Libations, a high-volume wine store and wine bar at which he operates 24 WineStation devices.

"The Software that comes with the machine is incredible," MacDonnel says. He notes that the sales/usage analysis tool slices and dices by, among other metrics, increments of time, wine variety, pour size and customer activity when personalized smart cards are involved.

Explaining how he uses data mined from his WineStation units for customer relationship management, MacDonnel notes that one of his regulars is former Miami Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino. Marino's WineStation smart card use showed a fondness for Meritage blends and Cabernets, so "when we get a special [deal on those], we can call him up and let him know," he says.

MacDonnel says perusing WineStation reports alerts him to the popularity of particular wines. That knowledge recently proved very profitable, he says, when a supplier offered him a buy-two-get-one-free case deal on such a standout product.

I asked MacDonnel if wine drinkers are ever put off by the automated wine presentation.

"Absolutely not," he replies, "People think it is really cool, state of the art."

If the convergence of technology and equipment can persuade users that a product delivery system is "cool," perhaps, all time considerations aside, it is revolutionary after all.