

FEATURES, WORK & MONEY

Breadmakers, others rise to the occasion

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One-hour breadmakers, super-fast teakettles, mechanical potato peelers - these are lures in an all out effort to draw Americans out of the fast-food line and back into the kitchen.

They joined thousands of items on display at the world's largest housewares show here earlier this month.

The central theme was products for Americans with frantic schedules.

Plants, for example, present an essential "quality of life" element to a home. But plants need water and food at regular time intervals, a commodity in short supply for many households. Charlie Eibeler of Misco Enterprises in New York brought a solution to the International Housewares Show, the self-watering planter.

"The future is in self-maintenance or maintenance free," he said. "People are traveling, and they don't have as much time as 20 years ago."

The faster the better

Mr. Eibeler was one of 2,000 distributors packed into 10 miles of kitchen appliances, pet supplies, exercise equipment, and other products that promise more home life in less time - plants that can stay home alone, devices that promise faster cooking and quicker cleaning.

"Americans are time poor," says retail analyst Howard Davidowitz of Davidowitz & Associates in New York. "They don't want to spend two hours in the kitchen if they can cut it down to half an hour."

To help them, manufacturers from around the world descended on Chicago with \$80 pots that double as strainers, cookers that reduce cooking time by 20 percent, cordless teakettles that boil water in a flash, and nonstick pans that poach four eggs at once.

Next time you visit a kitchen store, you may see spice racks that measure and dispense the dill without a measuring spoon. Next aisle over, a \$20 cutting board that fits atop the pot and has a hole so cooks can scrape sliced celery directly into the soup. In the appliance section, are breadmakers that make others look as if they're loafing on the job; they rise to the occasion in a quarter of the time required by these revolutionary machines a few years back.

"We don't sell a breadmaker that takes longer than an hour," says Ken O'Brien of Appliance Co. of North America, which markets products for the likes of Hitachi and Betty Crocker.

Such companies know their competition is more than just other appliance companies. They're up against restaurants, supermarkets, delivery services, and other businesses that sell prepared meals to busy customers.

Emphasis on convenience

Since the early 1990s, Americans have spent more money on prepared foods than on groceries, according to Technomics, a food industry marketing research firm in Chicago.

"If you are making a product or you are anyone trying to attract the consumer, the issue of convenience is of enormous importance," Mr. Davidowitz says. He notes that the trend toward time-saving devices started in earnest about six years ago.

That emphasis showed up in a big way at this year's show, where manufacturers hoped to attract thousands of buyers from the

department stores, discount houses and independent corner shops where their goods could appear in the next few months.

The show has been going on since 1939 and has brought Americans most of the goods filling their houses, apartments, and condos.

Another potential, but pricey, time saver: a new \$150 titanium thermos from Thermos/Nissan. Beverages stay hot for 24 hours, so you spend less time hoofing it over to the local cafe.

Laundry should take less time, too, thanks to so-called dye magnets that let you wash colors and whites in one load without worrying about colors running. Also look for balls of detergent that do away with the need for measuring cups.

"Anything that gives us more time today is a good thing," Mr. O'Brien says.

PHOTO: BOWLED OVER: A vendor hawks his goods at Chicago's housewares show. BY TODD BUCHANAN/SPECIAL TO THE **CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR**

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