

# Catering to your target market

**F**ood service, home meal replacement (HMR) and deli services are integral to supermarket offerings in South Africa, regardless of location or footprint.

Whatever your target market and business model, the key tenets of these categories are convenience and providing delicious, quality food. This may be grab-and-go deli style, freshly prepared hot meals and speciality foods through your food service offering, or heat-and-eat home meal solutions for the whole family.

In 2026 and beyond, this convenience is even easier to achieve as food service, deli, and HMR move towards an AI-powered automated future. With renewed focus on energy efficiency and sustainability, as well as modular designs for space-saving and multifunctional equipment that promises to save time while reducing costs and waste, the future is looking bright.

In terms of what retailers and wholesalers are serving, demographics play an important role. Where budgets are less constrained, consumers look for balanced, nutritious, functional options that suit their health requirements as much as their need for experiences and great taste.

Portion size and value for money become more important when budgets are under pressure and the consumer perception is that bigger portions offer more value, with less emphasis on the nutritional value of the serving.



## Key trends for 2026

**Balance:** nutritious foods and little luxuries combine to create a way of eating that is healthy for mind and body.

**Nostalgia and nouveau:** traditional or classic comfort foods are elevated using refined recipes or ingredients and imaginative twists to old favourites.

**Functional foods:** meals high in protein, fibre, antioxidants and superfoods that support various bodily systems and functions are taking centre stage.

**Plant-based alternatives:** as meat-based proteins become increasingly expensive and shortages loom, plant-based options are coming to the fore in providing nutritious options.

**Value for money:** specialised combos, value meals and value adds are popular offerings that can help to drive sales and attract customers looking for filling, tasty and inexpensive meal solutions.


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## Affordable and accessible

Local retailers understand that their HMR and deli offerings must appeal to their shopper demographic, which can be diverse. High-end stores have recognised that their customers include shop assistants and day labourers who need convenient, nutritious, affordable options, particularly in the grab-and-go category. Providing these options alongside speciality offerings such as sushi trays and designer salads help these stores capture both convenience markets.

Local retailer groups such as Shoprite Holdings and Food Lover's Market understand this well. Shoprite focuses on lower-to-middle income consumers and provides a pocket-friendly option for staples and great deals on essentials. Checkers, on the other hand, targets the premium market with a wider, high-end range that competes with retailers such as Woolworths. Food Lover's Market has always catered to a wide variety of consumers, offering niche HMR, food service and deli products alongside budget-friendly options.

Unilever Food Solutions has a range of value-boosting menu ideas for budget-friendly meals, economy savers and nostalgia-harnessing recipes that fit the bill of convenient, affordable and delicious. Their 'deli counter food ideas' are presented as a way to drive profitability while also answering consumer demand. The website also has a selection of free-to-download recipe books with titles such as 'More Ways With Chicken', 'The Hot Veg Report' and 'Reimagined Classics' to provide ideas and inspiration to those in the food service business.



Food producer and equipment supplier Freddy Hirsch says successful HMR is about understanding your market and being willing to innovate. "Snacking, minimising food waste and creating vegetarian options are three trends to consider. Customers want the same quality and freshness from their snacks as they would expect from other pre-prepared foods. When it comes to food waste, consider re-working leftover foods to create innovative deli dishes and to reduce food waste at the same time to create tasty, convenient foods that maximise efficiency. Meatless dishes have become more popular as consumers strive to incorporate plant-based options into their diets, so try and create enticing solutions for them."

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## Go-to gourmet

For many local consumers, convenience needs to go hand-in-hand with quality. Shoppers looking for an easy but elevated experience rely on more high-end offerings that include international influences and more exotic dishes alongside artisanal, hand-made and luxe options.

Spar Gourmet at Zimbali Oasis in Ballito, KwaZulu-Natal is a new concept store that presents itself

as a 'revolutionary lifestyle experience', blending Spar's traditional values with a modern, high-end grocery retail experience. With curated gourmet meals, premium private-label ranges and exclusive imported products, the deli offers meals prepared from scratch by highly trained chefs in a modern kitchen. These include wood-fired pizzas, poke bowls, Asian-inspired dishes and healthy salads.

The store also features four daily signature dishes on the menu, gourmet fast food, a speciality butcher shop, and a dessertery with 'curated indulgence for every occasion'. According to an article about the store on News 24, "the deli showcases the store's food philosophy with simple food done exceptionally well by scratch chefs."

# The Chef's Secret Weapon?

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Slow-roasted meats and freshly made sushi focus on freshness and craftsmanship, while seasonal salads, pastas and made-to-order sandwiches showcase their commitment to flavour and quality.” The addition of a Vida e Caffé adds a familiar and branded coffee culture boost. It’s all about premium products, premium convenience, and a premium shopping experience.

**Food preparation and technology**

Food preparation is evolving at an exciting with pace, thanks to technology. From the internet of things (IoT) and automation to AI, your back of house is likely due for an overhaul. While local retailers may not be quite ready to embrace robotic servers and fully automated food preparation, moving with the times is necessary to ensure business remains competitive and sustainable.

Merchant Capital, which provides growth capital to local SMEs, says, “The demand for speed, convenience and personalisation is pushing technology to the forefront. Businesses investing in digital systems, from point-of-sale integrations and loyalty apps to online ordering, are gaining the upper hand.”

The company notes that trends to watch in 2026 include smart kitchen systems that reduce waste and improve portion accuracy, and AI-assisted demand forecasting to help businesses stock smarter and prevent shortages. They say, “In South Africa, digital transformation doesn’t have to mean high-cost overhauls. Many SMEs are adopting modular tech; affordable tools that grow as they



do. It could be as simple as moving off paper and on to an accounting package or ERP system. It’s about working smarter, not bigger.”

**Commercial kitchen trends**

This view was substantiated by the trends seen at Host 2025, held from 17-21 October 2025 at Fiera Milano, Italy. Host 2025 featured 1 700 exhibitors from 54 countries, showcasing the latest in hospitality trends. One of the exhibitors, Welbilt, a global leader in professional kitchen solutions and a member of foodservice equipment manufacturers Ali Group, asked visitors, “What does the professional kitchen of tomorrow look like?” Their answer? Product innovations, AI-driven technologies, connected systems and practical solutions designed to enhance kitchen operations and increase sustainable production.

According to Welbilt, artificial intelligence is a core technology for future kitchens. Pairing smart equipment with digital platforms and connected, scalable system solutions helps automate workflows, improve kitchen operations and drive efficiency and profitability.



Pere Taberner,

Vice President Sales & Marketing at Welbilt EMEA says, “Modern technology should support people. We approach innovation from the perspective of those working in the kitchen every day facing responsibilities, time pressure and often limited staff resources. Our solutions are designed not only to be powerful but also intuitive, reliable and genuinely helpful in daily operations.”

For example, Welbilt’s Convothem mini pro is



Serves: 4  
Preparation time: 30 minutes  
Cooking time: 60 minutes

Tasty & Delicious

Ideal for a family meal

#### INGREDIENTS

200g bacon bits  
4 chicken drumsticks and  
4 chicken thighs  
salt  
pepper  
1 onion, thinly sliced  
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
3 sprigs thyme  
1 Tbsp (15ml) flour  
1 cup (250ml) cider  
150ml chicken stock  
150ml cream  
4 golden delicious apples,  
sliced into wedges  
1 Tbsp (15ml) olive oil  
roasted potatoes  
steamed tender-stem broccoli



## GOLDI, COUNTY FAIR, FESTIVE or MOUNTAIN VALLEY CHICKEN DRUMSTICKS AND THIGHS CHICKEN NORMANDY

Fry the bacon and colour the chicken skin first. You'll be surprised how much flavour these two steps add!

#### Method:

Preheat the oven to 180°.

Spread the bacon bits evenly over a skillet and fry over medium heat, stirring frequently. Once all the fat has rendered and the bacon has a beautiful colour, remove it from the skillet. Don't discard the fat.

Season the chicken pieces with salt and pepper.

Turn the heat up to medium-high and add the chicken skin-side down, browning it in the bacon fat. Remove from the skillet. Turn the skillet down to low and add the onions, garlic and thyme. Sauté gently until softened.

Add the flour and stir through for 2 minutes. Deglaze with the cider, chicken stock and cream, and bring to the boil. Add the chicken pieces, skin-side up. Place the skillet in the oven for 1 hour.

Toss the apple wedges with olive oil and a sprinkle of seasoning. Heat a pan over medium heat and add the apples, tossing until they are golden and soft (but not mushy).

Serve the warm chicken with roasted apple on the side, crispy roast potatoes and steamed broccoli.

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a compact combi oven that uses ConvoSense – AI-powered technology that automatically detects the food placed in the oven and instantly selects the appropriate cooking programme – with no manual input required.

Understanding the need for small, powerful and efficient equipment in the local market is also critical. Food service and equipment supplier BCE, which operates throughout southern Africa, launched the compact Prima Mini convection oven that allows for smaller bakes on demand, reducing waste. The oven is also energy-efficient, engineered for minimal power consumption, built to last, hygienic and features easy handling for daily, heavy-duty commercial use. This showcases the use of technological developments that improve design and functionality.

In early 2025, FoodServ Solutions, one of South Africa’s leading kitchen equipment suppliers, rolled out the Henny Penny F5 Open Fryer, to upgrade the frying experience by improving performance and efficiency. According to FoodServ, traditional 22.7kg fryers have long been the industry norm, but technological advancements have led to smarter, more cost-effective solutions. The Henny Penny F5 Open Fryer employs much lower oil volume frying, an intuitive touchscreen interface and automated oil management to deliver cost savings and increased ease of use.

FoodServ says, “Fryer technology has advanced and the F5 fryer is designed for modern commercial kitchens. With its ability to lower oil costs, simplify training and automate oil management, operators can focus on delivering high-quality food while reducing waste and operational expenses.”

<https://www.tombake.co.za/>



Key innovations to look out for include IoT-enabled ovens and fryers that can be controlled via an app, self-cleaning combi ovens and steamers, programmable induction cooktops with energy tracking and AI-powered inventory and waste tracking systems.

There’s more to smart kitchens than high-tech equipment though. In America, New Age Industrial designs and builds high-quality lightweight aluminium products used for storage and transportation. The rise of tech-enabled kitchens has impacted their designs and they say, “The kitchen is under-

going a digital revolution, moving far beyond simple point-of-sale systems.”

### Emerging trends in foodservice

Standard Restaurant, suppliers of restaurant equipment throughout the USA, shared their predictions for 2026 in a blog titled ‘Emerging Trends in Food-service Supplies for 2026: What Restaurants Should Watch’. They note the rise of smart kitchens and say integrating smart kitchen equipment helps streamline workflows and reduce energy consumption. They add, “Smart commercial kitchen equipment is redefining efficiency, labour and energy use. These high-tech tools offer automation, remote monitoring and predictive maintenance to reduce downtime and costs.”

“ Labour shortages and the demand for absolute consistency are driving the adoption of sophisticated automation, including robotic food prep, sensor-based inventory systems and smart appliances connected via IoT. This trend demands a new level of compatibility and precision from support equipment, which must be engineered to interact perfectly with these new digital and mechanical assistants. ”



# “Homemade” meal convenience

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Automation is a technological marvel but is imperfect and prone to being finicky. New Age Industrial says, "Foodservice racks and material handling carts must be perfectly sized and weighted to integrate seamlessly with automated systems, preventing jams and ensuring smooth operation. Space-saving and highly mobile equipment is no longer a luxury, but a necessity, with high-density, compact commercial shelving, nesting carts or racks, and multi-functional food transport carts.



<https://stockcake.com/i/heart-healthy-nutrition>

<https://stockcake.com/i/future-kitchen-master>



Sustainability and zero-waste practices are also key focus areas. "Businesses are increasingly committed to sustainability, focusing on reducing their environmental footprint, which is expected as standard practice by consumers. This focus extends throughout the supply chain, pushing operators to invest in equipment that saves energy, conserves water and lasts longer to reduce landfill waste," says New Age Industrial.

Health and safety for HMR, deli and food service is non-negotiable. New Age says, "Equipment should be rust- and corrosion-resistant, and kitchen hygiene should always be top of mind, to prevent cross-contamination and the spread of bacteria. Equipment and all surfaces should be non-porous

and be able to withstand frequent chemical washdowns. Back of house workflow should be well organised to support a wide variety of orders without compromising quality or creating bottlenecks. This means storage systems should be easy to reconfigure to manage a diverse and ever-changing menu."

### The intelligent kitchen

While they may seem excessive – AI, IoT, connected equipment, full automation – these developments are all designed to increase efficiency and production while reducing costs and waste. Increased volume, improved quality and consistency

and a focus on hygiene and food safety cannot be ignored despite the initial cost of converting to a smart kitchen.

With the food service, deli, and HMR categories all predicted to grow, predominantly in urban areas, it is a highly competitive market that is also sensitive to prices and supply chain fluctuations. Embracing innovation and keeping pace with technological developments and consumer trends are vital for success. **SR**



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# HMR & deli equipment solutions for modern retail

As retailers continue to expand their Hot Meals (HMR) and Deli offerings, the demand for equipment that delivers speed, consistency and food quality has never been greater. Tombake supplies proven solutions designed to support high-volume supermarket and retail food environments.



## Giorik Combi Steamer Ovens Consistent results. Scalable performance.



The Giorik Combi Steamer Oven range is engineered to meet the operational demands of supermarket HMR kitchens and deli departments. With intelligent controls and flexible tray configurations, these ovens ensure uniform cooking results while improving efficiency and reducing labour dependency.



### Key Features

- Advanced touchscreen controls
- Pre-programmed cooking recipes for operational consistency
- Core probe cooking for precise temperature control
- 4-stage automatic cleaning system to reduce downtime
- Compatible with 400 x 600 mm trays and 1/1 GN inserts
- Available in Electric or Gas models
- Available capacities: 7 Pan, 10 Pan & 20 Pan

### Retail Benefits

- Increased throughput during peak trading
- Reduced training time for staff
- Consistent product quality across multiple shifts
- Suitable for roasting, baking, steaming and regeneration



The Plug 'n Cook Speed Oven is a compact, high-performance solution ideal for deli counters and convenience-focused HMR operations. Combining steam and hot air technology, it delivers rapid cooking without compromising food quality.



### Key Features

- Single-phase power
- Combination of steam and hot air cooking
- Reduced cooking times
- Compact footprint for space-restricted retail kitchens

### Ideal Applications

- Toasted sandwiches and wraps
- Grab-and-go meal solutions
- Made-to-order deli items

**Plug 'n Cook Speed Oven (POP Oven)**  
Fast cooking for fresh-to-order retail environments



# High-speed cooking & dessert solutions

## Gel Matic Soft Serve Machines

Reliable dessert solutions for retail environments

Gel Matic soft serve machines provide a dependable solution for retailers looking to enhance their in-store dessert and impulse offerings. Built for performance and ease of operation, these machines deliver consistent product quality throughout the trading day.



### Traditional Soft Serve Machines

- Single-flavour or Double-flavour options available
- Robust construction for continuous operation
- Simple cleaning and maintenance
- Consistent texture and serving quality

### Ideal for

- Supermarket dessert counters
- In-store cafés and food courts
- Complementing HMR and family meal offerings

## Tombake FM Fast Impingement Oven

High-speed performance for busy retail kitchens



The FM Fast Impingement Oven is designed for retailers requiring maximum output with minimal waiting times. By combining impingement airflow with microwave technology, it ensures fast, even cooking – even during peak periods.

### Key Features

- Available in Single-phase or 3-phase configurations
- High-speed oven with microwave technology
- Consistent cooking results at reduced cycle times
- Designed for continuous, high-volume operation

### Retail Applications

- High-volume deli and HMR counters
- Convenience food production
- Rapid-service food zones

Tombake partners with retailers to deliver foodservice equipment solutions that support operational efficiency, food quality and customer satisfaction across HMR and deli departments.



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