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BREAKING NEWS AT CH

BUSINESS

EATING UP THE SHOW

Industry flocking to National Restaurant Association event

BY ROBERT CHANNICK
Tribune reporter

Innovation, nutritional initiatives and plenty of free tastings drew large crowds Monday to the National Restaurant Association show at McCormick Place.

The four-day annual show, which runs through Tuesday, features the latest products,

trends and menu items across the industry, while serving enough mini-sandwiches and thimble-size drinks to sate some 58,000 food and lodging professionals.

Hot sellers: The recession has boosted the fortunes of Elgin-based Middleby Corp., a venerable oven manufacturer whose latest products have become hot

sellers for casual chains looking to cut costs.

Looking like some futuristic cartoon appliance out of the "The Jetsons," the bright green, tri-level WOW oven was hard to miss at the entrance to the exhibit floor. Selling for about \$30,000, it promises to automate the casual dining kitchen, replacing flattop grills, charbroilers and, usually, at

least one line cook per restaurant.

Using conveyor belts and three programmable ovens, everything from meat and poultry dishes to pizza and baked goods are sent through the contraption, rolling out the other side about twice as fast as with conventional cooking.

Fast-casual chain Chili's is in-

stalling some 1,200 of the ovens this year at its restaurants, according to Chuck Freer, Middleby's vice president of sales and business development.

"It's probably the biggest year we're going to have in the history of the company," Freer said. "The down economy is forcing large companies ... to take a real look at how they produce food out of their kitchen and how they can save labor. It's a game changer."



ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE PHO

Chuck Freer of Elgin-based Middleby Corp. displays a freshly cooked chicken made with its innovative WOW oven.