In the not too distant past it was mostly lucky chefs working in the volume and high end parts of foodservice that got to experience the joys and benefits of having a trusty blast chiller and freezer as part of their kit in the kitchen. But these days the use of the clever piece of equipment is becoming more widespread as the potential they deliver to reduce costs and maximise profits is recognised. Chefs in smaller restaurants and cafes are introducing the machines and quickly realising the value they can offer a busy kitchen operation from food safety and hygiene and preserving the quality of food being prepared, to savings in time and labour, and wastage reduction. Blast chillers allow chefs to rapidly cool food and by doing so preserving the quality and integrity of the product. As well as preventing the formation of bacteria that leads to the degradation of food quality and shelf life, it also means there’s no loss of texture, colour, firmness, flavour and moisture of the food as happens if it’s cooled and frozen too slowly. Use of a blast chiller eliminates the risks and inconvenience associated with having to have food sitting around on benches to cool down, as well as the detrimental effect on the efficiency of your cool room by having warm food stored alongside chilled. Moffat’s Scott Graham says the latest generation of easier to use, “clever” blast chillers, such as its soon to launch new Friginox machines, are proving their value as versatile tools that can streamline the
operation of a busy commercial kitchen and significantly ease the demands on chefs, as well as delivering savings.

"Kitchens are very busy places and it’s great for a chef to just be able to take something out of the oven, put it straight into a blast chiller and then go on to the next process and let the blast chiller do its job," he says.

Graham says a growing trend in the industry is for blast chillers to be seen as a part of the kitchen process. “One of the shifts [in the industry] is that blast chillers are being seen now as part of the kitchen package as opposed to being part of the refrigeration package,” he says.

“What chefs are saying is it gives them a true process — [the food] comes out of the oven or off the stove it goes out onto trays and goes straight into the blast chiller.

“It improves the work flow — they don’t have these quantities of food without anywhere to really put them because they are too hot.”

Faster food
Matt Bates, head chef at acclaimed restaurant Café Sydney is one who has come to see his blast chiller as one of the most vital parts of the operation of the kitchen that features a brigade of 36 chefs who turn out up to 600 covers on a busy Friday night’s service.

“It is just huge, the impact it has had on our kitchen operation,” he says. “When we were changing over to a new one we were without a blast chiller for about one and a half days and our pastry section literally nearly went into meltdown, they have just gotten so used to using it for so many things.”

Bates says in the kitchen the daily use of the blast chiller can range from speeding up the process of making a parfait, to quickly chilling delicate seafood like scallops and marron.

“It can really kick start something like a parfait,” says Bates. “For our pastry chefs it means they can make it and put it away rather than trying to cool it slowly and setting it in the deep freeze.

“You can take something to minus 21 within an hour and a half. You can kick start a jelly, or a compote or a mousse. So instead of having to set something overnight before you can touch it again you can make it in the morning and serve it that night.”

Seafood is a product area where the blast chiller certainly earns its keep, says Bates. “We use it a lot for seafood, especially our crustaceans,” he says. “I try to buy as much live seafood as I can whenever I get my hands on a good deal — Balmain bugs, or Moreton Bay Bugs any of those things. We ice it down, cook it off — steam it or poach it — and then instead of putting it in an ice bath, where it can potentially get water logged, we can put it straight into the blast chiller.

“It’s cooled down within that two hour period so it’s at a safe temperature, and the product itself comes out beautifully, it’s nice and firm and you know it’s at its full capacity as far as freshness goes.

“The great thing is that ability to retain that quality of the food.”

Food safety confidence
Bates said the food safety factor is a major benefit of a blast chiller. “From that point of view it’s invaluable,” he says. “When the food goes into the blast chiller it gets probed and then that temperature is logged
2011 looks set to be another challenging year as Australia has seen major floods and damage to infrastructure and the farming community in Queensland and now Victoria has an inland sea converging on many rural towns. We wish all those involved the strength to get through the challenging months ahead.

New Committee for 2011
The FIA held its AGM in late 2010 where some new faces have joined the Committee for 2011. We are delighted to welcome Lee Ann Whitney from Mission Foods, Michael Wilson from Priestley’s Gourmet Delights and Steve Purser from Peerless Foods.

President for 2011 is Sally Meaden (Ready-Bake), Vice President Tony Grayson (Grayson Brokers), Gary Gertzmann (Delaware North Companies), Minnie Constan (Diversified / Fine Food), Bill Qualy (Rinoldi Pasta), Kate Muslayah (Nestle), Rob Di Martino (Del Re National Food Group), John Hayes (PFD Foodservice) and Legend of the FIA, David Gregory (Concater).

Foodservice Forum
A Foodservice Forum will be held on Wednesday 16 February 2011 in Melbourne with guest speaker and industry leader, Bruce Keebaugh, General Manager from The Big Group.

Tasmania
Another successful forum was held in Launceston and also a festive breakfast just prior to Christmas together with the IHHC. During February, events will be held with the Launceston Races and the IHHC Golf Day.

2011 will be a busy year for the FIA as it continues to grow and offer more for its members.

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and after one hour it’s logged again and after two hours is logged again and so on so you have a complete record from go to woe and it’s all digital.”

“As executive chef it’s a real load off my mind and gives you a lot of confidence. We’ve got 36 chefs in there and it really empowers them with confidence too that they are using food they know is safe.”

Bates’ Tecnomac blast chiller sits nestled under a bench between the open kitchen and the prep area, nice and handy for the chefs. “And it’s bullet proof,” he says. “We’ve had this one for over two years and it hasn’t missed a beat. That was one of the most important things I wanted, it had to be tough and simple to use.”

For leading Sydney catering company Opera Point Events too the blast chiller is indispensable, speeding up the day-to-day process of preparing food for anywhere up to 6000 people, and delivering measurable savings in labour and food wastage.

“Having a blast chiller really does just change everything,” says Simon Sandall, executive chef at the company that has recently also expanded to include Matt Moran’s new Aria Catering arm.

“It speeds up everything. You can be doing things like putting hot stocks or sauces in there and it just saves so much time. And you are actually putting extra shelf life on them because you are getting them down in temperature quickly so it’s just cost effective across the board.”

“We use it for so many different things. Say for instance we are prepping fish. No doubt when you’re prepping fish you’ll have it out on the bench and it might take half an hour to prep the fish. As soon as you’ve finished each step you can put it back into the blast chiller and get it down to a great temperature and cover it and cryo it or whatever you might be doing.”

“And we are often doing large numbers and this technology is just absolutely fantastic. For New Year’s Eve we fed 6000 people. Just with one product — the eschallot tarts — we had to make 3500 of them and it’s a bit of a process. The blast chiller just helps to speed up each step.

“With things like the puff pastry alone there’s many minutes saved. When you’re rolling out puff pastry for 3500 tartlets especially in the summer here the pastry gets very warm very quickly but you can be rolling it out and blast chilling it and you start to work in a process.

“And for things like semifreddos it’s a cracker. Instead of taking time for it to set which would probably be two to three hours you could stick in the blast chiller and it takes 20 minutes. The saving from that alone is just phenomenal.”

Essential tool
A newcomer to the world of blast chilling, chef Robert Crifo from the busy Olivehouse restaurant and function operation in Victoria’s Gippsland Valley says he’s continually discovering his blast chillers’ versatility after having his first one installed in December just before the business’ busiest period.

Now a devotee, he says despite a sharp increase in the operation’s business over the busy festive period having the blast chiller — an Irinox Multifresh — meant the increased workload wasn’t noticed. “November, December is a pretty crazy time for us here already but last year we were about ten per cent up in numbers than the previous year but it was definitely no harder,” says Crifo, who oversees an a la carte restaurant and busy schedule of functions, particularly weddings, as well as the production of a range of products for sale at Olivehouse’s retail business, from olives and tapenades, to sauces.

“It’s been fantastic already but we many of us are doing it ineffectively and expensively.’

The point is we are all cooking and chilling already but many of us are doing it ineffectively and expensively.”
ly bake them in the oven and then put tart,” says Crifo. “We would normally loved. “Things like our lemon lime quickly made the blast chiller much most in-demand desserts has also production of some of the Olivehouse’s final product is much better quality.”

The grains don’t clag and the risotto too and pop it in the blast chiller. The grains don’t clag and the final product is much better quality.”

Criso says the difference to the production of some of the Olivehouse’s most in-demand desserts has also quickly made the blast chiller much loved. “Things like our lemon lime tart,” says Crifo. “We would normally bake them in the oven and then put them on the bench to cool but if you’re not right on the spot they can start to get a hair line crack through the actual filling.”

“But by putting them in the blast chiller we found not one of them cracked. Even the chocolate pudding, they would normally sink a little in the middle, but by putting them in there they didn’t sink at all. It’s an essential now and I wonder how I’ve ever been cooking for so long without it.”

Criso’s also been amazed with the result when blast chilling fish and meat. “After Sunday service we might have a bit of seafood left over and instead of putting it out in the freezer we will blast chill it, and it is amazing.”

Waste reduction

Richard Bennett, from equipment supplier Skope, which recently took over as distributor of Innox refrigeration equipment, says in restaurants up to 40 per cent of food is wasted.

“That’s driving the move for blast chillers to be used more across restaurants is a number of reasons including the consistency and the freshness of the product, and the benefit of no waste,” he says.

“If you’re putting your food through a standard process, where you are cooling on a bench and then putting it into an fridge it’s taking 15 to 20 hours for it to cool down. And during that process bacteria is gathering in that food. With a blast chiller it’s 60-90 minutes and it’s at that core temperature and there is no bacteria during that process.”

Susie Leonard, from Cocomater, which distributes the top-selling Tecnomac brand of blast chillers and freezers, says having a blast chiller as part of the kitchen production process will save 20 to 30 per cent on labour costs alone, as well as the saving on food costs and wastage.

“Blast chillers are about putting the control into hospitality and allowing [restaurants and caterers] to really operate as a business,” Leonard says. “A lot of people will say, no we don’t do cook chill, we do everything fresh but when you actually look at it they don’t do everything fresh. Fundamental parts of dishes they are serving have to be done in advance. Then these are cooked and left on bench tops, and then they stick them in their coolrooms when they think it’s not too hot.

“What happens then is the coolroom really cranks up, gets furiously harsh and the stuff that’s already cool in there gets damaged. The point is we’re all cooking and chilling already but some are just doing it ineffectively and expensively.”

“Many people believe blast chilling is unachievable for them, firstly in understanding the technology, and secondly, in affordability.”

“But a five tray blast chiller can be hired for $10-12 a day and they’ve only got to have to throw out one serving of chicken to justify that cost.”

Leonard cites examples of foodservice customers who have been able to achieve major efficiencies by really examining how they operate.

“One Thai restaurant was paying up to $16 a kilo for whole snapper, but with their blast chiller they were able to buy in pallets for $8kg,” she says.

“Even with their limes — they were able to buy in quantity — and freeze the juice — they saved around $12,000 a year in limes, it’s really phenomenal.”

In the market?

Here’s a few questions to keep in mind if you’re shopping for a blast chiller.

- Does the blast chiller/freezer use a direct or indirect air flow?
- Does the blast chiller/freezer have to be defrosted after every cycle?
- Is the defrost cycle a hot gas or hot air system? If hot air it is very slow and the door needs to be left open.
- Does the blast chiller/freezer ever go into a defrost cycle during a blast chill or blast freeze cycle? (This will drastically compromise the product)
- Have you tested the blast chiller/freezer with delicate and non delicate products? Some blast chillers may meet HACCP standards but will damage any delicate products?
- Does it have soft chill, hard chill and blast freeze inclusive?
- Is it 95°C rated — fast chill down?
- Does the blast freezer air reach -30°C-40°C?
- Does it have sufficient capacity to pull down temperatures quickly and efficiently?
- Does it include a HACCP and alarm function?
- Does the status display show the phase in progress?
- Is the chilling or freezing cycle controlled by a probe or timer – does it have both?
- Does it include a core probe?
- Is it fully body internal and external 304 grade stainless steel?
- Does it include the condensing unit?
- Does it have a fully insulated floor?
- Is the air temperature below zero in the 1st phase and at zero in the 2nd phase?
- Does the unit have an automatic preservation system?
- Does the system run a fast and efficient HOT GAS automatic defrost during preservation?

**equipment/blasting chillers**

Latest in blast chilling technology from Friginox.