



EXPERTS IN GOOD TASTE

Professional chefs around the world are attracted by the expertise and perfect service provided by Rational, a Germany-based maker of cooking appliances.

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Chefs at the Parliament in Beijing, the White House, Buckingham Palace, and Munich's Pschorr-Bräurols pavilion of Oktoberfest fame all rely on the same key ingredient to prepare their dishes: kitchen appliances from Rational AG. Based in the Bavarian town of Landsberg am Lech, about 60 kilometers from Munich, this company has 54 percent of the market. Around the globe, some 120 million meals a day are made with its appliances.

Rational leaves nothing to chance in its intelligent products. Year after year, it goes through 25 tons of foodstuffs in researching how to make its appliances just that much better. "But if you want to keep offering the

best appliances, you need more than continuous improvement—you've got to keep coming up with inventions," says CEO Dr. Günter Blaschke. In 1976 Rational's combi-steamer launched a minor revolution—comparable to the switch from typewriters to personal computers. For the first time, a single kitchen appliance could be used not only as a convection oven but also as a steamer or super-steamer, which meant it could cook vegetables and potatoes quickly and gently while at the same time roasting or braising meat. The company's latest invention, the SelfCookingCenter whiteefficiency, takes up only a small amount of space to replace as many as half of all conventional appliances such as ovens, convection ovens, steamers, tilting pans, kettles, and grills. This makes it possible to bake a cheesecake while doing a roast →



CEO Dr. Günter Blaschke (left) and Chief Technical Officer Peter Wiedemann with the SelfCookingCenter at the company cafeteria. “If you want to make the best appliances, you’ve got to keep coming up with new inventions,” they say.

with crackling at the same time. Moreover, depending on the language selected in the navigation system, it suggests suitable ways to prepare food for the respective country.

Innovations such as these require a profound degree of specialist knowledge—which is why Rational employs around 300 chefs on its 1,400-member team. “We have to know our customers’ processes and also the challenges they face in order to generate the greatest possible benefit for them,” says Blaschke. And that can only be done by focusing exclusively on the target group, namely, professional kitchens around the world. “Our approach is creating a knock-on effect instead of pressure,” observes Blaschke. The company’s focus and specialization not only increase its innovative power, but also prevent costly levels of complexity. “While other companies put in a lot of effort trying to keep growing levels of product complexity under control, we don’t let it arise in the first place,” he says.

The processes at Rational are excellent, enabling deliveries on a build-to-order basis. “If a customer orders an appliance by 10 a.m. today, he’ll get the product made to his specifications tomorrow,” says Peter Wiedemann, Rational’s chief technical officer. Rational has always en-

couraged an entrepreneurial mindset in its employees, which is why its processes are holistic instead of divided by task. “If you take an order, you assemble the entire appliance up to the point of packaging. That ensures not only the greatest flexibility and the lowest inventory levels, but also promotes a sense of responsibility and goal orientation among our employees,” explains Wiedemann. The company’s management philosophy helps a lot. Hierarchies have long since been flattened, and Rational’s managers are viewed more as gardeners who create space and trust, act consistently, concentrate on essentials, and serve their staff members.

Another important element in Rational’s success is that all after-sale services are provided free of charge. That includes instruction on how to operate appliances in customers’ own kitchens, as well as a round-the-clock “ChefLine” for questions and a “GarenLive” training program whose experienced chefs show customers the most efficient ways of using their appliances to meet their needs. Whether at top-end restaurants or snack and pastry shops, these training programs focus on participants’ individual situations and allow a direct exchange of ideas—a good example of how Rational practices and reinforces its personal contact with customers. ←



Top left: All Rational customers receive a comprehensive introduction to their new appliances from professional chefs. **Top right:** Rational's TPEM system—the traffic light in the production area shows the machine's status. **Below:** Entrepreneurial ideas are put into action here—if you receive an order, you assemble the entire product right up to packaging.

LEAN DEVELOPMENT

ENERGY FREED FOR INNOVATION

Factory of the Year, Best Innovator, Best of Market—the list of awards that the Rational kitchen appliance maker has won over past years could go on and on. Porsche Consulting has helped Rational to make its development process even more efficient and to enhance its innovative power.

Rational's chief technical officer, Peter Wiedemann, gets straight to the point: "We used to have trouble meeting our cost and scheduling targets. That's why we decided to restructure the organization and processes."

Rational had always relied on development planning with defined milestones for all of its new products, but there were periods when it realized that some of the tasks leading up to a given milestone had not been sufficiently addressed. Problems had been covered up, and only became transparent at the subsequent milestone. The company's new product engineering process (PEP), which Porsche Consulting helped to customize specifically for Rational, now relies on a "PEP map" with multiple detailed interim checkpoints between milestones. "This approach improves our monitoring between milestones," says Wiedemann. "If they run into difficulties, employees can raise the urgency level earlier on in order to acquire more resources or make adjustments elsewhere—instead of waiting until the milestone is reached." The urgency level is signaled via a traffic light system. This increases transparency and also "gives managers a better feeling and greater assurance."

Another key factor in improving the development process was to decouple basic development work more strongly from the development work done on series production. "We only enter series production these days when each operation has been tested and secured. And ideas that have little promise of success are quickly filtered out," says Wiedemann. Darius Khodawandi, Principal at

Porsche Consulting, adds that "for every new product a business case is calculated beforehand in order to evaluate customer benefit, market potential, and costs. These cases are analyzed and discussed across hierarchies and departmental lines. Many companies have forgotten how to do this, because they view new products as the responsibility of just the marketing or the research people." By using this approach, Rational has become considerably faster in its series production development, and also more precise in its basic development work.

More energy has been freed for new inventions, too. "The lean production process has helped to enhance our innovative power," says Wiedemann, "because we can now concentrate more on new inventions." Moreover, the strategy calls for developers to guide the process of generating their new products from start to finish. "This approach enables individual researchers to function at a higher level, because it allows them to concentrate on a single product," says Khodawandi. And finally, it encourages everyone's entrepreneurial outlook—a key component in Rational's corporate philosophy.

Rational has already celebrated its first success. "Our new VarioCooking Center 112+ tabletop appliance is the first to be developed exactly within the defined time, quality, and cost framework," reports Wiedemann.



CHEF WOLFGANG GUTH

REAL EXPERTS DON'T NEED RECIPES



**Ever on the lookout for waste in the kitchen:
Master chef Wolfgang Guth**

The tantalizing aroma of grilled pepper steak wafts through the air. Wolfgang Guth gently places the juicy piece of T-bone meat next to precision-cut potato cubes. He lovingly garnishes the plate with a sprig of rosemary and then gazes at his creation with satisfaction. “To be a superb cook,” he says, “what you need most of all is passion.”

If anyone should know, it's this man, who can look back on more than 20 years of experience as a professional chef around the world, including sojourns in Canada, Australia, London, France, and Switzerland. Guth has worked everywhere from a two-star restaurant to an industrial kitchen, and also delighted guests with excellent catering fare at the Formula One and the Geneva Motor Show. “Top chefs can conjure extraordinary experiences from simple ingredients—that’s where the difference lies,” he says.

But you need more than creativity to prepare an excellent meal. Top chefs are not just masters of their craft. They also possess excellent management skills. “A chef has to be able to run the kitchen,” remarks Guth. Four people generally work on any given dish, so teamwork and communication are of the essence. Mutually coordinated processes are also of paramount importance. “It doesn’t help at all if I’m faster than my colleague, because we always have to have each component ready to serve at precisely the same time.”

These days, Guth is contributing his experience and expertise to the Rational kitchen appliance maker. Responsible for seminars and trade fairs, he helps the company make its processes at professional kitch-

ens even more efficient. The SelfCookingCenter takes over all the jobs that are not value-adding as such. This enables chefs to concentrate on what does in fact add value: “flavoring, marinating, dressing, seasoning sauces, creativity, talking with the guests,” says Guth. “Or sometimes just sleeping in after a 14-hour day at work, because the appliance will keep at it through the night.” An intelligent assistant, it also performs tasks such as monitoring and supervising. “This appliance determines on its own how products should be prepared. It ensures a consistent level of quality, whether or not the head chef is there.”

The greatest amount of waste in kitchens—whether professional or private—takes place in purchasing. The kitchen at Munich’s Hofbräuhaus has it easy. They know the place will be full from start to finish. “But at kitchens out in the countryside, for example, you never know how many people will come and what they’ll want to eat,” says Guth. The SelfCookingCenter helps keep overproduction in check, because it only cooks up to a certain point. The rest is done when the dish is actually ordered. “The trick lies in doing as much preparation as necessary in order to serve dishes that are as fresh as possible.”

In home kitchens, the problem is often a matter of purchasing on the basis of recipes and then not knowing what to do with what’s left. “Packaging sizes don’t help,” remarks master chef Wolfgang Guth. “If I want to use a fresh carrot with greens I’ve got to buy a whole bunch, so the rest of the carrots lie around in the fridge.” Once again this reveals true masters of the *métier*. “Making something delectable from any combination of ingredients is an art that our grandmothers excelled at,” says Guth. “That, for example, is what gave us the stew and the pizza.” ←