THANKS TO A SURGE of new products focused on ethnic diversity, the roller grill—the original anchor for most convenience store hot food programs—is hotter than ever before.

“Customers automatically associate c-stores and roller grills. It’s been a source of great sales for us,” said Scott Huggins, a marketing specialist for San Antonio-based Tesoro Petroleum Corp. “The roller grill is our primary foodservice offering.”

Surprisingly, the Washington-Baltimore area, not Texas, was the third-largest consumer of hot dogs in the U.S. last year, according to the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council, which also noted that, regardless of how far they travel from supplier to retailer, hot dogs are doggedly “local” with regional preferences determining what’s offered where.

Yet, while convenience store retailers provide only about 13% of the nation’s prepared meals and snacks, compared with 87% by conventional restaurants, food traffic is growing at a faster rate at c-stores than at restaurants, according to NPD Group market research reports.

In fact, convenience stores have seen the largest growth, accounting for 54% of all retail traffic for the 12 months ended in March 2008, up 11% since 2002. And a growing number of the feet that comprise that traffic are heading for the roller grill first, where an increasing number of tasty and varied hot food choices await them.

NON-TRADITIONAL CUISINE

No longer just a venue for traditional American hot dogs, roller grills that sport everything from Mexican tortas to pork-filled Chinese steamed buns to breadsticks stuffed with jalapeno peppers and cheese are cropping up all over the country.

Long known as a convenience store staple, about 43% of all c-stores have at least one roller grill in the store.

Greg Dornbach, senior vice president of sales and marketing for c-store grill food supplier Lettieri’s, a division of Hot Stuff Foods, traces the current expansion of roller grill choices to the introduction of taquitos and toranados.

Currently about 43% of all c-stores have at least one roller grill in their store, but Dornbach points out that adding offerings has caused many convenience retailers to add more grills.

Industry leader QuikTrip Inc., for example, consistently offers a variety of grill comestibles, including taquitos, egg rolls and breadsticks, but hot dogs are still the featured grill item.

“If you manage the category correctly, it will be a c-store staple,” said Mike Thornbrugh, the public and government affairs manager for the Tulsa, Okla.-based chain. “This program has longevity in the market, and if you promote the product well, it will stay around for a long time.”

QuikTrip’s hot dog promotional strategies include weiner mobiles that appear at QT stores periodically and during summer
FRESH, ETHNIC AND HEALTHY
A NEW REPORT FROM the Center for Culinary Development and Packaged Facts points out that today’s c-store customers want grab-and-go foods that are fresh, ethnic, healthy and portable, and that includes foods from the roller grill.

“Hand-held Culinary Trend Mapping Report” reveals that U.S. consumers are tired of “traditional” convenient snacks. “Eating the same sandwich, hot dog or slice of pizza gets pretty boring,” notes Kimberly Egan, CEO of the Center for Culinary Development. “Hand-held food is expanding to new flavor and form horizons, offering a host of ideas to excite consumers and build new businesses.”

Egan predicted that the predominant trend for hand-held snacks will be continue to be ethnic and multicultural as a more ethnically diverse population expands U.S. consumers’ eating experiences.

Joining the taquitos and Cajun sausages, whose presence started the current roller grill revolution, are Chinese steamed buns, chewy rounds of dough with spicy meat centers.

Though these are traditionally made with pork belly meat, manufacturers are now experimenting with different fillings including chicken and kimchee, a traditional Korean vegetable dish, Egan says.

Other popular snack foods that hit this trend include tortas, traditional Mexican sandwiches and empanadas, Latin American pastries.

The ethnic roller grill and hot bar snack sector offers some healthy and low fat treats, Egan pointed out, attracting Hispanic and mainstream consumers alike. “Fresh fruit, salad and vegetable fillings always give an ‘healthy’ message, as do low-fat meats such as turkey and chicken, egg whites and bread or wraps that are low in carbohydrates,” she said.

The report observes that more conventional c-store fare sells better when presented with a premium twist. Premium meats, specialty buns and unusual sauces all contribute to ensuring continued popularity for traditional dogs and burgers.

months some stores set up charcoal grills in their parking lots.

ROLLER GRILLS GROW UP
Sometimes, though, roller grill foods can expand so much that they literally “grow up and leave home,” said Open Pantry Food Marts Inc. Vice President Jim Schutz. The Pleasant Prairie, Wis. company recently added burrito bars to three of its stores in response to customer demand for fresh-cooked grab-and-go food items piqued by response to its roller grill offering.

As Schutz started looking at made-to-order hot foods several years ago, which was part of a larger marketing effort to makeover stores and attract more female shoppers to its stores, the chain decided to begin moving to more custom foods by switching from packaged sandwiches to fresh and boosting the quality and number of the choices in its hot dog program. “We knew that in order to win, we had to offer consumers what they were looking for,” Schutz said.

The company decided to target female consumers, building and remodeling its stores using “living room” designs featuring over-sized leather chairs, fireplaces, computer centers and Wi-Fi networks, and providing bathrooms with slate floors, marble walls and separate heating systems.

Redoing its stores to appeal more to women made Open Pantry execs aware that their food offerings, formerly targeted solely to Bubba, needed to expand and change as well. “We still have some Bubba foods like big hoagie rolls and lunch meats, but we went into whole wheat breads and pretzel buns and a lot of salads, including chicken and tuna salads made with low-fat mayo,” Schutz said.

Though store leaders were initially a little anxious about how customers would respond, Open Pantry’s food sales absolutely skyrocketed. “Our female customers were delighted to find what they were looking for, and their male counterparts decided it looked so good they began eating it, too, so we won on all fronts,” Schutz said.

BURRITO BAR LOGICAL EXPANSION CHOICE
A number of Open Pantry stores already had sandwich bars, so expanding into burrito bars seemed to be the logical next step, as did following the same healthful-with-high-flavor concepts that were already serving the company so well.

Eschewing the fat-laden ground beef and cheese normally associated with c-stores, Schutz spent months searching for a vendor who could provide exactly what he wanted: something authentic, out of the box and with a great flavor profile. He finally found what he wanted at a small New Mexico supplier that produces true-to-form Mexican foods.

“We can make a burrito that’s definitely
not for the faint of heart as well as milder steak and chicken versions,” Schutz said. “Our burritos are very healthful, wholesome and filling without the huge amount of filler frequently found at burrito establishments. We’re not talking about ground beef with a high fat level, but about lean steak, chicken and pork.

In addition to offering chunks of steak, pork, chicken and potatoes, Open Pantry’s burrito bars provide a dozen or more different items customers can add, ranging from beans and rice to four different types and spice levels of salsas and olives.

Lean ground beef has become a destination at the burrito bar as well, but Schutz said customers generally use it on nachos, choosing the more upscale grilled meats for their burritos. “When customers see grilled chicken and steak strips half an inch by two inches long and cubed pork loin that’s what they want,” he said.

**ON-SITE COOKING NOT REQUIRED**

With labor staffing and training an ongoing concern for convenience store operators, Open Pantry’s burrito components don’t require on-site cooking, which makes them labor and cost-efficient as well as tasty and popular. Burrito ingredients arrive pre-cooked and are placed into hot wells or cold condiment units that keep them proper serving temperature.

The company’s first burrito bar opened about three years ago as a test in a combined residential/industrial area with a high traffic volume. It took off almost immediately. “Customer response has been enormously positive,” Schutz said. “Consumers are moving to healthier eating more forcefully today than ever before, and authentic Mexican cuisine is much lower in fat than most fast foods.”

Given that all of its stores are in the Midwest, far from the coasts where Latino foods are more common, a little consumer

The most recent burrito bar is targeting students on the campus of Marquette University in downtown Milwaukee, where Schutz said college consumers form a seemingly never-ending customer stream from the moment doors open until closing time. As the company remodels more of its stores and builds new ones finding space to include burrito bars.

“A burrito bar takes at least 400 and usually closer to 700 square feet,” Schutz said. “But as we go through our stores and remodel them for our new concepts we’ll definitely be adding our Santa Fe Cafés because they truly separate us from our customers’ image of a gas station.” CSD