



◆ E-mail: [robert@rccateringconsultants.co.uk](mailto:robert@rccateringconsultants.co.uk) ◆ Website: [www.rccateringconsultants.co.uk](http://www.rccateringconsultants.co.uk)

**BHA/Hospitality Matters/Sept 2000**  
(Revised in 2014)  
**Car-maker mixes business and leisure**

Bruce Whitehall reports on a radical new hospitality concept created by Volkswagen AG, and on the company's ground-breaking decision to introduce cook-chill technology to its staff feeding operations.

TEXT

In planning a new customer service centre close to its largest car-making plant in Wolfsburg, Volkswagen hit upon a revolutionary idea: why not turn it into an automotive theme park open to admission-paying members of the public?

The Autostadt complex, which opened this summer near the company's main factory in Wolfsburg, therefore not only boasts two huge automated "silos" from which customers get their new cars. It also has a five star hotel, function facilities and ingeniously themed public catering facilities as well as extensive leisure and "edutainment" attractions for all the family.

In parallel, Volkswagen has also made a radical departure in the way it feeds its workforce, with a centralised kitchen which supplies the theme park and many other caterers (such as the Eurest contract catering business) within an 80 km radius. A notable aspect of the development is the decision to embrace cook-chill, a technology which German caterers have tended to date to regard with scepticism.

While the concept of "industrial tourism" has some precedents, such as visitor centres at distilleries and the conversion of old factories and dockyards into "heritage" attractions, Autostadt appears to have no direct equivalent anywhere in the world in the way it allies a customer service requirement with theme park marketing.

The project, which has required a budget of DM850m (€265m), originated in the mid-90s. Confronted with a severe recession, the VW group sought a more efficient way of enabling customers to collect their new vehicles. It earmarked a 25 hectare plot of land close to the factory in Wolfsburg, which is about 30 miles east of Hanover and houses the largest of the company's four German assembly plants.

The project got under way in early 1996. While the central purpose is vehicle collection, the idea developed into a much broader customer communications concept. As the VW Group puts it, Autostadt is a "marketing instrument which, by opening up the company and presenting its values will attract and retain new sectors of the population as customers."

However, Autostadt is not simply a grandiose PR statement. It is also expected to be revenue earning, both from its foodservice and from admission charges. Around €7.50 is charged per head for day visitors. People collecting vehicles are offered various packages which can include admission and restaurant /accommodation vouchers.

For the foodservice, a number of well-known restaurant design practices including London's Virgile & Stone and New York's Tony Chi & Associates were brought in to create six outlets based around automotive themes, and leading Swiss hospitality group Mövenpick has been contracted by VW to operate all of the units, which serve a total of 1300 seats.

The largest, called Lagune, has 500 seats and features meals prepared on large open stoves. Sections include a snack buffet, pizza, pasta and vegetarian buffet, ice parlour, coffee shop and bakery. The overall approach corresponds to Mövenpick's international "market-style" Marche restaurants with their strong emphasis on open food display.

Other outlets include the Cylinder restaurant, an American-themed unit offering hamburgers, chicken, ribs and similar fare. Also with an automotively inspired identity is the Tachometer, which is close to the vehicle customer-service area. It is geared more to takeaway for visitors who are keen to get their new car and hit the road. It also has a Water Bar selling 60 different brands of mineral water.

For visitors with more time, the Chardonnay restaurant offers table service with an average spend per head around €12.50; diners shop for their wines from a special walk-in wine cellar.

According to Nicole Baumann, catering manager at Mövenpick Autostadt, the majority of the people visiting the centre each day so far have been families on a day-out but there are also around 300 new car owners picking up their vehicle. This figure is projected to rise to 600-800 per day as the facility becomes better-known.

"Most of them don't come alone but bring their whole family with them, so car collection represents a lot of customers for us," she comments. "Basically, Volkswagen wanted something that was more than just a delivery office - a place where car buyers could spend a pleasant day, too." A third strand of business is from local people who use the restaurants without going into the leisure facilities.

Visitor attractions mostly have an automotive theme, as with a car museum and the "Marken-Pavillons" (brand pavilions) which showcase VW's extensive range of automotive acquisitions like Audi, SEAT, Skoda, Scania, Lamborghini, Bentley and Rolls Royce (models from these marques can also be collected). There is also an atrium filled with giant sculptures, four cinemas, three 30 seat simulators and interactive games in a series of giant cubes and numerous child play zones.

Around 1 million visitors are predicted in the first year, averaging around 3,500 people on an average day.

The Autostadt site also houses a new 174 bedroom, five star hotel which is notable for being the first built in Germany by the international Ritz-Carlton chain. As well as restaurants of its own, it contains a "cigar lounge" and fitness centre.

The hotel's Paris-based interior designer Andree Putman says that she has striven to create a "place of grace and quiet on an industrial site". The hotel provides a facility for business-people visiting VW and other companies in the area as well as visitors coming to collect cars. A notable feature of each bedroom is a new style tower unit which neatly incorporates television, fax, telephone and computer.

### **The Cook chill system**

A parallel development of note at Volkswagen Wolfsburg has been the introduction of a new cook-chill facility, which came on stream in September 2000. It is thought to be the largest of its kind in Germany specifically for workforce feeding. VW has invested over €6m of which €4m has gone on construction,

€2m on cooking and refrigeration equipment and €125,000 on training. The system's 3000 sq metre CPU (central production unit) is designed to produce up to 40,000 meals/day in two shifts using 35 staff and a range of high volume equipment such as bratt pans, combi-steamers, kettles plus blast and immersion chillers.

The bulk of production will be in Gastronorm pans with 3-5 day shelf life for distribution to the car plants, applying the cook-chill guidelines developed in the UK by the DSS. The CPU is also equipped to produce vacuum packaged chilled meals with up to 20 days shelf life, which opens up the potential to sell meals to other catering concerns.

An important partner with VW in the introduction of the system is Compass Group subsidiary Eurest, which has the contract to operate VW restaurants. While Eurest has not invested directly in the cook-chill system, some of its other German contracts are expected to become significant outlets for the cook-chill meals, conferring a strategic advantage in terms of reducing production and logistic costs.

Currently, the CPU has about 400 recipes, based on existing VW menus, and produces about 300 on an average day. New recipes for use at Eurest contracts are being progressively added, along with specific requirements of the Movenpick units at the Autostadt, notably soups.

"With 100,000 employees in Germany, we have become experts in feeding large numbers of people," comments VW marketing service manager Kees de Voogd. "A lot of smaller companies lack the expertise - and the buying power - to provide a modern meals service so we see opportunities for providing them with meals providing they are within a viable transport distance." He envisages a radius of about 200 km.

### **Feeding VW staff**

The new CPU will progressively replace 11 large conventional kitchens spread across VW's four German plants. According to Richard Bettenhausen, general manager, Volkswagen catering service, some of the existing kitchens originated up to 30 years ago.

Phasing them out will cut costs significantly since only modest investments in front of house areas, mainly regeneration equipment, are needed in the restaurants. Main change in terms of labour costs has been re-allocation of skills to the central production kitchen.

The new system has also provided an opportunity to optimise hygiene management with a total quality management system based on continuous temperature recording and hazard analysis now in place across the entire food production and distribution chain, including microbiological sampling.

### **Impact on German catering**

The VW development is being watched closely by other caterers in Germany, both institutional and commercial, and could bring a big change in attitudes towards cook-chill technology. While chilled meals are now widely sold in German retailing, scepticism has long attached to the use of cook-chill in catering.

"When German people hear words like cook and chill, they think in terms of prepared and reheated food so they have an adverse emotional reaction rather than thinking it through logically," Bettenhausen comments. "In fact, a lot of companies such as Mövenpick have been applying forms of cook and chill for many years but these systems are not normally identified in that way."

Introduction of the new system has therefore been the subject of a detailed programme of staff research, information and promotion, in consultation with workers' representatives. "The big issue with a major strategic decision like this is to get all our people to understand what we're doing," comments Kees de Voogd. One important message has concerned greater flexibility since changes in working patterns mean that the times when workers take meals are now much more variable. "And they now expect greater variety which has been difficult to deal using traditional cook and serve."

In Richard Bettenhausen's view, the arguments in favour of cook chill are plain. With the existing decentralised kitchens, there have been big differences from one plant to another in quality standards. "It is very difficult to ensure very high quality when you start cooking at 8 o'clock and the customer does not arrive until 12 or 1 o'clock."

Heating off small batches of ready-prepared food close to service times represents a significant improvement. It also, he believes, squares with new attitudes to staff feeding and gives restaurant staff greater scope to concentrate on customer service. "The VW worker is our customer and we have to be more customer orientated."

The new system will also make it possible to provide night shift workers - of which there are 7000 at the Wolfsburg plant alone - with hot meals for the first time. The average take-up of meals across VW of around 20,000 meals is projected to rise to 25,000 over the next three years.

The cook-chill food will account for about 60-70 per cent of meals served, with the rest comprising salads and other items. Present meal subsidies, which are based on agreements between the company and its unions, won't change with the new system. Of the average €1.75 paid for a meal, VW contributes 40 per cent.

**UK cook-chill specialist Robert Croft of RC Associates Limited has been responsible for implementing the system and training all relevant staff in accordance with the UK/EU guidelines. This has included off-site training at a cook-chill operation developed at the BASF industrial concern at Ludwigshafen and also visits to England to the Circadia cook-chill plant in Wimbledon and London's Cafe Royal to see the system and taste the end products. Croft comments that while German caterers have been 20 years behind the UK in developing systems catering, they are catching up fast.**