



SOME LIKE IT HOT

Rafi Gabbay is a young Israeli entrepreneur who invented foldable, lightweight electric food warming trays that are as practical as they are well-designed. Not surprisingly, they are selling like hotcakes

Rachel Kaplan



Rafi Gabbay

In the summer of 2015, years of hard work paid off when the first HotMat developed by Rafi Gabbay was officially launched – a four-plate heating tray with an attractive design that weighs only 2.5 kilos. This model is now known as the HotMat Classic. Thanks to its special surfaces, heat is spread in an optimal manner, enabling a much more even heat than traditional warming trays. Even better, it can be divided into separate areas that heat at different temperatures. Due to its unique structure, the HotMat offers plenty of space for four pots and pans. It is equivalent to a mid-size hotplate but uses 10% less space. The best part, though, is that it folds easily and can be conveniently stored or packed.

Following the success of the HotMat Classic both in Israel and around the world, Gabbay, who is 39 and lives in Jerusalem, recently introduced a second product – the HotMat Connect. This model features square-

shaped hotplates, rather than round ones, thereby increasing the overall heating surface. However, what makes the HotMat Connect truly unique and practical is the fact that it is modular and that pairs of hotplates can be added as necessary. In fact, up to five double units can be connected to a single source of electricity, so that as many as ten different dishes can be kept warm simultaneously. Each unit has two heat settings: warm or hot. Like the HotMat Classic, the HotMat Connect takes up very little space when folded and is light and easy to carry.

Meticulous R&D

It all started when Rafi Gabbay was an industrial design student in Jerusalem, working on a project about products for Shabbat. As part of this project, he sketched a warming tray which can be folded – unlike the heavy and cumbersome warming trays typically used by observant Jews to keep food hot during the

Sabbath. Realizing that he had hit on something, he decided to keep the idea to himself with the intention of exploring it further. “It was clear to me that something should be done with warming trays. Every other kitchen appliance is well designed and pleasant to use, and only the Shabbat tray remained heavy and unwieldy like in the 1940s – and burned the food to boot!” he noted.

After completing his studies and while working as a novice industrial designer, Gabbay started experimenting with materials for his foldable warming tray. It had to withstand high temperatures while also being pliable and lightweight. The solution was silicone. “I started to build prototypes with the help of an experienced engineer, and once we proved feasibility, I submitted a patent request,” he discloses. The next step was to raise funds for R&D.

During the day, Gabbay was busy with his job as a Product Manager for an Israeli loudspeaker company, and

at night he worked on his invention. Luckily, his employers were supportive and encouraged him to pursue his dream. During business trips to China, they even enabled him to stay longer to discuss his product with Chinese manufacturing experts.

“One of the biggest challenges was finding people who could give me advice. In Israel, there is plenty of know-how when it comes to high-tech projects, but very little when it comes to manufacturing, since so few products are manufactured here,” he points out. “No one knew anything about regulations and safety standards, and no one knew anything about making large products out of silicone. I was really on my own.” Eventually, he succeeded in adapting his invention to meet all the safety requirements necessary to conform to stringent European and American standards.

Universal appeal

Originally, the HotMat was designed with the observant Jewish market in mind, but it soon became clear that its appeal is actually much more universal. Jews who don’t cook on Shabbat and keep their food warm using warming trays on Saturdays are still an important market for Gabbay’s products, but he realized that HotMats are popular with many other groups as well. In particular, people who host in their homes and want to keep dishes warm, especially during buffet-style events, find the HotMat to be very handy.

Professional caterers are another significant market segment that has enthusiastically adopted the

HotMat, especially the new HotMat Connect. It makes their job much easier to be able to keep food warm in such a convenient manner. The HotMat is easy to transport and set up at any location, and it has the added advantage of being esthetic and elegantly designed.

In Israel, Gabbay has partnered with Michsaf, a company that manufactures silverware and is located on Kibbutz Nir Am near the Gaza Strip. “I found a common language with Michsaf,” he explains, “and today we use their warehouses and marketing expertise to further penetrate the Israeli market.” In addition to online sales through the HotMat website and Facebook, HotMat products are also available in select kitchenware stores around the country. In the

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past two years, thousands of units were sold in Israel, and many more thousands are set to arrive soon from China in order to meet the growing demand.

Gabbay is also pursuing export markets, especially in the United States. There too, the product is very appealing to the professional catering market and other institutional customers, and Gabbay’s U.S. partners are busy introducing the HotMat throughout North America.

Whether or not you are a regular user of warming trays, this is a must-have item for every household.

For more information, visit www.hotmathotplate.com.