

Haute Cuisine on the Menu at Today's Convention Centers



Once upon a time, meals at convention centers were just a step up from cafeteria food. Not anymore.

Restaurant-quality experiences are now standard fare at many convention centers, where innovative and high-end menu offerings with all the trimmings rival today's top gourmet eateries. ♦

BY ANDREA DOYLE



"Being new, we're looking to wow the client and create a memorable first impression. We do that by managing our own food and beverage services," said Chef Roger Morgan of the Connecticut Convention Center (CTCC).



"Our presentation is fabulous, and that's very important to me. But it's not just about the plate. It's about the theme and the entire experience," said Chef Morgan.



"We look at our director of food and beverage services, Diane St. Jean, partly as the center's interior decorator. She is always trying to outdo herself," added Chef Morgan of the CTCC.



This dessert table as well as the preceding images were from functions created by the CTCC for the Society of Independent Show Organizers 2006 Executive Conference in August.

BEEF TENDERLOIN MEDALLIONS WITH A PEPPER-corn demi or potato encrusted Chilean sea bass with a red curry sauce. Your choice, served on fine china complemented with the best of linens, and the lights lowered just so. Sound like dinner at a gourmet restaurant?

Try a typical meal for a group function at the Duke

more fruits, salads, lighter sauces, less starches, and more overall creativity with the meal. Presentation has improved as well," said Cathy Nash, CMP, director, meetings and conventions department for the American Psychiatric Association. The group's annual convention was held at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre (MTCC) this May and

livan, director of marketing for Utah Food Services, caterer for the Salt Palace Convention Center and Sandy Expo Center. "We incorporate entertainment with interactive chef stations such as giant woks set in the middle of the room where chefs bring the heat and aroma in to the event and personalize the guest experience; fruit shacks and penny

Where is the demand for variety and high-end offerings coming from? "Supermarkets are merchandising their fresh and organic produce to new levels, airport concession operations have risen to new levels, and these everyday interactions increases expectations from our clients. Today, there are lots of action stations, specialty beverage theme

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Energy Center prepared by Executive Chef Henry Warman of Ovations Food Services, the food and beverage caterers for the center.

"It seems the message has finally gotten out. A lot of money is being spent on today's conventions and attendees don't want rubbery chicken and overcooked steak smothered in a lot of sauce. Plus, many are eating healthier. Today, convention centers are offering more choices. I'm seeing

she said all the food and beverage functions at the centre were "absolutely fabulous."

Today's F&B Functions Have Pizzazz

Today, food and beverage functions at convention centers are about much more than merely satisfying one's appetite. "It must attain almost theatrical standards," said Kate Sul-

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candy storefronts overflowing with an abundance of tantalizing choices; sensational salads freshly tossed and served to order; and sushi chefs hand rolling the freshest ingredients. The popularity of chocolate fountains continues to grow with new twists, such as white chocolate tinted to match the event's colors, and an array of Willy Wonka-type dipping items that brings out the child in us, from gummy bears to Rice Krispie Treats."

bars from martini to ice bars. The days of chafing dishes on multiple tables are limited," said Damien McArdle, general manager of the Levy Restaurant Group, the catering company of McCormick Place in Chicago, and several other convention centers. "We do 'chafing-less' cooking, avoiding stainless steel trays and instead using cast iron or copper pans and other interesting serving pieces to liven the presentation and stimulate conversation."



Poached jumbo prawn and seared Atlantic salmon with black and white sesame seeds, a salad of lamb lettuce, and a cylinder of cucumber dill dressing; a typical appetizer at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre (MTCC).



Heavy desserts are out; light, fruit- or mousse-based desserts accompanied by fruit are in. Here is a fruit mousse encased in chocolate, crowned with spun sugar, served at the MTCC.



McCormick Place and Navy Pier in Chicago as do almost all of today's convention centers stress lively presentation which often includes live flowers and eye-catching foods.



Rows and rows of steel chafing dishes are history. Serving platters of all shapes and sizes are used to showcase wide varieties of different offerings.

Chicago's Navy Pier is also getting away from chafing dishes and using more unique serving pieces like platters, paella pans, woks, and cast iron skillets, said Jennifer Poskin, senior catering sales manager for Chicago Signature Services at Navy Pier. "Planners expect plated dinners to be of a high quality — equal to, or better than what they are eating at hotels and other special event venues," she said. "Action stations serving freshly prepared Asian, Mexican, and pasta items, build-your-own stations with burgers, salads, baked and/or mashed potatoes with lots of toppings are extremely popular."

You will never see a chafing dish at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center, where Executive Chef Jack Delby adapts recipes from celebrity chefs from around the world from his favorite book series, *Art Culinaire*. "All service is done on brightly colored glass displays. The convention center has also purchased display tables that can be mixed and matched for a glass top or stainless steel top. There is an extensive, portable back-of-house heating system to keep the food at [the proper] temperature prior to serving, since chafing dishes aren't used," he said.

Number of "Foodies" Increases

The sophistication of today's planners as well as attendees has in turn led to the sophistication of today's events. The proliferation of TV cooking shows combined with the phe-

nomenon of celebrity chefs have created consumers with more discerning palates for food and beverage.

"The expectation of planners has moved to a much higher level in recent years due to expectation of their clients. We are seeing the planner and the client well educated in food and beverage trends which in turn means we as a convention center need to be on top of everything from food ingredients and trends to drink recipes, service techniques, and current décor designs. It is expected we can work within the time schedules of the event and ensure a superior product and exceptional service," said Richard Willett, MTCC's vice president of food and beverage. "In terms of food, we are seeing less of the standard chicken fare and a number of functions testing the waters; fish, pork, and lamb are now chosen by a number of planners to rave reviews. Duos, meaning a surf and turf entrée, are popular, such as beef tenderloin with Atlantic salmon. Specialty meals are an important component of our repertoire based on the number of allergies and intolerances; we are sometimes prepared with up to 15 percent alternate meals," Willett added.

Today's attendee is vocal about what they can and cannot eat. The Washington State Convention and Trade Center (WSCTC) reports that it is not unusual to have 200 special meal requests out of 5,000.

"Kosher, gluten free, dairy free, vegetarian; we're getting very specific requests we haven't traditionally seen in

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the past," said Michael McQuade, CMP, director of sales and marketing for the WSCTC. This center is so committed to guaranteeing an innovative culinary experience that it had a tasting room built in its kitchen. To help meet each client's specific needs, the center customizes more than 80 percent of the meals served and prepares from scratch more than 90 percent of the baked goods served.

Trimming the Fat

Of course, high-end dishes can carry a high price tag. "Today's planners want and expect home-run ideas although their budgets may be limited," said McQuade. To

ensure this happens, it is imperative that a planner be upfront with the catering manager. Do your homework, he said. Go online, see some sample menu prices, and plan your budget accordingly. Most of all, be a realist, said McQuade. Food and beverage prices will be extremely different in a major metropolitan center than they will be in a second-tier city. Although there is not a great deal of wiggle room with menu prices, choosing to serve something that is fresh and in season can trim costs. "Let the chef determine what fish will be fresh at that time, what vegetables will be in season. If you rely on the chef to get things that are in season it will lower your cost," said McQuade. "Most planners are being evaluated on how they control



Seared Asian Ahi with Wakame Salad was on the menu at the grand opening celebration at the Renaissance Schaumburg Convention Center (RSCC) in July.



Tuna Tar Tar and Tabiko in English Cucumber with Wasabi Mayo on beautiful colored plates was also served at the celebration. Today, presentation is just as important as taste.



Demonstration kitchens allow planners and attendees alike the opportunity to sit and interact with the chef as he prepares their selections. Here is the demonstration grill at the Washington State Convention & Trade Center (WSCTC).



Meeting planners often want the opportunity to taste menu items and wines before finalizing their events. Here is the WSCTC's elegant tasting room located inside its kitchen.

their costs. Be honest with your catering person — who is your partner, your advocate — on what you are trying to achieve and as far as cost is concerned. The catering manager will help increase what you can get, plus they know the facility inside and out as they have done business in that center with other groups over and over again.”

Signature Events

Customization is the name of the game today. Rarely do planners order all of their food and beverage off a pre-printed menu. They want the help of the catering staff at the convention center to tailor dishes for their group. They want to put their signature on their events.

Convention centers can often showcase their region to groups meeting there through their F&B. At the WSCTC, the area's abundance of fresh Northwest seafood, shellfish, beef, fruits, berries, vegetables, microbrews, and wine enable groups to choose from a wide variety of regional fare.

The Hawaii Convention Center's state-of-the-art 20,000-square-foot production kitchen provides Executive Chef Douglas Rothenburger with the facilities necessary to create world-class Pacific Island cuisine.

Brian Allen, director of food and beverage, and Rothenburger work directly with meeting planners to create special menus with a “taste of Hawaii,” which are tailored to the preferences of attendees and developed in line with their

budget. “Meeting planners are intensely interested in offering items off the beaten path, but not so exotic their attendees will shy away from them,” said Allen. “It is important for meeting planners to come to us with a budget and demographic information on their group. We back into their needs, filling in with local product as much as possible. When they are hesitant, we offer tastings and convert them to our Pacific Basin cuisine with emphasis on buying Hawaiian products.”

A Word About Wine

According to *Food & Wine* magazine, last year, for the first time, more people chose wine over beer as their drink of choice, and the grape's popularity is spilling over to meetings. It is being taken seriously at today's convention centers — including the MTCC, which created a special “Wine Council” to help select its list of wines for its 2006/2007 event year. The MTCC's new wine list includes selections from all categories and price points. MTCC client Jeff Gilbert, deputy executive officer of the Ontario Libraries Association, was thrilled to be part of the wine council. “We spend a lot on wine as event planners, and it's great to have some input on the selection we can choose from,” said Gilbert. When liquor is served, it is increasingly in the form of specialty drinks like martinis, margaritas, and cosmopolitans.

In the non-spirit category, bottled water continues to be expected by convention-goers as being readily available. The

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trend of upscale coffees has percolated to convention centers as well, where it is common to find lattes being whipped up at Starbucks. Tea drinkers are finding a wider variety of herbal and special blend teas offered at centers as well.

Everything in Moderation

It wasn't that long ago that low-carbohydrate diets were all the rage. Atkins ... South Beach ... the Zone ... these protein-packed, low-carb diets had a legion of followers whom planners had to accommodate at meal and break functions. That trend seems to have quieted down (although low-carb selections should still be offered), and today, it's more about offering balanced alternatives than certain diet foods. Organic

products are also gaining in popularity. Decadent, heavy desserts are being replaced by lighter items.

“Healthy food will always be requested, but the requests haven't been as aggressive as in the past. When we do health-conscious food, we focus on flavor and presentation just as we would for any other menu because we want the experience to be just as memorable,” said Roger Morgan, executive chef at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford. “Being new, we're looking to ‘wow’ the client and create a memorable first impression. We do that by managing our own food and beverage services.”

For planners it's just getting easier to hold meal events at convention centers that impress even the most discerning attendees. ■