

FEATURES

JULY 2007

All's Fare

These facilities bring culinary excellence to the masses

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Photograph by Serge Bloch



Last April when British Columbia's culinary elite gathered for a night of serious feasting and to welcome a new batch of inductees into the British Columbia Restaurant Hall of Fame, they didn't choose a luxury hotel or one of this foodie city's high-profile restaurants for the gala dinner. Instead, they headed to the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre, where they dined on delectables such as pan-seared foie gras with apple relish, smoked trout with leek vinaigrette, and osso bucco with fresh morels.

"There was definitely some performance anxiety backstage in the kitchen that night, because that was an intimidating group," says Andrew Pollard, director of food and beverage for the VCEC. He needn't have worried. The group was so impressed by Pollard's culinary prowess, they plan on returning next year.

Remember when hotel dining was the kiss of death, before headliner chefs began popping up in hotel dining rooms and rolling out signature restaurants? Well, convention center dining, that bastion of mediocrity, is undergoing a similar transformation that is certain to banish those industrywide rubber-chicken jokes.

"Bulk food production has always gotten a bad rap, so people don't expect much from convention centers," says Pollard. "But they should. People are often shocked at the quality we are able to put on the plate for large numbers of people."

Flip this food

It might have been a long time coming, but the food and beverage trends emerging at convention centers across North America, as well as the new injection of culinary talent, will have meeting planners downright eager to dive into planning their event menus.

* **Lights, camera, drum roll.** From preparing Asian noodles to tossing

customized salads and grilling skewered meats, the art of culinary showmanship, delivered tableside, is now thrilling legions of diners at convention centers. "People want to see the chefs, so we are taking them out of the kitchen and bringing them up front and making them part of the event. It's performance theater, like *Iron Chef*," says Richard Toscano, vice president of event planning for Spartanburg, S.C.-based Centerplate, a catering, concessions and management firm counting among its clients 130 convention centers, arenas and sports venues, including the convention centers in Dallas and San Diego. "When the chef prepares the food in front of you, the meal takes on a whole new dimension. You almost don't need to have any other entertainment, he adds."

*** Family-style dining.** The typical scenario for a plated meal is this: Wait patiently for everyone at your table to be served before digging into that course, now gone cold, then repeat the process for the next course. "We have begun taking a family-style restaurant approach to meals by placing a selection of platters in the center of the table," says Bennett Fass, executive chef and director of culinary standards at Philadelphia-based Aramark Convention Center & Cultural Attractions, which manages food operations at more than 50 convention centers, museums, zoos and science centers across the country. "Not only aren't people waiting around for their food," Fass continues, "it becomes very interactive. One person turns to the next person and says, 'This is delicious. What did you try?' "



No out-saucing: Connecticut Convention Center's Roger Morgan

*** Made fresh daily.** "Where do you buy your soup?" It might seem like an innocuous enough question for a client to ask of a convention center's chef, but it makes Roger Morgan at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford bristle.

"I make my own soup, my own seasonings and sauces, because I am a perfectionist. We don't take shortcuts here," says Morgan, the CCC's executive chef, who has pushed this relatively new center, open less than three years, to take an ambitious attitude toward its food-service operation.

Morgan's background explains a lot. He had never worked at a convention center before and came to the CCC following more than a dozen years at Bally's casino hotel in Atlantic City, where he acknowledges the aggressive competition among chefs for consumer recognition and media ink can be ferocious. "I am accustomed to creating and serving four-star quality food. It's the only type of food I know," says Morgan, one of the few executive chefs in the convention center industry. "Now, I am competing against myself and pushing my team to do that here."

To ensure that his handpicked team of 10 buys into and perpetuates his demanding standards, Morgan includes them in tastings, actively solicits their feedback and shares praise from clients. "They have eaten every meal I've

made, because they need to know what they are serving and be proud of it," he says. And when the accolades come through the kitchen's swing doors, Morgan makes sure they fall on the most deserving ears. "I absolutely share them with my team," he notes. "I don't hold onto compliments for myself."

*** Keeping it local.** Andrew Pollard's steadfast motto is: "Know where your food comes from and how it was handled." At the Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre, he emphasizes local and fresh. "I will not fly a tomato halfway across the world because it carries an organic stamp. That doesn't seem too environmentally friendly to me," he says. "Give me fresh, local products from my backyard any day."

It's not that Pollard doesn't believe in organic, fair trade or any other food movements. In fact, he is a big proponent. Earlier this year when negotiating with a vendor for the purchase of 4,000 tons of coffee beans -- an amount typically consumed by the center annually -- not only did he pick beans that carried the fair trade label, Pollard insisted the coffee supplier provide the documentation to substantiate the claim.

"We are putting a lot of trust in suppliers when they tell us something is organic or fairly traded," says Pollard. "The only way I will make that same claim to our clients about our food products is if I know I can truly prove it."

In fact, Pollard regularly visits local farms and fisheries to sample their products and encourages them to work with him. In 2006, the VCEC purchased 12,000 heads of locally grown hothouse butter lettuce, more than a ton of various mushrooms and several hundred pounds of British Columbia smoked salmon, and served 18,000 bottles of wine, all exclusively from local Canadian wineries. "Fresh and local is just better. There is such a tremendous difference in flavor," says Pollard.

*** Just like a restaurant.** When planners start their menu-planning process at convention centers, the responses they typically get from catering sound like this: "Sorry, we can't do that for several hundred," "You want to serve what?" or "We don't have that item on our banquet menus."

Those excuses won't fly at the St. Charles Convention Center in Missouri,



"People are often shocked at the quality we are able to put on the plate."

-- Andrew Pollard, Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Center

another relative newcomer. Alvaro Beltranena, the 2-year-old center's director of food and beverage, thrives on crafting what he calls a "restaurant approach to serving the masses." Crab-stuffed prawn topped with a signature sauce or a 10-ounce Chateaubriand paired with shrimp are some of his recent creations.

"When we have food tastings for clients, I hear, 'Wow! This is not your traditional convention center food. I'd expect to get this at a restaurant in downtown St. Louis.' Well, that's exactly what I'm shooting for," says Beltranena, who hails from an extensive catering background at luxury hotel chains, including the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Co.

But it's not just the food that has to look and taste like it was delivered out of a restaurant kitchen, the entire dining experience has to fill the role, says Beltranena, who eschews the likes of traditional banquet table skirting and cheap, mass-produced china and stemware in favor of more high-end table linens and serving pieces. "To deliver the restaurant experience, you have to deliver the whole package, from food presentation to quality of service," he says. "You have to create an exceptional experience."

A new approach

From customizing menus to wooing planners with extravagant wine-paired tastings, some convention center food operations departments are taking a fresh approach to the art of selling a center's second-largest revenue maker after exhibit space -- its food.

Family-style fare: Aramark's culinary czar, Bennett Fass



* **May we suggest?** The toughest part when it comes to planning a meal for thousands, says Bennett Fass of Aramark, is that one or two planners have the job of picking out a meal for thousands. "We are really starting to push that we are the experts, and we try to make recommendations," says Fass, who adds that all too often planners come in with ill-conceived ideas of what they can get for their budget. "What they don't seem to understand is they don't have to serve the same tired old salad and chicken."

* **Taste tests.** According to Richard Toscano of Centerplate, clients are more food savvy, thanks in large part to the myriad television food shows and the popularity of celebrity chefs. And that new breed of client has nudged centers to hold more elaborate and out-of-the-box tastings to really strut their stuff. "It's as if the American palate has evolved," says Toscano. "Planners are coming in and asking for a certain type of lamb. And even if they have a

budget of only \$22 a plate, they want choices, and they want it to be tasteful and elegant, too."

* **Customized menus.** It comes as a surprise to most planners when Roger Morgan of the Connecticut Convention Center sits down with a planner and tells them he doesn't have a standard in-house event menu, because he builds every menu to the client's needs. "They are definitely not used to hearing that," says Morgan, who makes a point of asking about attendee dietary needs, including potential allergies. He says he doesn't see small budgets as a problem, but rather a creative challenge he and his team can rise to. "I'll make a suggestion, and they'll go, 'I didn't know I could substitute that for that and it won't cost more.' I love it, because it shows we care about what we are doing."