

INSURANCE & FINANCIAL MEETINGS MANAGEMENT

THE EXECUTIVE SOURCE FOR PLANNING MEETINGS & INCENTIVES

Food and Beverage Trends

Keep your attendees happy

September/October 2007

Clare Adrian

We asked Stephen Colbert to coin a new word for us.

We need one word to describe the ultimate, all-inclusive F&B event. One that summarizes the expectations of attendees, meets the event's objectives, promotes environmental responsibility and illuminates the company's brand.

One that includes all the necessary ingredients: healthful food choices (organic and locally grown, too), an exquisite theme-related presentation that educates and entertains, an arrangement that cultivates interaction and networking, and delivers the supreme "wow" factor.



James R. Wolfe
Director of
Administration
NCCI Holdings
Inc.
Boca Raton, FL

"Apart from having a fabulous hotel or resort, if the food isn't right, that's what people remember."

But Stephen Colbert, the word-invention wizard and satirical, comedic host/character of Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report" was busy. Instead, we'll examine the latest in F&B corporate meeting trends, and conclude with the perfect and ideal word.

Defining Healthful

James R. Wolfe, director of administration for Boca Raton, FL-based NCCI Holdings Inc. suspects insurance and financial management groups developed a refined palette dining out frequently with clients. The events he arranges are business-driven not incentive, yet food is a significant factor said Wolfe. "Apart from having a fabulous hotel or resort, if the food isn't right, that's what people remember."

Points stack up highest on NCCI attendee surveys, as elsewhere, for healthy choices. "The challenge is, nobody says what that means," said Wolfe. No problem. He focuses on the choice aspect, ensuring enough interesting selections to satisfy everyone from vegetarians to low-carb dieters. A trained chef himself, Wolfe is attentive to the history of what has worked. "Some take surveys and never do anything about it. We do. Feedback has been wonderful. It's what we live by," he confirmed.

For training events at Guardian Life Insurance Company's Agency Growth & Advanced Markets department based in New York City, training events coordinator Tracy Horwitz said that while attendees don't expect much, she makes an effort to provide the best food and beverage service possible. "For incentive programs, they expect better quality and more upscale cuisine." For both, she added, "I strive to provide an abundance in

quantity and choices. Among the items that attendees prefer are premium level steaks, crab cakes, shrimp or sushi. We aim to please, and steer clear of eccentric options.”

Horwitz has yet to hear a complaint regarding healthful offerings. She ensures that all special food requests are met, mainly for Kosher and Halal, by outsourcing to reputable restaurants. For the best quality venue that fits her budget allocations, Horwitz asks catering managers for menu possibilities in the medium to top range, depending on the event, and notices progressively upgraded quality.

The event often creates the budget, said Margaret Moynihan, CMP, meeting director of the global conference group of Deloitte and Touche in Wilton, CT, and though extensive variety in foods pleases attendees, the environment sometimes dictates limits. Buffet breakfasts allow flexibility for attendees to arrive at their leisure. Moynihan learned her standard widespread offerings are not always available outside the U.S. at a recent event in Germany where sliced meats are customary and bacon, ham, sausage and breakfast potatoes are foreign. Moreover, Moynihan cautions that too much of a good thing may be too much. She said, “If you make it too healthy, some say ‘What happened to my Milky Way bar?’”

Sustainable Health

For some, the meaning of healthy is more expansive than meeting dietary restrictions. The greening of America permeates the various meal event strata, and attendees often want to see some signs that assure everything from organic food to proper packaging, said Jaclyn Bernstein, DMCP, president and partner of New York City-based Empire Force Events. Those on restricted diets appreciate table-tent signs listing ingredients rather than just menu items. “The trends are not as much individual foods as content quality,” she noted.

Whether for business or incentive purposes, Bernstein applies the high-end thought process approach, “massaging the various facets to fit budgets,” yet retains her goal to excite clients asking “what can we do differently so they pay attention,” as if the educational component were her responsibility. She scrutinizes her client’s history in order to make the most appropriate decisions, pressing to learn the group’s previous event locations, if they’d been to New York and how spouses like to spend time. She asks where they go locally after work, what the executives like, what has backfired in the past? If her province is only one meal for an entire event, she inquires about all other meals to avoid any overlap. She respects the multinational backgrounds of attendees likely to be present at most any event, insists on knowledgeable servers, watches trends, yet won’t adopt one if it isn’t functional.

Healthful food and environmental practices are pervasively second nature on the West Coast — down to the tableware, said Ryan Ingalls, a corporate event manager for Washington Mutual in Seattle, WA. “People have strong beliefs, which we respect. And it makes sense to reuse. It’s very subtle. If we use paper or plastic, someone might ask why.”



Tracy Horwitz
Training Events
Coordinator
Agency Growth
& Advanced
Markets Group
Guardian Life
Insurance
Company
New York, NY

“I strive to provide an abundance in quantity and choices. We aim to please and steer clear of eccentric options.”

Quarterbacking Events

Ingalls enumerated several criteria, his “quick hits,” describing how he quarterbacks his events by first establishing the appropriate format. For the large conference, a buffet is conducive to quick service and accessible options for restricted diets, and for small group incentive trips, carving and/or cooking stations are preferable.

To cut costs and secure enough food, Ingalls plays the numbers game with the hosting venue, basing his final guaranteed service number on those registered, minus the venue’s overage provision. “You never want running out or serving bad food to set the tone,” he noted.



Margaret Moynihan, CMP
Meeting Director
of Global
Conference
Group
Deloitte and
Touche
Wilton, CT

“If you make
it too healthy,
some say
‘What
happened to
my Milky
Way?’”

Ingalls knows restaurants and hotels are keen to trends. “You notice something on a menu and then all of a sudden it’s on all of them, like sushi. It’s everywhere.” Speaking of sushi, he doesn’t order it often although, when it does fit the occasion, he orders three times the offered amount per person and it goes quickly.

His “first impression” strategy applies to that one standout menu item he knows will be a hit. If appropriate, it gets first-day billing. “Starting with an excellent meal, again, sets the tone, although the bar is set and you have to be sure the other selections are comparable,” Ingalls related.

Finally, when choosing a venue, he prefers to work with a chef who is willing to substitute, the same chef who prepared the meal he sampled when visiting for the site inspection.

Moynihan prefers to go right to the source. “I always ask what’s the latest or what people request more often or what a particular chef likes to do for this size of group, as opposed to what I like to do,” she offered.

When meeting planners show up on Walt Disney World Resort’s doorstep, client survey in-hand, they’re met by a representative of a 350-strong diverse catering team that is up-to-date on all the latest industry trends. “The single best source,” said Anne Hamilton, vice president, resort sales and services for Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, FL, “is asking clients the right questions and listening to their needs, which is at the heart of all we do.”

Disney responds with extensive variety in healthful, seasonably fresh menu options that are innovatively, ethnically and exotically prepared to produce sensory experiences for adventuresome palettes. Hamilton noted her company has eliminated trans fats from all foods, chefs are serving smaller portions, and menus are detailed and tailored for each event. Attendees are likely to see turkey bacon, turkey sausage and turkey burgers, as well as pork as non-beef options, said Hamilton.

The “in-foods” are locally grown, organic and green, observed Jennifer Palacio, director of catering and conference management at the Hard Rock Hotel At Universal Orlando, A Loews Hotel. “Meeting attendees are taking better care of themselves, not stopping

there but considering the environment as well. It's important to them to know where the food is farmed and how it was raised.”

Trendy health foods Palacio cited are pomegranate and the Amazon acai berry. Also, varieties of olives are all the rage, and exotic dark chocolates, whole grains, gazpacho and basic Italian-style dishes continue to be popular. And, Palacio said, “bread is back.”

Asking For The Unusual

The changes are stark compared to when Palacio started in conference and catering management 12 years ago. Food and beverage was simply an essential for survival. Now the Food Network has ushered food and beverage art into homes. More familiar with gourmet foods, attendees are not afraid to ask for the unusual. They love multicourse meals, small portions paired with a wine and cheese course, incredible presentations and flavors, and want to be entertained by chef-attended stations. Palacio said that clients want the resort to customize menus and accommodate the increasing number of dietary and allergen restrictions. “Global availability has expanded our pantry to get anything, anytime, especially convenient for the many international guests who take advantage of the reasonable international flights in Orlando,” concluded Palacio.

Brian Stapleton offers a perspective of 26 years in the business and having grown up on a farm in rural California. He is the corporate executive chef and F&B director for Aramark Harrison Lodging. He fine tunes and personalizes menus and activities around meeting planner goals and objectives, which he encapsulates into, “value for dollar, quality of product, a balance of variety of foods, nurturing a very positive learning environment.” The variety is essential, he said, as a comfort factor for participants from a vast array of backgrounds and to generate excitement throughout the duration of the program.

Stapleton suggests success-bent meeting planners consider generational differences in order to better understand expectations that underlie conference evaluations. The older set stood in the college cafeteria line of yore and is more easily satisfied. The younger, accustomed to the food court concept, has developed high expectations at an early age. To meet his divergent needs, Stapleton provides foods based on personal preference at the station, cooks fresh per individual order, and mixes and matches ingredients with protein of choice.

Besides cooking, Stapleton lends his expertise to training in the field, focusing on advancing operations and engineering menus to the next level of sustainability — developing relationships with organic farmers and suppliers. He minimized the “in” food notion. “There will always be a hot item of the season. But generally there is a sense of urgency to utilize the locally grown, natural and organic,” he said.

Blind Tastings

Stapleton seizes opportunities to advance sustainability by creating unique environments beyond the food and education element of meetings. At chef's table blind tastings, 80 percent of the meeting planners choose a grass-fed medallion of beef over the same cut originating in a stockyard containing less nutrients and flavor. He emphasized, “We as operators need to maintain the expectation of guests, but also within that component create situations where the wow factor is about the superior taste of locally grown foods and gets into the conversation right there at the chef's station.”

A conflict arises as sustainability becomes more commonplace and restaurants buy more from local vendors, said Wolfe. “We have an Americanized palette that wants what they want when they want it. They expect blueberries all year round and can get them, but that doesn’t come under the heading of sustainability.”

Surveys say attendees are happier, smarter and more satisfied the more meeting planners and culinary staff stir up entertaining meal experiences that cultivate networking.

“It’s easier to network when people have something to talk about,” said Palacio, recalling an event that paired a wine with each station of an Italian-themed dinner at Portofino Bay Hotel At Universal Orlando, A Loews Hotel with a sommelier explaining the wine and cuisine combinations. “The wine feature brought people together.”

A “rock concert” was set up for Washington Mutual in the lobby of Hard Rock Hotel complete with lighting, sound system and live band for a musical conversation catalyst. The food stations, which certainly gave attendees “something to talk about,” included a variety of stations from a build-your-own Cobb salad and quesadilla stations, to a chef-prepared paella and a risotto station.

Chefs As Rock Stars

Mum is not the word at food stations as Disney chefs become the rock stars, out of the kitchen and into events to interact with attendees, said Hamilton. “It’s educational and enlightening, as the chefs prepare fresh entrees and describe the passion and inspiration behind each.”

For a “Best of Berlin” event for the Deloitte Annual World Meeting, Moynihan chose five of the most well-known chefs of the German city to prepare their signature meals, presented in small-plate tasting versions. The booklet form menu of recipes generated conversation, and attendees who were unaccustomed to getting up and down for a buffet dinner enjoyed it, rather than sitting for a three-hour dinner.

“Tastes From Around the World” was a Park City, UT, chef’s answer to Ingall’s request for a socializing welcome meal event. Five displays represented distinct cuisines, a fresh fish station, a Pan-American style cuisine, U.S. wine and cheese pairings, a Spanish station and for the adventurous, the station that revealed Utah’s love for Jell-O as well as buffalo.

Low- and high-boy cocktail table levels rather than banquet rounds, numerous food stations, food and wine combo tastings, and various samplings created intrigue and motivation to move around and network at “Harbor Nights,” the function Wolfe arranged for NCCI at Portofino Bay Hotel.

Bringing attendees together to cook a meal may be the ultimate networking facilitator. Bernstein has improved the teambuilding exercise by staging a bit of theater — an argument between company CEO and the executive chef who storms out leaving the



Jaclyn
Bernstein,
DMCP
President and
Partner
Empire Force
Events
New York, NY

“The trends
are not as
much
individual
foods as
content
quality.”

group to prepare the meal. They're soon in on the gag when they are wrapped in personalized aprons.

Dining Out

Trendy New York City is synonymous with live theater and dining out. The city boasts thousands of eating establishments, hundreds of which fit the fine dining category. Thus, Bernstein's clients are treated to the best of it. Celebrity chefs such as Mario Batali may highlight a function, or the group may be transported to his restaurant.

For budgets with no room to squeeze into the Tavern on the Green, Bernstein unearths that obscure side-street deli, ethnically and olfactorily satisfying, as well as tasty. If possible, she'll treat attendees to the latest in greening at Pure Food and Wine where the organic fare is mostly raw or cooked below 118 degrees Fahrenheit.

Interestingly, Bernstein won't divide a large group up to send to different dine-around experiences only to have them compare restaurants afterward. Rather, she advocates splitting them up among the tables of one restaurant maintaining equanimity.

Art Galleries Of Food

"People look for what entertains their eyes," said Palacio, noting more heights, layers and colors in sauces and drizzles. She confirmed that overabundance is definitely out. In buffet presentations, less is more in regards to décor and props. Chafing dishes are replaced with creative ways to maintain food warmth, such as a flat-top griddle or a glass building block to elevate platters, mesmerizing with fire showing through.

Artsy spoonfuls and individual shish-kabobs are perfect for buffets and networking, said Hamilton. Colorful food and lighting accent Disney's food presentations. Breaks and buffets are displayed on attractive furniture, heavy dressers and armoires at Disney's Grand Floridian Resort & Spa and Disney's Yacht & Beach Club Resorts. At Disney's Coronado Springs Resort, chuck wagons carry out the Southwest flavor.

"The Disney Difference" encourages planners to "tap into the creative resources of the world's premier entertainment and content company" for imaginative ideas to enliven their event planning. For example, the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie franchise has spawned a number of new event concepts such as the Buccaneer Bash, an after-the-show party. For a recent event at Disney's Contemporary Resort, the meeting was themed to the high-tech future, with tables linked together in molecular patterns, and flat-screen televisions floating throughout the room announced each meal course.

"Food that looks cool tastes better," noted Bernstein. At times, she prods caterers to be more creative, matching tableware to the theme, rather than pulling out the white dishes. At other times, innovative presentation is born at the event. The menu for a 10-course meal she orchestrated required an entire 8" x 11" paper. Guests found that when they placed the paper under the glass charger plate warmers, they could read it as one course was replaced by another.

More Trends

Bob Zappatelli, vice president of food and beverage for Benchmark Hospitality International, recently released his annual report on the top five dining trends. Zappatelli and his team of 18 F&B professionals, who handle the culinary duties for the 30 hotels,

resorts and conference centers and condo resorts managed by Benchmark, reported that the number-one trend is downsizing desserts. Sampling is in and can be achieved guilt-free with less expensive mini-versions of everything from creme brulees to tropical fruit spanakopitas. Secondly, Latin American cuisine is taking hold as evidenced by the use of Latin flavors and fruits, vegetables, meat and fish indigenous to the Caribbean, Central and South America. Zappatelli named “grow naturally, harvest locally” as his third trend. No explanation required; however, number four may surprise. Childhood memories are influencing today’s chefs who are incorporating their favorite family recipes, reinterpreted and updated, into today’s menus. Lastly, mixologists are “mixing it all up” by pairing premium beverages from the specialty drink menu with fresh ingredients: Lemon Verbena Cosmopolitans, Purple Basil and Mint Mojitos and even a Bloody Mary Salad served with pickled vegetables and shrimp. After dinner, ice cream or sorbet and vodka or rum duos serve as dessert. Need we say more.

Behind The Scenes

Survey responses are never the same twice, said Ingalls, who gets a kick out of something like “We traveled too far to the restaurant but it was so good, we would do it again in a heartbeat.” It may seem strange, said the detail-oriented Ingalls, “but I strive for no recognition. People notice the small things that might be easily overlooked. You want an event to be run so smoothly, it seems to run itself. No recognition is better than somebody talking about it, because then it’s as if something needed to be discussed.”

Certainly we have learned a great deal about what’s hot and what’s not in F&B these days. Can we sum it all up in one word a la Stephen Colbert who, at the 2005 premiere episode of his show, coined “truthiness” to describe things that we know intuitively without regard to logic or actual facts. (Truthiness was named Word of the Year for 2005 by the American Dialect Society and for 2006 by Merriam-Webster.)

Let’s see, “edutainment,” educational entertainment is already taken as is “infotainment” used widely in meetings and events today to get a message across in an entertaining manner. Could meetings that carry the thread of goals and objectives into a healthy, sustainable, F&B event in an entertaining, interactive manner be henceforth known as “edufoodaramasus?” Stephen, help us out.