

Party Hearty.

In an age when chefs have become celebrities, banquets are now called "special events."

Picture this. You are in a ballroom with 400 other guests at the Maui Four Seasons Hotel and the theme is "Arabian Nights." Draped tapestries give the illusion of tents. There's a sultan with his harem seated on silken cushions on stage. Mimes, jugglers and acrobats walk the floor entertaining guests. A tableaux unfolds. The sultan commands the beheading of an upstart intruder. Minutes later, the harem gives an ear-piecing shriek as the man's severed head is revealed on a platter.

And some parties start the evening off with only an appetizer or salad.

This party has been meticulously produced, every detail carefully scripted. Its chief creator and director Philip Richardson, president and owner of Current Affairs, a local company specializing in "creating innovative events," is particularly proud of his Arabian Nights evening. And he's been in the banquet business here for the past 16 years. During that time, he's seen enough change to be uncomfortable associating the word "banquet" with what he does.

"I think the terminology 'banquets' to me is almost 1970s," explains Richardson. "I'm seeing the long tables. I'm seeing the big black wrought iron chandeliers and gargantuan portions and such.

"Our expertise is working with the overall experience of that banquet. Step in the door. Let us take over and create an experience for you."

Richardson says their price per head ranges from \$35 up to \$600. But at the high end you're getting much more than food and a theme. "It's the theatrics," he says. "There may be entertainment in there, decorations. We just got back from doing something on Maui using dinosaurs."

The Sheraton Waikiki Hotel's director of catering agrees that the business has changed over the last couple of decades. Says James Brown: "The banquet business has like all other endeavors been beset by the challenges of price and competition and, of course, one of the most important challenges now is the sophistication knowledge of our customers."

Brown has 25 years in the banquet business. Business was booming, along with everything else in Waikiki during the Japanese visitor-fueled bubble economy of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Sales fell after 1990, a casualty of the Gulf War. At one point they were off by 20 percent. He says sales have been "holding steady" the last 10 years, but the way the Sheraton Waikiki does business has changed drastically to accommodate changes in the Japanese market and coexistence with the Hawaii Convention Center. The trend is to focus more on service.

There's no question that service is key to banquet operations at the Pagoda Hotel & Terrace, which targets a different crowd. Just ask acting Food and Beverage Manager Kevin Tachibana, who estimates that 85 percent of their banquet business is local.

"You have to work harder, you have to be flexible. You have to be very diligent and pay attention to every aspect of a client's experience. That's the best investment you can make," says Tachibana.

He says that even in the tough times, the Pagoda has still managed to grow banquet sales every year, mainly because of loyal local clientele. And this year, with the conversion of the LaSalle Restaurant into another banquet room, Tachibana is bullish about food and beverage sales. He is projecting \$5 million in gross sales this year, an increase of about 8 percent over last year.

With his well-established niche, Tachibana is unconcerned about the trend toward more "special event" banquets. Says, Tachibana, "The overall impact for special events types really don't draw too much away, because people come here to get away from having to worry about too many details. They're familiar, they feel at ease, so they're reassured and you know they'll come to Pagoda."

Current Affairs' Richardson says his niche is about 85 percent out-of-state clientele, based on gross sales. He's projecting a 10 to 15 percent increase in sales for 2000 after virtually flat sales numbers for the past 7 years.

Richardson says the company has gone through some soul searching and along the way decided its niche was quality. That led to selling off half of a 4000 sq. ft. warehouse of catering, staging and party equipment that he didn't consider up to snuff and laying off his nearly two dozen employees. Today there are no employees, but Current Affairs leases help through Altres Inc. They can use up to 300 people for one event.

"It's a very challenging time," says Brown. We're in a situation where food and service and cuisine and the culinary arts have got their rightful place in our society now, where chefs are celebrities and party planners are potentates."