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All-in on Dining Concepts

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Matthew Von Ertfelda,
Senior Vice President
Food and Beverage,
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DINING TAILORED TO GROUPS

Planners Are Going All-in on Dining Concepts

BY SOPHIA BENNETT

Creating exciting dining concepts for groups of all sizes continues to grow in importance as the event industry evolves. “With groups, I think there’s more opportunity to deliver experiences that can not just promote the goals of a particular meeting, but which can be exceptionally experiential,” says Matthew Von Ertfelda, senior vice president, food and beverage, global operations for Marriott International. “Meetings today have to be so much more than they’ve ever been in the past, and the levels of creativity are just going to continue to grow,” he said. “The meeting planners who understand that and also understand that they have to deliver experiences that make meet-

ings absolutely unforgettable — where attendees walk away with not just the key messages of the meeting, but those experiences that drive connections to the company or the venue — are the ones who are going to be successful. Success will be about who can unlock a culture of creativity and artisanship routinely across their brand and hotels.”

Content is still key to creating outstanding meetings, but meals can be a surprisingly important part of reinforcing an event’s theme and creating a lasting and positive impression of a brand or gatherings. Von Ertfelda and other event industry professionals share a wealth of creative ideas for dining concepts that provide much more than a chance to refuel.

Attendees at a Marriott event watched Marriott chefs cook rib-eye, lamb, Dungeness crab, and paella over open flame for a themed meal.

Big vs. Small

To some extent, size matters when it comes to creating great dining experiences for groups. “What’s great about the larger groups as opposed to the smaller ones is you’re able to offer much more selection,” says Donald Ross, vice president of Meeting Operations, Las Vegas for Caesars Entertainment. “If you have 100 people, typically you wouldn’t offer several food stations because it’s just too many.

It gets too costly. When you have the larger groups, you have to have so many points of service that you can almost do a food hall.” The ability to offer a wide variety of beer, wine, cocktails and other beverage options is also expanded, he points out.

But bigger isn’t necessarily better. “Large groups present logistical challenges that require painstaking precision, mathematics and the operational excellence of a military maneuver,” says Tiffany Richardson, president of Current Affairs, an event production and planning company in Hawaii. “When quantity of people increases, the quality of food and service can decrease.

When Richardson has large groups, she tends to think about ways to pro-

vide them with multiple dining experiences rather than sticking to the same food service concept for everyone. It elevates the experience, she says, as well as creating diversity in food offerings, increases intimacy, and helps handle issues such as crowd control and risk management. “When you break formidable challenges into manageable sizes, it opens up space for innovation and creativity.”

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MATTHEW VON ERTFELDA

Senior Vice President
Food and Beverage, Global Operations
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Devin Burns, vice president of Food & Beverage for Omni Hotels and Resorts, follows a similar philosophy. “The goal for large events is to make them feel smaller and more intimate,” he says. “This is accomplished by providing enough servers, food and bar stations. This is also done by making sure that the food is as delicious for a group of 1,000 as it is for a group of 20. High-quality meats, local vegetables, creative salads, well-orchestrated wine service

and amazing desserts all go a long way to ensuring a best-in-class, intimate feeling dining experience.”

“The one constant between large and small groups is that you have to think of all the options you need no matter the size of the group, such as any allergies and how to have options to fit the whole crowd,” says Kelly Biggs, director of sales at Jackson & Company, a full-service event planning and catering company in Houston, Texas.

“Smaller groups focus on details other than food offerings as well, and thus you have to think of the whole experience for them.” That includes seating arrangements, napkin and tablecloth colors, room décor and people’s comfort level.

“A key question to ask yourself is what type of arrangements — menu, service style, room setup — are going to provide your group with the best overall experience,” Burns says. “Some of the fundamentals are the same regardless of the size of the group. For example, the service should always be thoughtful and friendly. Hot food should always be served hot, on time and delicious. However, other elements should be varied based on the size of the group, including number of service staff, and the number of stations and bars should be adjusted to the size of the group. There is nothing worse for the attendee or the venue than to have an amazing food or mixology station not being enjoyed because of long lines or inadequate staffing.”

Dining That Reflects a Theme

Group meals present a great opportunity to illustrate the themes and content being abstractly discussed during a meeting. At a recent event for Marriott general managers in Seattle, attendees were sharing ideas for low-impact meetings and gatherings that make smart

Large groups give planners an opportunity to get creative not only with preparing food, but serving it as well.

use of outdoor space. For dinner one night, the local events team organized live fire cooking along the banks of the Port Orchard River, which ran next to the picturesque event venue. Attendees watched Marriott chefs cook rib-eye, locally raised whole lamb, Dungeness crab, and paella over the flames. “A local farmer even brought in a mobile garden that allowed attendees to snip greens for their own customized salad,” Von Ertfelda says. “It was an unforgettable experience from an F&B perspective. It took advantage of the natural beauty of the surroundings. It eliminated the boundary between the chefs and the artisans and the attendees. Attendees could talk to the chefs and feel the live-fire experience in a way that would be impossible in a traditional meeting setting.” When the event concluded, the reusable dishes were washed and the embers were tossed into Puget Sound, making it a ‘leave no trace’ opportunity that spoke directly to the event’s theme.

At a sustainability-focused event Von Ertfelda attended, the Marriott operator put a sign with a QR code next to each food station. “Attendees would click on it and they would get a video with a story behind the dish and how it spoke to sustainability,” he says. “We’re always thinking about, ‘How do you unlock a narrative behind the food and behind the event that jives with the broader purpose of a meeting?’”

Dining as an Experience

‘Experiential’ is the hottest word in events right now, and mealtime can definitely be a moment to give people an experience they’ll never forget. When Marriott hosted a meeting for managers in Washington, D.C., the team gave



Photo by Joy Asico / Courtesy Omni Hotels & Resorts

participants a totally unexpected sight when they entered the dining room for dinner — a bowhunter displaying a snakehead, an invasive, eel-like fish now commonly found in the Potomac River. Once attendees got over their shock, they could talk to the hunter about his sport and the fish’s impact on the local ecosystem. When dinner was served, everyone sat down to a portion of snakehead on their plate, so they could try eating the fish and learn about how consuming invasive species has become an important part of their management in venues around the world.

“If you want attendees to pay atten-

Planners and chefs should team up to ensure meals are as delicious for 1,000 attendees as they are for 20 attendees.

tion to something, you need a headline,” Von Ertfelda says. “You have to shock them. I think it was pretty shocking for attendees to walk in and see a bowhunter with a bow. But then to have this delicious meal and this interesting conversation — it really made an impact.”

For a recent corporate event, Richardson staged a celebrity-chef-versus-resort-chef competition. The chefs did a key ingredient challenge similar to the ones done on a popular Food Network show. It was a huge hit.

“In another experience, we created a dessert reveal in which drapes parted to present an aerialist performance,” she says. “Behind her, a giant round table that was about 20 feet in diameter was lowered from the ceiling brimming with desserts. A pastry chef was on hand to serve.” Don’t forget, she adds, “Clients and attendees want elevated experiences where food is art and entertainment. Today’s attendee eats with their eyes. We all crave food that’s worthy of Instagram.”

Memorable experiences don’t have to be so over-the-top. Richardson has also had good luck with putting a fresh twist on more traditional dining options. “For groups that have already enjoyed a typical luau, we have reimaged the experience with a new expression,” she says. “It could be a luau that returns to authenticity and heralds

Mealtime can be a moment to give attendees an experience they won’t soon forget.



Courtesy Omni Hotels & Resorts



Photo Courtesy Current Affairs

back to a more ancestral experience with floor seating and ancient Hawaiian lawn games. It could also be a more artistic interpretation of an all-white luau or black-light experiences.”

Other Trends in Group Dining

Food can be a powerful way to tell a story. Richardson uses that to her advantage when putting together memorable meal concepts. “In an experience where attendees have traveled to multiple islands in Hawaii, we’ve planned a finale evening where each course stars a food or ingredient that’s significant or sacred to a specific island of their visit.”

Dining experiences that reflect local cuisines and cultures are still very popular with today’s event attendees. “As people’s tastes become increasingly sophisticated and cosmopolitan, there’s an ongoing movement to bring forward what’s locally loved,” Richardson says. “We always have to be ahead of the trend in curating the next adventure.” For events in Hawaii, she’s arranged for spam musubi to be served alongside a short rib musubi, or tofu poké to be served in addition to the traditional fish dish. “Those small elements of surprise delight attendees.”

Von Ertfelda describes an F&B event that stood out during a meeting of Marriott managers in Cancún. One focus of that meeting was driving local relevance with groups that came to the property. To illustrate that, the staff put together a Mexican carnival to coincide with dinner one night.

“They built a Lucha Libre wrestling venue in the middle of this outdoor venue and orchestrated Mexican street food around it,” Von Ertfelda says. The exposure to local food and local culture served as an excellent example of how hotel managers could bring the flavor of their area to guests at their property.

With larger groups come more diverse dietary limitations and preferences. It’s important to offer foods that will appeal to all eaters. “Back in the day, if we were having a meal and somebody wanted a vegetarian meal, you’d just give them a bunch of

We always have to be ahead of the trend in curating the next adventure.

TIFFANY RICHARDSON
President
Current Affairs



vegetables,” Ross says. “That doesn’t fly anymore. Put as much effort into vegetarian meals as non-vegetarian meals. Everyone eating in the dining room should have an equal experience. When we do tastings now, we focus as much on the vegetarian and vegan entrées. We’re also labeling food to let people know what they’re eating.”

Trends in how food is served are important to pay attention to as well. The days of having big, plated dinners are over, Ross says. “Unless you’re doing an awards dinner, people are going to be more interested in buffets

Dining experiences that reflect local cuisines and cultures are increasingly popular with today’s event attendees.

and receptions because they want to move around the dining room. They want to network and talk. That’s why food stations are becoming so popular.”

Von Ertfelda is also a fan of food stations because they help the dining portion of events be more interactive, social and conducive to collaboration. “They give you more control of food waste and the ability to bring local artisans and authentic culinary and mixology techniques forward in a more fun, animating way for attendees,” he adds.

Another alternative to plated dinners is serving food family style. There are some fun twists that can be used as an alternative to passing heaping platters from person to person. “Having unique food displays that are slightly raised above the centerpieces on each table encourages more conversation and culinary exploration,” Richardson says. “It encourages guests to make connections across the dinner table.”

Says Burns, “I’m a big fan of varying the styles of service within a meal. For example, start the meal with a feasting board of bread, meats, cheeses and spreads pre-set on each table. Then moving to a table-side tossed salad, followed by a traditional plated and served entrée which is accompanied by family style sides. Then to finish it all off, why not add a dessert action station presented as a grand unveiling to ‘wow’ and nightcap the perfect event.”

Biggs says strolling dinners are popular in Houston right now. Guests are guided through various stations serving appetizers, first courses, salads, soups, entrees and desserts. What makes this concept different from the typical buffet is that she focuses on creating interactive ‘chef stations’ where the guests can watch the professional at work. Being able to ask questions and garner information from these experts beats standing over a standard chafing dish any day.

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