

Local and Sustainable: The Global F&B Movement That's Here to Stay

By Stella Johnson
February 15, 2011

Food makes meetings memorable, and coordinating the various food and beverage segments of a corporate event these days is no small culinary achievement. Consequently, the food and beverage component of a meeting, from breakfast to dinner, and from receptions to refreshment breaks, can make or break the event.

But, while most people ponder whether to stick with the tasty food options from the “healthful eating” column such as honey-crusted salmon surrounded by julienne carrots or more traditional fare such as Southern-fried chicken or marbled prime rib, the fastest growing trend in the industry today is a global sustainability movement that includes a wide range of sustainability initiatives and practices that have permeated most areas of the meeting planning process in the past few years.

According to Carol Galle, CMP, co-founder of Detroit-based Special D Events, sustainability in all its forms has taken on far greater importance with many of her Fortune 500 clients, which include such corporate icons as Texas Instruments. Galle, who was formerly a meeting planner for General Motors, says, “After nearly 20 years since founding my own company, the biggest trend we are witnessing is the one towards the demand for locally grown foods. Fortunately, not only are our clients asking for it upfront, but most of the caterers, hotels and other vendors that we work with are already ahead of the game. When I prepare to open that discussion, they are already ready with a variety of suggestions from the outset.”

For example, for a recent corporate event, Special D worked with the convention center to design a menu that featured only locally grown ingredients and arranged for simple wheatgrass centerpieces for the tables.

Experts including Brad Goodsell, president of Chicago-based Executive Travel Directors, and Hillary Bessiere, director of business development of Kansas City, MO-based Bishop McCann, share Galle’s point of view.

Goodsell, for instance, says that the company is definitely seeing “an uptick in planners buying into the idea of using only local and seasonal ingredients whenever and wherever possible.” He says, “This not only saves on costs but also showcases the environment in which the meeting is being held. At one recent corporate event, not only were local and seasonal ingredients utilized in all menus, but the group went one step further by adding a description card next to each dish saying where the ingredients came from and why it was chosen for the meeting. Extra touches like that educates attendees and make them feel they are getting something special, too.”

Bessiere, whose clients are also into sustainability in a big way, recently coordinated a reception for a group of pharmaceutical reps that had attendees buzzing: “The hotel served wedges of pecorino cheese drizzled with honey that was actually taken from beehives on top of the roof, explains Bessiere. “The chef displayed the active beehives under a glass case at the reception, which really created an interaction among the attendees as the chef discussed the story behind the beehives.”

Bacon Is Back!

Perhaps it’s a direct correlation to the anxious times we now live in but another hot trend is the return to comfort foods at corporate events.

Bibby Gignilliat, CEO of San Francisco-headquartered Parties That Cook, a culinary event company with three offices that stages corporate teambuilding events, cooking classes and cooking parties, says comfort foods such as sweet and savory pot pies and crushed-cornflake fried chicken are becoming increasingly popular at corporate meetings.

And while it might raise the eyebrows of the strictly yogurt-and-fruit crowd, Gignilliat also claims that bacon is making a respectable comeback, and the company uses it regularly in such dishes as “pork tenderloin served with bacon jam,” among other rich and savory favorites. Food is back. The days of small salads and dainty hors d’oeuvres are over and have been replaced with BBQ ribs instead,” observes Elliott.

“For example, a standout example in my mind involves a series of events we recently catered for a large foreign auto manufacturer at our local racetrack in Monterey. This was a portfolio of very high-end engagements, encompassing breakfast, lunch and dinner, and it spanned a period of several fall weekends, too,” he adds. “The attendees were a diverse group of racing enthusiasts

“That’s because people want big,” exclaims Nick Elliott, director of operations at Paradise Catering, a 25-year-old organic caterer, located in Carmel Valley, CA. Elliott believes that this re-emergence of comfort foods at business events is in direct correlation with the return of corporate business. “Comfort who loved to eat and drink. While some started the day with light fare like Greek yogurt and granola, most of them headed for heartier dishes like frittata and French toast smothered with butter and maple syrup.”

According to Elliott, lunch for this international-style event included beef or chicken dishes with starchy sides and tasty desserts but dinner was the real highlight of the day: “It was both fun and ethnic. Everything was German fare with such delights as sauerbraten, sausage and warm potato salad,” says Elliott. “German beer poured during the dinner while German chocolate cake and other tempting desserts reigned at the end of the evening.

Less Is More

The return of comfort foods to corporate menu planning doesn’t dismiss the “less is

more” philosophy that’s dominated the food industry over the past several years. For instance, while Gignilliat passionately sings the praises of the realm of rich and savory foods that we all love so much, she also reminds us that, “Rather than a sit-down meal, sometimes event planners choose menus of small plates or tapas that represent cuisines from around the world, which can be passed around or served at a buffet. Popular items we list include Vietnamese Pork Meatball Bahn Mi Sandwiches, Little Fish Tacos and Spanish Albondigas — meatballs in almond, garlic and parsley sauce.”

Likewise, Goodsell says many of his clients shift their first night’s welcome reception to a later point in the evening so that they can serve small bites or dessert only — a much more cost-effective, yet viable option. “With a later welcome reception time on the first night, attendees know to come with fuller stomachs,” he notes. “And, we’re finding dessert-only buffets are becoming popular with the awards section of the agenda, too.”

Downsized portions at business meetings and events, whether it’s to save on inches at the waistline or dollars at the bottom line, make great sense for Kate Paul, owner, catering and creative director at Los Angeles-based Foodink Catering. Paul affirms that a “small-bite” event is a cost-effective alternative for her many clients such as Victoria’s Secret, The Limited, Chanel, Louis Vuitton and Qantas.

Paul presents a custom, luxe menu of specialty appetizers for the guests who are invited to the canapé bar to watch as the chefs prepare them. Later on, they pass the appetizers around to the attendees. Paul says a popular item is a miniature classic meal “like carved turkey au jus with mashed potatoes, vegetables and a dollop of cranberry sauce, downsized in a pastry box.” To reduce bar costs, Foodink Catering offers a welcome drink made from their specialty elixirs and infusions (with or without vodka or gin, according to the client’s wishes). Paul adds, “we often suggest that the specialty drink be named after the corporation with its logo and colors played up to reinforce corporate branding.”

Food Teambuilding Events

Parties That Cook boasts an impressive client list including Facebook, Google, Apple and PayPal. One of the first to successfully pair cooking classes with corporate teambuilding events, Gignilliat says, “We have staged several events for Facebook and always they choose Kitchen Challenge (a concept borrowed from the popular “Iron Chef America” show televised on the Food Network). “With our professional chefs as culinary coaches, each Facebook team slices and dices to create a meal from a predetermined protein, vegetable and starch. Strategy, delegation of tasks and efficient communication were all crucial for the big win. The Facebook team that whipped up the best entrée won a prize based on presentation, teamwork and taste. Then, all Facebook participants sat down to eat a meal garnished with camaraderie,” explains Gignilliat.

On another occasion, Parties That Cook hosted an event for 40 Japanese businessmen in a private home. As he recalls, “On the night of the event, the businessmen timidly arrived, one by one. Keep in mind that many of them had never cooked before, let alone in their non-native language. You can imagine how anxious I felt when I asked, ‘Who’s excited to cook?’ and no one raised a hand.

“After I gave a lively interactive demonstration, I divided the men into teams. Within minutes, they approached me, covered in flour from making shortcakes saying, ‘Chef, give me another project.’ By the time they sat down to dinner, the decibel level had gone from zero to 10, says Gignilliat. Then, two weeks after the event, the host contacted Gignilliat and said, ‘Bibby, the cooking party was the highlight of their two-week stay in San Francisco.’ I knew then that I had a great concept — bringing people together with the universal language of food,” reveals Gignilliat.