

Catersource

January 2007

Create one thing each day!

Is it January already? 2006 disappeared like a miniature Ice Cream Cone on a hot July day. The last email from Linda Picone, my editor, strongly hinted that once again the January column should focus on the catering culinary trends for 2007. As if we have mastered the trends for 2006 already. I began my research, called a few friends and consulted with my staff on what was out there and what was up and coming.

It used to be that we could look at the restaurants and see what trends were on the horizon. The logic was that in a year to 18 months, we would be duplicating those concepts on our menus. As luck would have it, the tables have turned and the restaurants are looking at us for new ideas. Both Caterers and Restaurant Chefs are out there right now setting trends while the meeting planners and food loving public is salivating for the next great party or event concept.

Remember that I did say that we have yet to master the trends of 2006. For that matter the previous decade of trends continue to evolve and morph into bigger and better executed concepts. We have seen the good, like the small plate, go from a served course to a magnificent buffet of all small plates lined up like dutiful soldiers awaiting their demise. And we have also seen the chocolate fountain go bad as a melted Velveeta Volcano. Let us see what we may be in store for in 2007.

Updated trend One:

Small Plates are still hot. More and more Tapas, Mezze and Cichetti restaurants are opening faster than we can count all over the country and in fact all over the world. So how are caterers adapting to this concept? We have seen this concept served as full buffets of room temperature pick up plates. This has been well received, except that there are some serious logistical challenges involved. First it takes a great deal of kitchen staff to execute these dishes and lay them out. Second the guests now have a plate, a fork a drink and already they are out of hands and juggling until they can find that stand up cocktail table to seek refuge and enjoy this wonderfully presented culinary masterpiece. Of course they are finished in a few bites and need a server to immediately remove that plate so they can devour another. Lastly, when the evening dwindles to a close, the empty buffets do look a bit sparse and messy unless your staff is a master at somehow filling the visual voids and stains on the buffets with desserts, coffee or a potted plant.

The update that handles some of these concerns, except the quantity of staffing came to me when I was stealing ideas from the restaurants. A food bar! Yes that is what I said, a Bar at an event, where the guests could walk up and order from a Chef off of a limited menu and he would assemble the dish as quickly and artfully as a Las Vegas Bartender. This dish would then be taken by the guests to their seated or cocktail table to be enjoyed. The portion was a bit larger than the small plate version, but is still small enough to allow the guests to try one or two more choices before sated.

The first few times we tried this it was wildly successful in limited form. The limits where, size of the event, talent of the Chefs and menu selections. The later was most important. By having a Bar set up where a moderately competent Chef just assembles the items and garnishes, it mostly handled the other two concerns. Here is an example of a food bar menu that really works well.

Food Bar Menu

The Chef is here to prepare a selection from our menu for you to taste. If you would like second or third selection, please come back!

Grilled Spotted Prawns over Napa Cabbage Sauté
with a Pineapple Onion Marmalade

Seared BIG Eye Tuna with Black Olive Vinaigrette
over a Bed of Bay Lettuces and a Poached Quail Egg

Bouillabaisse with Rouille Laced French Bread

Notice that in choice one, the prawns are served room temperature, the cabbage is kept hot in a chafer and does not lose integrity and the pineapple marmalade is also room temp. The Tuna is all cold and resembles a Niscoise Salad. The Bouillabaisse can be kept hot with out losing quality. The chef simply has to assemble, no cooking or carving required. The Chef tosses a garnish on the plate with flair and the guest walks away with a seafood plate designed and delivered by the chef him or herself. Assembly time for each item is less than one minute.

Updated Trend Two:

The plated dinner with a dual entrée is still alive and many choose it because it gives variety and eliminates the need to give your guests a choice, which as we all know can be a real challenge. I have long said that serving a first course protein instead of a salad delivers the same variety, yet allows the food on the plate to make more sense. Now we see a bit of sidestepping going on. With the advent of rectangular plates and other such geometric shapes, the double and triple plates are becoming very popular. It looks great and gives much variety.

In the double plate version, these plates can contain two versions of one entrée or two separate entrees (the typical dual entrée). A Duo of Duck, shows two versions of duck. On one side of the plate there would be sliced duck breast on and pillow mashed sweet potatoes and on the other side a confit of duck atop green beans. A splash of Oregon Dried Cherry Demi completes the plate. These items sit side by side in two distinct mounds married by one sauce. The dual entrée is now revised and also sits side by side on a rectangular plate. It could be something simple like Grilled Chicken over Egg Noodles and Seared Salmon over Grilled Asparagus married by a Lemon Cream Sauce.

In the triple plate version, we have many options. How about a Plate of Seared Mahi Mahi, Bleu Cheese Gnocchi and a Carrot and Pea Sauté? This is a single entree dish served in a different shape. You may want to see a dual entrée choice with petit filet of beef garnished with grilled onions on the left side, in the middle is a piped mound of mashed potatoes with pan gravy and on the right a roulade of chicken over green beans. This elevates the dual entrée all piled up on one round plates and separates it into an elegant triple thrill, all by changing the shape of the plate.

Here is a list of other trends to look for in 2007:

Plate colors- They will mostly stay white, with new geometric shapes, but look for bright colors and colored glass plates.

Infusions add color to the plate. They are easily made by placing a neutral oil, like Canola or Grapeseed into a blender with herbs, beets, roasted tomatoes or whatever you can imagine. Blend on high speed and then let stand over night. You may choose to filter the oil or leave as is for a more rustic look.

Combinations of flavor are always in vogue. Mixing sweet and salty has served the chocolatier well for years, but now Chefs are placing sweet items like grilled fruits and sweet jams on savory dishes to the delight of the diner.

Fun Holders for food are all around us. Standing forks, bowing spoons, demi tasse cups, shot glasses and curved knives are all being used to deliver foods to our guests as an Hors d'oeuvres or an amuse Bouche. This trend will continue with new twists this year as caterers get creative.

Fish has become very expensive and the public is eating it up. Sustainable seafood like farm raised Salmon, Barramundi and farm raised Shrimp are on the rise. Look for fish that are not endangered and are new to our country. We are using Wolf fish from Europe and Barramundi from Australia quite a bit now because of the accessibility and the great taste.

Pasta stations have been here forever, but an old time pasta, new to catering has emerged. Gnocchi, those potato dumplings from Italy, can be prepared quickly by boiling them at a station and tossing them with incredible sauces like Bacon and Bleu Cheese or Fennel Roasted Tomato puree. This takes a skilled hand, but the rewards are incredible.

Ethnic Flavors are always in and out. We saw Southwest, Cajun, Asian and California (whatever that is) come and go. This year look for Indian and Latin cuisines to be very hot.

I have often enjoyed a cocktail before dinner, and then I prefer wine with the meal. However, many chefs are concocting Cocktails that pair with the meal. Imagine a butler tray of Coconut Shrimp served with a shot glass of Pineapple infused Rum.

Lastly, there has been a great emphasis on regional cooking in the past ten to fifteen years. Think globally, cook locally has been the mantra. Now chefs are becoming more and more serious and working with local farmers to serve foods grown or raised locally, especially organic foods. Environmentally it is a sound practice as less fuel is used to deliver the product, fewer pesticides are used and seasonally the products are fresher. Depending on your location and the time of year, this can be a good practice.

I hope I have given you some food for thought (pun intended) for this years menus. As always, I am at your service and you may contact me at jerryedwards@chefsexpressions.com for any questions you may have. Until next time, remember to create at least one thing each day.