



bountiful buffets

caterers around the country report the continued popularity of the less-formal serving style

Le buffet est mort, vive le buffet! (The buffet is dead, long live the buffet!)

The question of whether or not buffet service is still a popular dining option recently arose amongst some of my colleagues within the hospitality industry. In our research with caterers around the country, we've found the answer to be a resounding "yes!"

In fact, there have been quite a few indications that there is a move toward even more buffet service. Just as the disparity in wealth between the 1% and everyone else increases, we notice that the very upper end of the income spectrum can't seem to get enough of plated sit-down dinners, whereas most of the other 99% are seeking a less formal environment.

Joan Taylor, owner of Diva Catering and Cakes in Salem, Ore., wholeheartedly agrees. "There has been an increase in buffets," she says. "As a matter of fact, I would say 90% of our events require buffet service. I have been told by most clients that they feel plated meals are either too formal, too expensive, or both."

Caterers are elevating buffet design with eye-catching presentations. A vegetable display by Judy Beaudin at Scrumptious Catering is simply sophisticated (opposite), while Lisa Teiger at CuisinEtc pairs staff's wardrobe colors with the buffet décor (right).



Dressing for the Occasion

Not only are buffets increasing in popularity, they're getting dressier than ever. Innovative and exciting designs allow the caterer to exceed the client's expectations. Adding striking colors, and the use of dimension and height are just a couple of ways caterers are punching up their signature look.

Lon Lane, owner and president of Inspired Occasions in Kansas City, Mo., has been utilizing "interesting and unique servingware," eschewing florals for more candles and architectural pieces. "We like to go in the direction of clean, simple and crisp," he says. "We are doing more and more with lighting, candles, glass, floating candles and ice."

Lisa Teiger, owner of boutique catering company CuisinEtc in New York City, goes a step further. "We like to pair colors that our staff wears with the buffet décor," she says. "A server dressed in a red chef coat, and a waitress with a red beret, might complete the look for some of our themed parties. Also, we are finding clients continue to love the vintage displays." For example, Teiger has repurposed antique dresser drawers for a salad bar display, with cups of lettuce surrounded by the salad add-ins, as well as for a salsa bar.

Here in New York, all of us at Indiana Catering receive lots of requests for low-cost, high-impact methods of feeding people. Interesting, elegant and tasteful meals that demand more effort on the guests' part can mean saving money on labor costs. In particular, our "Spice Party" invites and inspires the guest to eat, drink and be creative by selecting from bowls of exotic spices to flavor a palette of soups, stews and even popcorn.

Fire and Ice

Caterers are also being innovative when it comes to maintaining temperatures on the



With Indiana Market & Catering's dramatically designed "Spice Party" concept (above and left), guests can select from bowls of exotic spices to flavor soups, stews and even popcorn.



buffets, according to David Sandler, executive vice president of Catering by Michael's in Morton Grove, Ill., just outside of Chicago. "In addition to the various products in the marketplace, there are many creative ways to design the serving vessels, depending on the products and look that's desired for the station," says Sandler. "For example, in order to keep food hot or cold, we don't just rely on chafing dishes. We use products like butane, induction stoves, canned fuel, torches, thermal-insulated cookware, battery-pack heating and cooling elements, just to name a few."

And sometimes servingware inspires the caterers' designs. Now that there are more interesting and highly developed compostable diningware options than ever, we are seeing a



lot of ways to bring an exciting edge to our buffets in an environmentally sensitive yet moderately priced way. JB Prince (jbprince.com) provides New York caterers and restaurants with a sensational variety of novel dining options. Their corrugated geometric dish can even be baked in!

Small and Exotic

As for food choices, small plates are still going strong. Judy Beaudin, owner of Scrumptious Catering Company in Franklin, Tenn., just outside of Nashville, has found her clients have been favoring minis. "Clients are loving mini things," she says. "Mini tacos, mini shrimp and grits, mini mac and cheese...this is the South. We like rich, but minis allow it in small, manageable doses without the guilt!"

At Diva Catering, "small plate offerings have become popular; for instance, beef three ways or global small plates," says Taylor. And at Inspired Occasions, Lane has seen an increase in the type of cuisine being requested by those with an appetite for the exotic. Korean food, Brazilian cooking, farm-raised game (including wild boar, venison tenderloin, bison rib eye, tenderloin and quail), create-your-own ceviche bars and mixology stations are all on the rise.



Lon Lane at Inspired Occasions prefers "clean, simple and crisp" storytelling for his buffets (above). David Sandler at Catering By Michael's utilizes creative serving vessels to keep food hot or cold (opposite left). An enticing coffee drink from Diva Catering and Cakes, where 90 percent of events require buffet service.

Seeking Inspiration

Working and living in New York has many advantages when it comes to being inspired. The greenmarkets and multicultural markets in the city offer so much beyond that which can be found in even the largest of our grand food emporiums. Walking around the streets of Manhattan; looking into stores specializing in home goods, such as ABC Carpet (abchome.com); and, of course, attending the multitude of trade shows that hit New York regularly, especially the International Gift Fair, provide much fodder for the imagination.

But you don't need to live in New York City to come up with great and innovative new ideas. Lane looks to the retail world, especially, he says, "Z Gallerie, Pottery Barn, Saks' windows, Tiffany & Co.'s windows, Neiman Marcus, and Crate & Barrel for their serveware and color."

Whether your client is on a limited budget or not, there are more ways than ever to offer your guests a visually stunning buffet with creative and unique cuisine choices. With buffet service still trending upward, your imagination and creativity are all it takes to turn what used to be traditional buffet service into an extraordinary and unforgettable story for your clients and their guests. ●



David Turk is the founder and president of Indiana Market & Catering (indiananyc.com), a full-service caterer in New York City. Over the past 30 years, Turk's leadership has made Indiana one of New York City's top caterers. Named Best Value/Dinner Caterer in New York magazine and highest-rated caterer in Zagat's New York City Marketplace guide, and known for its innovative American cooking, high standards and excellent service, Indiana has been responsible for organizing thousands of events in the highly competitive Manhattan catering market.

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