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The runaway popularity of television cooking shows has fueled interest in customized incentive and teambuilding food-preparation programs at The Culinary Institute of America.

Photo courtesy of The Culinary Institute of America

What's Cooking?

From Chef-For-A-Day To 'Dead Wines'

The following is an excerpt from the January, 2010 Corporate & Incentive Travel article written by Mickey Murphy.

Food is life, literally. Without it, we die. Food is also life in the figurative or poetic sense. That is, good food makes life worth living. People have a hard time agreeing on anything, but everyone can agree on that undeniable and palatable truth.

Renowned French epicure Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin once wrote, "The discovery of a new dish does more for the happiness of the human race than the discovery of a star." Diners, who encompass all of poor and otherwise beleaguered humanity, would heartily second that sentiment.

The fact is, an astronomer discovers — ho-hum — a new star about once each month. Boring news. However, when a hot new chef opens a restaurant, people line up around the block, their tongues hanging out, waiting anxiously to get inside. Regardless of ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, age, political affiliation, you name it, every person alive without some confining medical malady or odd philosophical bent loves to eat. And they all watch the Food Network. It is no surprise then, that the wide world over, food and dining (and increasingly, food preparation and cooking) are beloved topics for all.

Thus, when it comes to developing the food and beverage portion of a corporate meeting, most planners are able to throw themselves into the task with gusto, a word that derives, quite appropriately, from the Latin word *gustus* for taste. Meeting planners do so with far more energy than, say, registering

attendees, making audio-visual arrangements or doing room setups. Considering this, most planners take an intuitive interest in the latest F&B trends for their meetings and events.

What's New

So what's new in F&B? The people who attend corporate meetings and events at hotels and resorts are the same individuals who eat out at restaurants. Therefore, a good place to turn for the latest information on food and beverage trends is the National Restaurant Association's annual survey of American Culinary Federation Chefs.

The most recent survey of more than 1,600 chefs indicates that when it comes to food, locally grown produce, nutritional concerns, interesting food-alcohol pairings, as well as an interest in "superfruits" — fruits that combine exceptional nutrient richness and antioxidant quality with appealing taste (e.g., grapes, blueberries, cranberries, mangoes and pomegranates) — are all key F&B trends.

Additionally, the chefs report that gluten-free and allergy-averse foods are now used more than before across America's dining establishments. This is also true for meals at meetings and events, according to Ilene Reinhart, DMCP, CMP, partner, Access Destination Services in Southern California.

"More attention is now being paid to dietary requests, allergies and so on," said Reinhart, who was named Association of Destination Management Executives' 2009 Destination Management Professional of the Year. "Every time we do food buffets and food stations, we now label all of the food choices with their individual ingredients. The information is there for anyone who may have questions. This makes everyone at the meeting or event feel welcome and comfortable. You can also do this for seated meals by printing out custom-designed menu cards, listing the courses with descriptions. Besides being smart, it makes for a nice souvenir for the program."

According to the survey, another prominent F&B trend is small servings and bite-sized desserts. "Today, the watchword is 'mini-mize,'" said Janet R. Pickover, CMP, owner, JR Associates and Site Inspections Plus, Princeton, NJ. "Portions are becoming smaller. For example, attendees now get mini-cupcakes and even mini-ice cream bars on sticks."



"They say, 'How about if we incorporate this into our program? I saw it on the Food Network.'"

**Ilene Reinhart, DMCP, CMP
Partner
Access Destination Services
Long Beach, CA**

"The challenge with leaner budgets is not to undermine the quality dining experience that planners want for their groups."



**Janet R. Pickover, CMP
Owner
JR Associates
Princeton, NJ**

Signature Cocktails And Savory Ingredients

When it comes to the beverage portion of F&B, creating signature cocktails is the No. 1 trend. Also known as "culinary cocktails," such drinks include a wide variety of ingredients and more precise techniques than the more traditional concoctions. Mixologists even use savory ingredients — such as fresh cucumber and herbs — in such drinks, as well as other food items previously used only in kitchens. They often make the aptly named culinary cocktails to complement specific food items or dishes.

Additionally, cocktails that mixologists create with healthful and nutritional aspects in mind are becoming popular. This includes using trendy superfruits as ingredients. Also, micro-distilled liquors (distilled spirits in smaller batches that "artisan" distillers create), organic wines (produced from grapes grown without chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides and herbicides) and specialty iced teas that contain such ingredients as herbs, fruits, spices and blossoms, are now popular choices.

Everyone Wants To Be A Chef

Today, no matter which moniker you prefer, it truly is the era of gourmands, gourmets and gastronomes. Indeed, almost everyone seems to take a proprietary interest in food preparation these days. This certainly includes meeting attendees and the planners who arrange their events.

"Attendees and planners are far more food-educated today than they were years ago," said

Pickover. The 2006 Planner of the Year for MPI's New Jersey chapter, Pickover routinely lectures on F&B topics for meeting industry groups. Why this marked interest in all things culinary? "Food books and magazines abound. TV shows about cooking are popular. So is the Food Network," said Pickover.

Reinhart agreed. "I think the uptick in interest in food and cooking has a lot to do with reality television," said Reinhart. "You have popular shows such as 'Top Chef' and 'Iron Chef,' as well as the Food Network, indeed, a proliferation of all things food and beverage, coming at you from so many different angles today.

"Of course, this all make sense. We all have to eat. So why not make eating interesting?" Reinhart said. "All of this impacts the questions we as planners are asked today. Someone sees something really cool on one of these shows and brings it to our attention. They say, 'How about if we incorporate this into our program? I saw it on the Food Network.'"

The Food Network's popular "Iron Chef" is a one-hour competition among master chefs. Each is given a secret ingredient and instructed to prepare five dishes with it. At the end of the show, judges select the chef who prepared the tastiest dishes as the winner.

"We do a lot of 'Iron Chef'-type competitions at our teambuilding events," said Reinhart. "We have turned this TV show into a popular activity for our attendees. At our meetings, people fully participate in the 'Iron Chef' cooking contests. We do things the same way that they do on TV, but participants only prepare one or two dishes. It is a lot of fun. People love to cook. And people who don't like to cook love to eat. So you engage everyone."

Sustainability

As corporations place increased emphasis on social responsibility, sustainability has quickly become a highly relevant factor as planners and groups work out the F&B components of their meetings and events.

"Moving forward, clients now look at sustainability and the environment," said Reinhart. "There is now more interest in knowing where their food comes from. So today, buying locally is a prominent factor in F&B decision-making. This also is the trend for catering managers and chefs.

"Professionals in the meetings industry can have a truly positive impact on the environment," Reinhart continued. "It comes down to the way you purchase your food and design your menus. It even concerns the choices you make of some serving utensils. Styrofoam cups might have been OK years ago. Now that's a no-no. As an example, planners now look toward bamboo-made items, because bamboo is extremely sustainable.

"Before, when you thought about disposables, you went biodegradable," Reinhart said. "However, today, instead of using paper products we are going back to the rental of china and linens. This way, manufacturers are not making the same new items over and over again."

Ethnicity And Simplicity

The U.S. is a polyglot nation, the great melting pot. As additional cultures mix and mingle here, ethnic cuisine is becoming increasingly popular nationwide, including with corporate groups. This includes Middle Eastern, Polynesian, Indian, Mexican, Thai, Vietnamese and so on.

"Ethnic cuisine pleases a lot of palates," said Reinhart. "So, for instance, if you are a vegetarian, you may have additional options available to you. To illustrate, Middle Eastern cuisine offers numerous vegetable options. Ethnic food is all about the variety. Plus, it's enjoyable eating, so much better than enduring another boring chicken dinner."

When times are tough, however, there's no place like home: Traditional Betty Crocker-style cooking is making a notable resurgence with some corporate groups. This includes meat loaf, mashed potatoes, chicken and dumplings, beef stew and many other all-American home-style favorites. "Attendees like entrées and other meal choices like these," said Bonnie Walsh, CMP, CMM,



At this "Iron Chef" teambuilding event organized by Access Destination Services, Orange County, and held at Montage Laguna Beach, teams receive "recipes" and are challenged in a timed event to create the best culinary dish as determined by a panel of judges. Photo courtesy of Access Destination Services

chief strategist, Bonnie Wallsh Associates, LLC, Charlotte, NC. "We are going through very tough economic times right now. These comfort foods remind people of home."

Leaner Budgets

The economy has certainly pushed budget concerns to the top of the F&B trends list as well. Illustrative is this comment from savvy meetings industry veteran Loretta Lowe, CMP, Meeting Planning and Special Events, San Francisco, CA: "The only consistent 'trend' is the continued drive to save money!" she said.



"Show [the chef] the budget and say, 'What can you do with this amount of money?' This is the trend, as opposed to just looking at prepared menus."

Bonnie Wallsh, CMP, CMM
Chief Strategist
Bonnie Wallsh Associates LLC
Charlotte, NC

"Budget always sits at the top of the F&B pyramid," Pickover agreed. However, she added, tight budgets should never detract from the F&B portions of a planner's meetings and events.

"The challenge with leaner budgets is not to undermine the quality dining experience that planners want for their groups," Pickover said. "In this regard, realizing savings on F&B often involves much more than merely the prices that groups pay for the meals their attendees consume."

Pickover spends a lot of her time delivering

this message via a "Savings on Food and Beverage" presentation that she routinely delivers to meeting planners, clients and suppliers across the country. Her most important presentation point: Always speak directly with the chef. Explain precisely what your group wants to accomplish regarding the F&B portion of your meeting or event, and what your budget will be. Get the chef to help you figure out how to attain your objectives without going over the budget. Some additional valuable F&B savings tips from Pickover:

- The F&B-free way: Wait until the end of meal times to commence your meetings, and end them before meal times. Thus, you will not need to provide meals.
- The pay-to-play way: Arrange with sponsors to pick up your meal costs. Their payoff: Brief mentions by you before meals, as well as program credits and unobtrusive signage in the dining room.
- The no-surprises clause: Never leave an open-ended clause that says "food and beverage prices subject to change." The planner must negotiate, prior to signing the contract, what the cost will be or how much of an increase is allowable at the time the meeting will take place, especially if that meeting is several years out.
- Don't "whet" their appetites. Skip such salty foods as peanuts at cocktail events. They make people thirsty.

Wallsh also lectures on F&B. She recently gave an F&B presentation to planners and suppliers, along with Michael Rigot, executive banquet chef at the Sheraton Birmingham Hotel, Birmingham, AL. Like Pickover, Wallsh is a big believer in speaking directly with chefs regarding F&B issues.

"Today, more planners choose to meet one-on-one with the chefs," said Wallsh. "Show him or her the budget and say, 'What can you do with this amount of money?' This is the trend, as opposed to just looking at prepared menus." Wallsh also recommends that planners try to piggy-back with other groups to save money on F&B.

"This way, the chef must only prepare one or two entrées in the kitchen, rather than four or five," said Wallsh. "So, if you want to do something inexpensive, ask the chef what are the other dishes that will be served at the same time to other groups; can he or she serve the same dishes for your group, and what price consideration can you get?"

Wallsh and Pickover both note that planners can save their groups money by utilizing "dead wines" — old bottles of wine the venue may have in inventory for which it has already paid. By doing so, a group can often upgrade the wines they serve at reduced prices. The planner should therefore always ask the catering manager, chef or other venue contact about the availability of dead wines at attractive price discounts. **C&IT**

Since 1970, **ACCESS** Destination Services has provided the highest caliber of full-service, professional destination management and event production services in the West, including Anaheim/Orange County, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Palm Springs and San Diego.