

TOP CHEFS

Convention center chefs bring organic food to the meetings market.

BY LISA PLUMMER

AS THE SUSTAINABLE, farm-to-table movement continues to spread across restaurants and eateries throughout North America, it makes sense that it also would have an impact on meetings and conventions. After all, eating fresh, locally grown, organic and sustainably-produced foods is better for the environment and one's health, and when at a meeting, many attendees appreciate the benefit of both. As a result, several convention center food and beverage providers have been integrating sustainable and organic fare into their culinary operations during the past several years, often in conjunction with venue greening programs. And leading this charge are the chefs themselves, seasoned culinary professionals who believe strongly in the sustainable philosophy. By using locally sourced and organic ingredients, these culinarians are able to create delicious menus to satisfy their customers, all while supporting local farming communities and being kinder to the earth.

CLOSE TO HOME

Sustainable cooking is good for everyone involved in the process of creating it. And in a city known for being greener than green, no one understands this better than Jeff Hall, executive chef at the Moscone Center-West in San Francisco.

As a culinary professional who worked for many years in local eateries, Hall says he has enjoyed taking his experiences with sustainable cuisine in the smaller restaurant environment and translating them to the large-scale convention center. But this couldn't happen without the support of Moscone's food and beverage provider, Savor (a division of SMG), which began developing a sustainable program for its 50 properties across North America, Latin America and the Caribbean four years ago. Now, sourcing locally whenever possible has become the norm at Moscone, says Hall.

"All of our breads are baked fresh from a local bakery and we work with our produce company to help us utilize ingredients that are local and in season," says Hall. "We have a lot of purchas-

ing power, so we can wield our might with some of our vendors to help us get better pricing. [Most things] are sourced from California, but when you get into wintertime, the produce starts heading down toward the desert. We do a lot of custom menus, so if a corporate group is coming in February...we'll create menus that reflect the season and the client's needs, and hopefully everyone comes out happy."

And making people happy while doing it sustainably is a win-win for convention centers nowadays, says David Skorka, Centerplate executive chef, convention centers, and executive chef at the Dallas Convention Center.

"Centerplate has always made it a priority to differentiate itself with regionality, the local identity of food, which then becomes a tie of sustainability," says Skorka. "It's always been an initiative and we've always worked in that direction, but especially over the past four or five years, it's become even more important throughout the country and the world."

And creating memorable experiences by designing environmentally friendly meals





Dish by Chef
Blair Rasmussen,
Centerplate.

Jose Chavez (right), executive chef of the Washington State Convention Center, develops relationships with local farmers.



is a challenge Skorka enjoys. For a Professional Convention Management Association event held at the DCC in 2010, for example, Skorka created a fully compostable meal for 2,500 people, from compostable table linens to pressed bamboo plates. The response was overwhelmingly positive, says Skorka. "First and foremost, you want to provide a unique and different experience [for attendees]," he says. "When you do menus like that, it sticks in people's minds. And when you use something local, it adds that extra regionality and flair to your cuisine, and guests always enjoy that. You're tasting your flavor profiles, especially in the peak of ripeness."

Like Savor, Centerplate also encourages the chefs in each of its 42 convention centers to source and design menus using local ingredients whenever possible.

Working with clients to create memorable, custom menus that are sustainable and reflective of the region is also a specialty for Carmen Callo, executive chef at the Colorado Convention Center in Denver. By sourcing ingredients from in-state farmers, growers, ranchers and suppliers, Callo is able to design delicious menus, and give guests a true taste of the Rocky Mountain region.

"Most commonly people associate [Colorado] with wild game, venison, elk, trout, Colorado lamb, goat milk and cheeses, so I enjoy taking any of those foods and putting them on the menu with different twists, while meeting the client's theme and budget," says Callo. "A lot of these shows are traveling the country, so the expectation is that the menus and the foods will reflect the region they're in. This promotes creativity within the chef, [guests can] learn about that region, and most importantly, they're going to be getting the freshest ingredients while supporting a healthier community."

BUDGETARY CONCERNS

In this economy, groups are more cost-conscious than ever, and the price for some sustainable food items, such as organic, may be a sticking point.

"Once we go into proteins, there is a significant increase in cost," says Callo. "Then there's the understanding, the clear difference between sustainable and organic, and local and organic. The

SPOTLIGHT: ROBBIE DELANEY, VIRGINIA AQUARIUM

Since becoming executive chef at the Virginia Aquarium, Robbie Delaney of Sodexo Leisure Division is not just an implementer of a trend but a believer. "Once I started doing the research, I really enjoyed it," Delaney says. "A lot of sustainable things aren't local, so we have a [green, yellow and red tagging] system that tells you whether it makes more sense to use something across the street versus fly something green in from Alaska and leave a big carbon footprint." The aquarium's Sensible Seafood program, a result of a partnership with the Monterey Bay Aquarium, is an educational program for guests and local restaurants, as well as the basis of menus and private events there.

SUSTAINABLE EVENT: "Taste of the Bay is an intimate setting where we offer a five-course dinner with wine pairing. I prepare and talk about the seafood in each course. The aquarium's educational coordinator holds a presentation to explain Sensible Seafood and how you can do your part. [It] also can be modified and scaled down for tour groups, where I offer three courses and demonstrate the main course in order to expedite the process and keep groups on their timeline."

TRENDS: "One of the other chefs that works with me says that gourmet hot dogs are going to be big this year. Maybe we'll do tofu, chicken, Cincinnati dogs or others to make them upscale."

OUTSIDE THE BOX: "I like events like Taste of the Bay because I get to step out of the box and rewrite new menus—go above what I do on a daily basis and get to play with food right in front of the guests."

INSPIRATION: "I'm a member of the American Culinary Federation, and I get pamphlets of what's new and what's hot. I see what's done with some items, see a nice presentation, but think maybe instead of chicken we can use fish. I see something and a hundred ideas come at me."

ADVICE: "Let the chef know what you are looking for, but be open to suggestions—especially when it comes to sustainability—if they can offer an alternative with the same taste."

LAST MEAL: "I think it would be a big, fat cheeseburger."
—Jennifer Garrett





Chef Jeff Hall's mango passionfruit cake with coconut and dark chocolate

[price of organic] produce has come in line a lot better because there's more demand for it from the average consumer, so there's more of it, but once you get into proteins that have no antibiotics, are hormone-free, free-range, all-natural and all-organic, there's still a premium cost associated with that."

The solution? A planner can work with a chef to design delicious menus that contain seasonal ingredients and organic items that cost less, such as produce, dairy and baked goods. This way the group is still meeting the majority of its green cuisine goals while staying in budget, Callo says.

A little creative menu engineering can indeed go a long way in addressing customer price sensitivity, agrees Edward Lake, Northeast regional chef for sports and entertainment for Aramark, which has made a big push in sustainable food and beverage practices at its 35 North American convention centers within the past several years. "If a customer wants

the entire menu to be organic and they're price sensitive, we try to use organic products that aren't as expensive," says Lake. "We'll try to offset a significantly priced protein with a reasonably priced organic vegetable. Our mission is to propose a value to our clients and to make sure we're doing our best to give them the best for their buck."

FARM TO MEETING ROOM

Lake believes it also helps for convention center chefs to be knowledgeable about their farming communities so they can have an understanding of where the food is coming from and who produced it.

"All of our chefs are pretty passionate about knowing the growers, the farmers and the folks they get fish from, as well as where the food that they're serving is coming from," says Lake. "Speaking specifically around the convention center I'm responsible for, the Pennsylvania Convention Center, our commitment to

the client was that we really wanted to be founded in the area, so if somebody was going to come here and it was going to be a destination for a meeting, we wanted them to walk away with a memorable experience that was authentic Pennsylvania/Philadelphia."

With its proliferation of farmers, ranchers, growers and producers, and especially wine makers, the state of Washington is a great place to be a chef, says Jose Chavez, executive chef of the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle. Chavez agrees that it's not only important for chefs to know the local farming community, but also for them to get into the field and establish relationships with the growers themselves.

"I come from a background of farmers, so I think it's very important to build relationships with farmers and growers," says Chavez. "Normally every year I'll go and meet with them a couple of times to see what kind of crop they're growing and when it's going to be harvested. I

keep an eye on that and build and write my menus accordingly. We try to capitalize on just about anything in season, so if asparagus is in season, for instance, I use a lot of that and incorporate that in to our menus as much as I can.”

Many chefs who believe in sustainable cuisine also agree that the biggest benefit of sustainable sourcing and cooking is its impact on the earth. According to Blair Rasmussen, regional executive chef for Centerplate at the Vancouver Convention Centre in British Columbia, knowing where the food comes from and making sure ingredients are sourced in an environmentally conscious way is not just the responsible way to cook; it’s the only way to cook.

“I was born in Vancouver, I’ve lived here all my life, and this is the community I came from, so (cooking with local ingredients) is about the pride in showcasing what we produce in the area and also the quality of those items,” says Rasmussen. “Of course, it’s about flavor and how amazing the quality of the produce is and the freshness of it, but I also believe it’s good for the guests, it’s good for our community and ultimately it’s good for our planet. It’s so obvious it’s the right thing to do.”

As the culinary head of one of the greenest convention centers in North America, Rasmussen has the advantage of working in a venue that supports his longtime culinary vision, and he also lives in a region known for its bounty of sustainable produce, meats and seafood.

“We’re lucky in the same way that San Francisco, Portland and Seattle are lucky...it’s wonderful being a chef out here,” says Rasmussen. “But it’s not as if we can get everything locally [all the time]. In winter months production drops off and we have to buy from farms that are further south over the U.S. border, but we’re doing as much as humanly possible. When we get into seafood, there’s a major focus on local seafood...we use Ocean Wise accredited products. We also purchase Pacific scallops that are local and raised sustainably, as well as local, free-range chickens that are fed an all-vegetarian diet without hormones or antibiotics. All of our eggs are free-range and produced [locally].”

As planners become more enlightened about the benefits this kind of cuisine

provides, many venues are seeing a steady increase in interest and demand when it comes time to plan event menus, and the Virginia Beach Convention Center is no exception. There are so many great reasons for planners to make a point to choose sustainable food and beverage, even if it costs a little more, says Paul Benson, executive chef for Distinctive Gourmet at the VBCC.

“One, I believe it’s healthier for them, plus they’re also helping the environment and are supporting local agriculture that supports our local economy and the local purveyors,” says Benson. “It’s important to treat ingredients and products properly so they are available for the future. The demand of sustainable ingredients has grown, and many companies are often willing to pay the extra expense. I believe this will continue to be a trend.”

And as the demand increases, not only will costs go down, it will also become easier for chefs to source more

environmentally friendly options for their clients, says Hall. At the end of the day, it’s about planners making sure they give their attendees what they really want: fresh and healthy food.

“I think planners should [recognize that] this is what their customers are looking for right now—diverse, intelligent and more health-conscious eating,” says Hall. “People want more real food, and there’s so many more options out there for people to get real food instead of packaged. I also think it’s our job and our responsibility to care about the environment, and the financial impact that we can have on our community. So sustainable is also the financial sustainability within our community. I think that’s the reason convention centers are even in existence: to create jobs and bring in tourism. That’s why purchasing locally produced product is really important, because it gives back to the community and you’re contributing to people keeping their jobs.” ■

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