

The Business of Catering

Take culinary talent and a head for business into the catering world.

By Jan Greenberg



Great Performances celebrates its commitment to sustainability and the local food movement at its 100 Mile Menu Event July 22 in the Grand Ballroom of the Plaza Hotel in New York.

Feeding the cast of NBC's "Law and Order: Special Victims Unit." Counting carbs for members of the California Rowing Club. Preparing banquets at New York's historic Plaza Hotel. It's all in a day's work for the growing number of chefs in catering.

"As people get busier, both in business and in their personal lives, they don't have time to cook, and increasingly use

catering services," says Bruce Mattel, associate dean of culinary arts at The Culinary Institute of America (CIA), Hyde Park, N.Y., and author of *Catering: A Guide to Managing a Successful Business Operation* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008).

"Most of my students at the CIA come with the idea that they are going to go into the restaurant business," Mattel says. "But through their experiences here, more and more are realizing that catering might be a good opportunity. The hours are more flexible than those of restaurants, and the success rate higher. It offers the opportunity to marry the culinary talent of a chef with the business acumen of a CEO. And, since over 70% of all catering services are owner run, there is more autonomy than restaurant or institutional work."

Will multitask

Dorothy Whittenburg, owner of Blissful Kitchen, a personal-chef and catering company based in San Francisco, left corporate life at Charles Schwab & Company, where she worked as a corporate and meeting manager, to attend the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco.

“My corporate background gave me the ability to do multiple things at once, which you must be able to do if you cater,” Whittenburg says. “You must be a good listener and develop good intuitive skills so that you really understand what the client wants. You’ve got to be able to perform well under pressure, and you must learn to adapt very quickly. There is always the unexpected. For instance, you plan for 240, and suddenly, it’s 290, or the client decides to do a buffet rather than a plated meal. For me, though, it works. I like a dynamic working environment, and in catering, as opposed to a restaurant, nothing is ever set, even when you think it is.”

She points out that off-site catering is a lot more than just serving good food. Her clients are food savvy—often people who like to cook but just don’t have time. She has built a loyal clientele in the San Francisco Bay Area who rely on her to plan, organize and manage a range of events from small dinner parties to fundraisers and retirement parties.

Recently, she catered a formal, wine-based dinner for clients who store their wine collections at Subterranean, a private wine-storage facility in Oakland, Calif. She paired an appetizer of chilled avocado

Fried green tomatoes with aioli was one of the dishes served at the Great Performances 100 Mile Menu Event.

soup with watercress and gulf prawns and a 1985 Krug Brut Champagne, and served a main course of seared duck breast with Bing cherry sauce, fiddlehead ferns and fingerling potatoes with a 1983 Paul Jaboulet Aine Hermitage La Chapelle.

Most fun, though, are the events she does for the California Rowing Club, the San Francisco-based Olympic and world-championship event training facility for the United States’ best rowers. “They must consume in excess of 5,000 calories a day, and have very specific food requirements,” Whittenburg says. “It’s pretty basic, with main courses of beef lasagna and barbecued chicken breast, and apple pie with ice cream for dessert.”

Expanding horizons

For some chefs, catering is a step toward broadening a career. Dan Obusan, a 2004 graduate of New York’s Institute of Culinary Education, served as chef de cuisine at Alfama, a fine-dining Portuguese restaurant in the city, and as executive chef at Comix, a comedy venue and restaurant in the downtown Meatpacking District. Then he joined New York-based



Roey Yohai

Great Performances, the fourth largest independently owned catering-and-events company in the nation.

The company’s more than 180 full-time and 400 part-time workers handle about 1,500 events a year, as well as manage cafes in many of New York’s best-known cultural institutions, including Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Asia Society, and in the ballroom of the newly restored Plaza Hotel.

Founded by Liz Neumark in 1997 to offer employment to women in the visual and performing arts, Great Performances is today known throughout the industry for its commitment to social and environmental concerns. Its 60-acre organic Katchkie Farm in Kinderhook, N.Y., provides much of the company’s produce.

For Obusan, the switch from restaurant to catering hall was to gain experience and exposure. “Catering is a big business nowadays,” he says, “and being here gives me the opportunity to expand my cooking abilities. This isn’t like a restaurant, where

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—Dorothy Whittenburg

there is a set menu, you know exactly what you have to do and nothing really varies except how busy you will be for the night.”

Obusan is a roundsman, doing a bit of everything, although his primary responsibility is the sauce team. He also quantifies menus, taking the menu chosen by a client and translating it into a workable, executable menu for the kitchen to prepare.

“Cooking styles are different in catering than in restaurants,” he says. “When you prepare something off-site to be transported to the event, you keep it as simple as you can possibly make it. No complex ingredients and no difficult last-minute techniques. You always have

to keep in mind that you cannot take the kitchen to the event. And, unlike a restaurant, when you make the food you send it away and basically say goodbye to it. You don't have control over how it is served. Someone else is going to do that.”

A typical weekend includes a large event for 2,500 and a small wedding for 150, offering the opportunity to work on and prepare a variety of dishes, which Obusan appreciates. “A lot of restaurant work is repetitive and monotonous,” he says. “You do the same thing over and over, and the hours are brutal.

“But I realize that, at the end of the day, I am a restaurant cook. I really miss the life, and it is what I will return to.”

Alternative lifestyle

For Neal Swidler, that life is what he intentionally gave up when he opened his own business, Chef Neal Feed Me. New Orleans-based Swidler attended The Culinary Institute of America, where he was on the dean's list, after graduating with a degree in writing and language from the University of Arizona in Tucson, Ariz. He was chef de cuisine at Emeril Lagasse's NOLA in New Orleans, and before that, held similar positions at Emeril's Delmonico and the now-defunct Mike's on the Avenue. For Swidler, it was the desire to spend more time with his three school-age daughters that motivated him to give up his restaurant position.

Tips from the experts

“We as chefs are proud and focused on providing our customers with the best—A-quality food, plate presentation and service—which represents our commitment to our profession and our catering business. Unfortunately, at times we find ourselves charging the customer B- or C-level pricing for fear of not booking the event”
—Joe Aiello, CEC, AAC, chef/owner, Apropos Catering, Schiller Park, Ill.

“Listen to the client, obtain a clear image, and translate that image into a one-of-a-kind experience. Our goal is to create events that will remain a

lasting memory.”
—Nicolas Daeppen, director of sales, Great Performances, New York

“Always be as flexible as you can with the client. Having alternate solutions for clients who want to change their minds will secure their return business.”
—Bruce Mattel, associate dean of culinary arts, The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, N.Y.

“Don't wait to start building a dream. There are so many reasons to put off starting, but if you can distill it down to a real grassroots belief—for me, feeding

people—you can probably start building it immediately. I started with \$200 grocery money, which I completely invested in that week's menu, sold my dinners, doubled my money and kept on building each week. You've got to be determined, listen to good advice, and then drive forward—there is no substitution for kinetic energy.”
—Neal Swidler, owner, Chef Neal Feed Me, New Orleans

“Choose staff who not only provide outstanding service, but who engage your clients and guests.”
—Dorothy Whittenburg, owner, Blissful Kitchen, San Francisco

Ingredients for all items served at the Great Performances 100 Mile Menu Event—including these local fruit ice pops—were sourced from within 100 miles of New York's Plaza Hotel.

"Restaurants are huge stress generators," he says. "I really tried to make my schedule fit around my kids, but when I was at NOLA, I would work six, or even seven, days a week, sometimes from early in the morning to late at night."

After leaving NOLA, Swidler worked as a private chef, and then helped out in other restaurant and catering kitchens. He planned to start a business focused on frozen foods, sauces and his signature popsicles. "I am crazy about popsicles," he says.

"I started cooking dinners for my family, and friends would drop by and ask if they could buy some of my food. I thought, this is a good idea. But I really didn't want to cook at home. Too lonely, and besides, I needed a commercial kitchen. A friend offered me his restaurant facility to use, and now it is really taking off."

In addition to catering jobs, Swidler runs a weekly dinner-delivery service. He e-mails the week's menu to clients on Monday, and they respond by Wednesday for dinner delivered on Thursday. Recent menus included pineapple-barbecued pork chops with a chipotle/orange glaze served with coconut rice and peanut stir fry baby bok choy, blackened breast of chicken with andouille sausage, and gulf shrimp jambalaya. And, to promote his next venture, popsicles are always included.



Roey Yohai

"The best part of all this is that I feel I am meeting a tangible need here in New Orleans. People want an alternative to dining out," Swidler says. "What is difficult, though, is realizing that I must wear so many hats at once. I'm chef, publicity person, bookkeeper, driver, shopper, designer and marketer. It is really challenging to meet and exceed my customers' expectations. But it is a wonderful learning experience."

Let me entertain you

For the truly adventurous, there is the rarified world of location catering for the entertainment industry. Sounds glamorous, but for Brian Brown, whose Shooting Stars Catering based in Tabernacle, N.J., provides meals and snacks to those involved in ongoing television series and motion pictures filming throughout the New York metropolitan area, it is anything but.

"On a typical day, we begin at 1:30 a.m., moving one of our mobile commissaries to that day's location. There is a chef and sous chef on each, and by 3 a.m., we are receiving deliveries, doing prep work and preparing to serve breakfast starting at 5 a.m. We have a mobile continental breakfast set up outside the van, but inside, we take orders for anything and

everything—eggs Benedict, omelets, waffles—you name it and we will do it. Keep in mind, if we are doing a TV series, we are feeding the crew and cast nine months a year, three meals a day. We are their only source of food, and it's got to be good and satisfying."

With a typical day often lasting 16 hours or more, Brown points out that this is not for everyone. "People think it's glamorous, but it's not. Generally, I don't ever get to leave the truck. But I like the challenge. I am rarely in the same place every day. The work never gets stale or stagnant. And, let's face it, the pay is pretty good, and it's rare that I work weekends."

Mattel says that although catering is increasingly popular, it is competitive, as well. "If you can develop an identity or signature style, you can create the competitive edge you will need to succeed," he says. "Caterers who know how to customize their services to appeal to a specific group or type of event will continue to grow and succeed in the business."

Jan Greenberg, author of Hudson Valley Harvest (Countryman Press, 2003), is based in Rhinebeck, N.Y.