

Nation's Restaurant News

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## **Catering to the new norm: operators offer holiday parties for post-recession tastes; Food & Beverage**

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Healthful items, ethnic influences and lower price points are reshaping catering menus as restaurateurs gear up for the crucial holiday season in an increasingly crowded field.

While corporate and consumer spending on catered events remains tepid, some operators are reporting an uptick in holiday bookings and are optimistic about the coming months. And even though catering sales are not as robust as they were before the recession, restaurateurs seeking new revenue streams are still entering the segment, increasing the need to differentiate offerings.

"There are certainly a lot more restaurants in the catering business," said Melissa Wilson, a principal at Technomic Inc., a Chicago-based research and consulting company. "New entrants are seeing that some restaurants have had tremendous success with catering. Others understand that while consumers are staying at home more, they are still entertaining and want to take prepared food home."

### Eye on the price

The economic downturn continues to hurt catering, which watched the corporate party business vanish overnight in 2008, forcing operators to rethink their audience.

"Corporate catering shut down for a while," said Bob Shuman, owner of Zaftigs Delicatessen in Brookline, Mass. Now, he added, "people are clearly spending their money differently."

The penny-pinching mindset common among corporations and consumers has prompted operators to emphasize in their marketing that their catering services are flexible and work within any budget.

"Our clients are looking to spend less money, period," said Jeff Kennedy, founder of Moe's Original BBQ in Vail, Colo. "They want to spend less on venue, less on food, less on service."

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Customers are looking for very basic menus and holding parties in parks and homes, where they can avoid additional costs, he said.

"We do a lot more drop-offs and set up parties that do not include service staff," he said.

In the same vein, Haru Sushi, which has locations in Boston, New York and Philadelphia, offers to cater everything from no-frills food deliveries to large-scale, turnkey events.

"We've hired a dedicated catering sales manager who works one-on-one with clients to come up with custom menus that fit their budget," said Seth Rose, Haru's vice president of operations.

### Healthful choices

Growing attention to organic, local and healthful foods has led to an increase in customers seeking platters loaded with such fare, according to restaurant caterers across the country.

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"Everyone is waking up to the common sense of healthier dining choices," said Bob Morgan, chief executive at Woodbridge, N.J.-based Muscle Maker Grill, a 36-unit fast-casual chain offering healthful fare to people looking to build muscle and lose fat.

No one wants to serve unhealthy food to their friends, family and co-workers, Morgan said. Dishes on the Muscle Maker catering menu feature such ingredients as brown rice, lean chicken and whole wheat pasta. Morgan noted that salads with no-fat dressings and gluten-free offerings also are popular.

Hope Cleveland, the catering manager at Home Team BBQ in Charleston, S.C., says a majority of catering clients are taking a larger interest in where their food comes from and how it got there.

"A lot of people prefer--and sometimes insist--on local farm-raised products, from protein to produce," she said. "Organic is, at times, requested, although most people shy away from it once they see the price differences, especially with proteins."

Bonnie B. Fedchock, executive director of the National Association of Catering Executives, or NACE, said that along with growing interest in local, organic and more healthful menu items, there's a proliferation of cultural, religious and international items on catering menus.

Targeting ethnic and international palates "is a good way to develop another segment," Fedchock said. Ethnic foods and flavors are being requested by consumers seeking different experiences or looking to showcase their heritage or culture with menu items that they may not know how to prepare themselves.

New York's Nanoosh Mediterranean Hummus Bars & Counters and Boston's Anna's Taqueria, Basho Japanese Brasserie and Lala Rokh, which offers traditional Persian fare, all opened catering operations within the past three years.

"Customers are looking for new and exotic alternatives," said David Kostman, chief executive of Nanoosh. "Our dishes, which are prepared using mostly organic and all-natural ingredients, meet a corporation's desire for a healthy and environmentally friendly alternative. The hummus plates with toppings, salads and whole wheat wraps offer a nutritionally balanced and very tasty alternative to regular catering menus."

It's too early to predict how the crucial holiday catering season will turn out, but 44 percent of NACE members have said they are seeing increased catering sales for the year. That's up from 18 percent who were predicting a good year in 2009, Fedchock said.

"A lot of people are reporting good sales for 2010, and 10 percent told us they were increasing their projections," she said. "Both sides of the country are seeing an increase, but it's not everywhere. Las Vegas is starting to come back, but Florida is still one of our weaker areas. New York really made a rebound in 2010, but many areas are still experiencing slower growth."

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