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## Return of 'the holiday party' means busy season for caterers

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The company holiday party, nearly extinct the past two years after the economic collapse, is making a recovery.

This development is bringing a welcome infusion of green into the coffers of Silicon Valley caterers.

"This year, I still have a few blank dates, but things are filling up," said Greg Casella, owner of Catered Too, a San Jose catering firm, and president of the National Association of Catering Executives, an industry trade association based in Columbia, Md. "People booked later this year than in the past. On Nov. 1, I would have told you the holidays weren't looking that good. Now, things are much better."

Casella said the recession that deepened with the stock market plunge of September 2008 had a delayed effect on his business. Eighteen-year-old Catered Too - which caters to midsize and large companies - actually had its best year before the market crashed in 2008, Casella said. In 2008 the business reported nearly \$3 million in revenue. That slid to \$1.8 million in 2009, but is back on track for 2010. Casella is projecting \$2.4 million in revenue this year.

Casella's catering company isn't the only one seeing more business this holiday season. The National Association of Catering Executives conducted a nationwide survey of its 4,000 members this fall on the state of corporate holiday entertaining. David Harrison, an organization spokesman, said 52 percent of respondents reported they've seen a resurgence in corporate parties this year, compared to 30 percent last year.

For the 2010 holiday season, Casella said a tab of \$125 per person is the going rate for large Saturday night gatherings. Weekday on-site affairs with costs of \$50 to \$75 are attractive to more frugal employers.

His regular client list includes such Silicon Valley heavyweights as Apple Inc., Facebook Inc., LinkedIn Corp. and Juniper Networks Inc.

Business began to rebound last summer, Casella said, when company picnics - which virtually disappeared two summers ago - made a comeback.

Tim Ford, catering director at Los Altos-based Armadillo Willy's BBQ Corporate Catering, saw the same phenomenon.

"Summer was substantially better this year than last," said Ford, estimating his company barbecue business was up about 15 percent this past summer over 2009.

He expects his 2010 revenue will be up 10 percent to about \$1.5 million with help from the holidays. Holiday revelers at Armadillo Willy's eight Bay Area locations pay a flat fee of \$13.95 per meal for the holiday menu. Ford's regular clients include such Silicon Valley giants as Apple Inc. and Cisco Systems Inc.

Ted Laymon, managing partner at Il Fornaio Catering at the Sainte Claire Hotel in downtown San Jose, said his holiday bookings are up 10 percent this year over 2009. Last year's business also increased 10 percent over 2008, which saw a 50 percent plunge over the 2007 holiday season, Laymon said.

Il Fornaio operates catering operations along with its 22 restaurants in five states, including one in Palo Alto.

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"It's great this year because Christmas falls on a Saturday, so we will have three really good weeks," Laymon said.

He said smaller events are more popular this year, with bookings up about 15 percent for parties at the Il Fornaio restaurant and catering facilities compared to last year.

"People were a little scared last year," Laymon said. "The big parties, the sit-down dinner parties for 300, really dropped off. Company parties are making a comeback, but they tend to be smaller, and often a lunch instead of dinner."

For Silicon Valley companies that are treating their employees to one of those festive lunches or dinners, Casella said there are some distinct trends this year besides smaller, less extravagant affairs.

"Gluten-free (menus) are all the rage this year," he said of the protein found in wheat products that can cause allergic reactions. "And sit-down dinners are making a comeback. They're much more popular than, say, five years ago, when events moved more toward casual. But there definitely aren't as many ice sculptures today."

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