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Hospitality sector abuzz with corporate holiday bookings**BYLINE:** Missy Frederick**LENGTH:** 772 words

The eggnog should flow more freely this year.

After two years of canceled or downsized holiday parties, more local companies are once again holding events at area venues, according to party planners and caterers. They report earlier bookings and lack of availability, all signs that point to a more lucrative holiday season for employers and the hospitality sector alike.

"We've been booking parties this year even before Halloween," said Hillary Patriquin, events manager for ThinkFoodGroup, which operates such Jose Andres-led restaurants as Jaleo and Zaytinya. "A lot of our private spaces are filling up, and we're having to turn away business."

ThinkFoodGroup has booked an average of 60 events per week at its six restaurants during the holiday season. That is slightly higher than last year's final figures. As a result, the D.C.-based restaurant group is investing \$60,000 in refurbishing Oyamel's private dining room before the holidays.

The uptick in holiday parties signals a growing optimism that the recovery - at least in the Washington area - is in full swing, and employers are looking to reward employees who have done more for less in the last two years.

The region gained more private sector jobs than any other major market in the country between September 2009 and September 2010, adding 34,000 jobs.

After canceling its party last year, Welz & Weisel Communications in Fairfax is hosting its 15 employees and their spouses in a rented suite at a Washington Capitals game.

"It's a busy year, and people have been working their butts off," said spokeswoman Jayna Kliner. "We wanted to do something different. In the past, it's been more traditional dinners at places like Maggiano's."

Holiday parties are something most employers agree are important for morale - it comes down to finding ways to make them work financially without appearing insensitive to the times, according to Eve Framinan, president of Falls Church-based human resources consulting firm TPO Inc.

"I think we're past the point that people believe that by doing anything at all, you're appearing too extravagant," Framinan said. "This year, we're at the point where things are slowly increasing back up, where the majority of people are truly happy to have at least a bit of a holiday celebration."

The festive mood in the Washington area, for the most part, aligns with the national trend. According to the National Association of Catering Executives, 44 percent of respondents are seeing an increase in corporate clients planning holiday events, with more than 10 percent seeing an increase in budgets. Battalia Winston Amrop's annual survey on corporate holiday celebrations may show a slight drop in companies holding parties this year, from 81 percent last year to 79 percent this year, but about 11 percent of respondents said they plan to hold a more lavish party this season than last year.

Party planners say more companies also are moving away from the rampant cost-saving measures of 2008 and 2009: They are relaxing limits on alcohol, allowing employees to bring their significant others and even returning to party favors, such as signed cookbooks or DVDs.

At downtown D.C.'s Equinox Restaurant, which was closed last holiday season because of a fire, owners are seeing indications of a return to pre-recession party revenue.

"This year is very busy," said co-owner Ellen Kassoff Gray, without offering specific figures. "We've seen a big increase."

D.C.-based Farmers & Fishers restaurant, which has three private rooms, is seeing a 30 percent increase in holiday inquiries so far, spokeswoman Jennifer Motruk Loy said, though it still has some openings available in December.

New York transplant Carmine's opened in September with a whopping nine private dining rooms scattered throughout the 700-seat restaurant. According to CEO Jeffrey Banks, the company had 222 holiday parties on the books in its first month. It's now nearing 400.

"We're reaching capacity for the holiday season," Banks said, attributing the surge to the restaurant's large portions and lower prices. "If we were a high-end restaurant, we may be facing issues. But right now, it's not about price, but about whether we have room for you."

Ashok Bajaj, who owns such lobbyist and politico-friendly restaurants as 701, Bombay Club and Oval Room, says one thing hasn't changed since the recession: Smaller functions are now the trend for his holiday business.

"Two or three years ago, before the recession started, there were a lot of corporate functions with people renting out the entire restaurant," Bajaj said. "Now, you'll see events with 40 or 50 people, maybe 20 to 30."

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