

FEASTS FOR THE

SENSES

How to Harness Trends in Event Cuisine and Decor

By Lisa Plummer Savas

Creative, cutting-edge food and beverage and room decor amounts to a lot more than just tasty cuisine or pretty window dressings. When executed effectively, these crucial components can take your event to the next level. Keeping the look, feel and flavors of your meetings fresh and appealing means staying on top of current trends and being open to new interpretations of old favorites. To help you create that "wow" factor at your next conference, here are 10 suggestions on how to improve your F&B and decor from some of the industry's best design and culinary experts.



KIMBERLY GAVIN; LESA GIBSON

1 CUSTOMIZE YOUR MENUS.

As people become more educated about food thanks in part to television programming such as Food Network and Bravo's "Top Chef," attendees have become more sophisticated and discerning when it comes to event fare. That's why offering typical one-meal-fits-all menus isn't going to cut it with most groups anymore. "People are sick of seeing the same old convention center food," says Paul Benson, executive chef of the Virginia Beach Convention Center. "The knowledge of customers has risen so much even in just the past five years. They know more about food, and they expect more. You can't just put chicken on a dish and put it out there. You've got to [offer] fresh garnishes, fresh sauces and fresh ideas."

Trending Now
Working one-on-one with chefs or caterers to design customized menus that match group demographics and give attendees plenty of choices

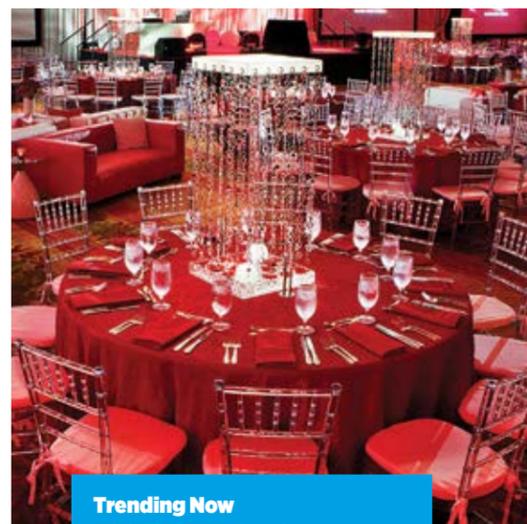
"Think outside the box and don't just accept the menu [the venue provides]," says Deborah Elias, owner of Elias Events. "I request a meeting with the chef so that he understands my vision for the event, and I always challenge him to come up with something that's not on their standard menu. You'd be surprised how excited they get," she adds. "They're always up for that."



2. BE BRIGHT AND COLORFUL.

As one of the key elements in event decor, color can influence the look, feel and energy of your event's atmosphere, so select the right palette for your audience and message, choose it early in the planning process and use it wisely. If you're apprehensive about going over the top with a color theme, incorporate bright accent colors into table linens, floral arrangements, centerpiece decor and event graphics.

James Rota, owner of Dazzle Creative Events, says color trends can be a reflection of how people are feeling in society at large, so in a more optimistic economy, introducing bright and intense colors in meeting environments is more acceptable than it would have been just a few years ago. "I'm using colors and textures such as leathers, pleathers and lame, and I'm mixing and layering colors in, keeping in mind who my audience is," says Rota. "I'm not doing a hot pink party for a bunch of men." One color to consider this year is emerald green, the 2013 Pantone Color of the Year.



Trending Now
Bright, intense colors that are a combination of pastel and jewel tones



Trending Now
Healthy, whole and unprocessed foods; farm-to-table cuisine; vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free options as menu staples

3. GO HEALTHY AND LOCAL.

Offering healthier food options can do wonders for attendee energy and information retention. To create nutritious cuisines that support well-being, accommodate special dietary requirements and restrictions, and support local agriculture, ask the chef or caterer for menus that feature fresh, seasonal ingredients that are locally sourced whenever possible.

The trend toward healthier convention food is what Liz Cipro, executive chef of A Legendary Event, calls "approachable healthy." "It's not like we're serving shots of wheatgrass juice that people are turning their noses up at," she says. "It's approachable, it's recognizable, it looks interesting and appealing, and it tastes great. The fact that it's more healthful is just a bonus."

"There's a huge swing toward gluten-free, so the trend for a lot of our clients is not separating specialty [dietary] requests but integrating them all into one menu," says Jeff Hall, executive chef at the Moscone Convention Center in San Francisco. "So you're getting your gluten-free [and] your vegan, [but it's] not set apart from everyone else."

F&B: What's Out (Or Close to It)

OUT:

- > One-meal-fits-all menus
- > Over-the-top floral arrangements
- > Pasta stations
- > Superfluous giveaways
- > Large food portions
- > Carb-heavy meals
- > Traditional ice sculptures
- > Chocolate fountains
- > Meat-and-potatoes fare
- > Overspending on frills
- > Food served in martini glasses

ON ITS WAY OUT:

- > Signature cocktails
- > Light-up bars
- > Meat-carving stations
- > Food trucks
- > Traditional cupcakes and cake-pops
- > Bacon on everything
- > Molecular gastronomy
- > Food served in mason jars

4. ADD PATTERN AND TEXTURE WITH LINENS.

Linens that make a statement on their own are an easy and inventive way to create individuality, says Jessica Moschella, managing director of MTL Communications. "Linens are a pretty easy way to infuse personality into overall decor.

"If you choose a patterned linen, keep your usage light and only incorporate it into the napkins, seat cushions or as a peekaboo layer of the table cloths," she says. "It adds a little bit of flair and personality to the overall effect. If you're going with a pattern, go pretty muted on the rest of your palette, including dinnerware [and] flowers. If you choose textured linens—which is usually better with a monochromatic color scheme—definitely mix and match. Use one pattern for napkins and another on seat cushions or coverings. Because the color is going to be the same throughout, incorporating multiple textures will catch light differently and give dimension to the decor without being overwhelming."



Trending Now
Textured or patterned linens in bold or muted palettes, including stripes and chevron patterns



Trending Now
Small plates and tapas-style fare, action stations with bite-sized portions, and miniature sweets and dessert shooters



5



SERVE BITE-SIZED FARE.

Quickly fading into the past are the days of giant meal portions, including troughs of macaroni and cheese at buffets, carving stations featuring enormous hunks of beef and plated slices of chocolate cake too big to finish.

"Smaller portions are definitely a trend," says Benson. "For example at action stations, you're seeing little beef medallions that are seared and put into little square plates with a little bit of greens, little bit of sauce, [in] bite-sized portions. Attendees are eating just as much."

6. HARNESS FLOWER POWER.

Beautiful flowers and flowering plants can spruce up an event space and lift attendee spirits. When overdone, they can be obnoxious, distracting and expensive. Get clever with florals by using minimal flowers in fresh, modern ways, aiming for clean, contemporary lines rather than large, romantic arrangements that might send the wrong message, says Rota.

"You have to be very careful when you're adding floral elements to meetings, based on who your audience is," Rota says. "You never want to put something too feminine on a table with a group of men. I find that if you do more linear things, such as branches, sticks, harder goods, woodchips, mushrooms or dried elements plus flowers, you get more of an interesting look that people will study."



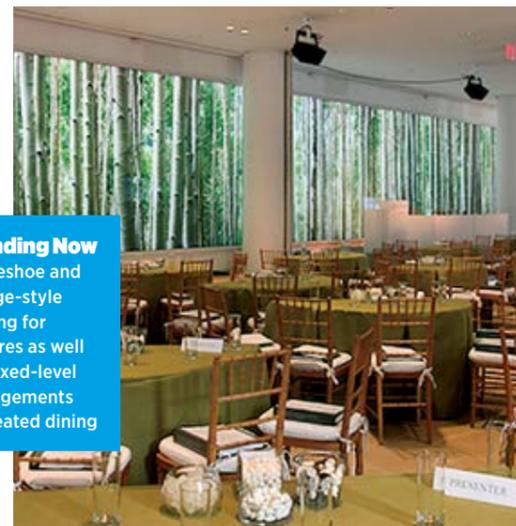
Trending Now
Simple, elegant arrangements using one type of flower such as tulips or different types of blooms of the same color



7 OPT FOR UNCONVENTIONAL SEATING.

For many events, traditional conference and dining seating stifles interaction, creates dead space and hinders visibility. Nobody wants to crane their necks or twist around in their seats to watch a luncheon presentation. That's why less structured seating styles that improve visibility and engagement while maximizing the event space are becoming more common at conferences.

"Mixing levels with high-tops and rounds creates aesthetically unique seating and can help with visibility issues during presentations at meetings," says Moschella. "The mix of rounds and rectangular tables allows for larger group seating without having to break up teams or co-workers who are attending as a group." Another great option for lectures: Instead of run-of-the-mill bleacher seats or rows of chairs, create original groupings of chairs, couches and ottomans that can promote more conversational settings. "[They] are much more comfortable if people are going to be sitting for hours at a time," Moschella adds.



Trending Now
Horseshoe and lounge-style seating for lectures as well as mixed-level arrangements for seated dining

Soil-to-City Cuisine at Hyatt



"People are accepting healthier eating. It's not that we're putting our customers on a diet. We're guiding them toward a better lifestyle when it comes to food."

See Sway's Southern homestyle food and other F&B trends in "The Great Food Debate," pages 58-63.

At Hyatt Regency Atlanta's Sway, a contemporary Southern restaurant, the focus is on local products and ingredients. Austrian-born Executive Chef Martin Pfefferkorn, named the 2012 top chef among all large Hyatt hotels, calls his cuisine soil to city, "because 'farm to fork' and 'farm to table' are overused," he says. "We try to do Southern food with a twist. We like to lighten it up with local ingredients," he adds. At Sway, the vegetables are always seasonal and the meat is sourced from farms in and close to Georgia, like Southeast Family Farms in Alabama. The fried chicken is hand-cut by an in-house butcher before soaking in apple cider brine and being marinated in buttermilk. "We want to create an experience for the customers so that every bite is perfect," Pfefferkorn says. For the pimento cheese, he uses only Duke's mayonnaise, and the crackers are made on-site.

Not everything on the menu is as decadent as buttermilk fried chicken. The hotel recently introduced a 500-calorie-and-below menu for meetings and banquets, and the chef regularly works with planners to come up with affordable, healthy menus. Lunch protein portions have been downsized from six ounces to four, and rather than offering several protein choices during lunch, he only gives two or three. "There's no complaint," he says. "People are accepting healthier eating. It's not that we're putting our customers on a diet. We're guiding them toward a better lifestyle when it comes to food." The new menus also give planners the option to use the organic, locally sourced foods Sway serves, including hormone-free milk, cage-free eggs, wheat bread, and agave syrup and honey sweeteners.

And then there is dessert. For those who appreciate organic foods and lighter dishes but still have a hankering for a slice of homemade pie, Sway has the city's only Southern pie bar. The family-style, all-you-can-eat smorgasbord of flaky goodness includes seasonal fruit pies, chocolate pie and coconut cream pie, all made on-site daily.

—Mari Shirley

Chef Pfefferkorn's Tips on F&B Banquets:

- > Offer your attendees variety. At the very least, change the breakfast each day.
- > Inform your banquet and catering team of any allergies or food restrictions your attendees have. Most hotels can accommodate specific requests, so don't be shy in making them.
- > Let your hotel know about any hot-button issues for your group. Do they prefer lighter breakfasts and healthier options? Do they hate lines at bars and buffets? Are most of the attendees vegetarians?
- > Offer healthy options for your groups. Many attendees are looking for healthier snacks, breakouts, lunches and dinners, and many prefer local, seasonal ingredients.
- > Don't cut the food budget as the first option to save costs on your meeting or event. In many cases, food is what your attendees will remember most.

8

GET ADVENTUROUS WITH FOOD.



Trending Now
Creative buffets with make-your-own snack stations and specialty food service such as food trucks, juice bars, artisanal beverage stations and beer tastings

While nothing influences an event experience like the quality of its food and drink, adding an element of fun to culinary offerings helps take the experience to another level. Incorporate one-of-a-kind ideas that play on trends while fostering a spirit of experimentation.

"Be adventurous and push and challenge your sales manager and chef," says Hall. "It helps us grow and become better at what we do each time someone challenges us to do something different. It pushes us into new territory."

"Don't take a generic approach to the menu," he says. "A lamb dish with quinoa might not fit everyone's palate, but you don't need to be safe. People are more worldly and open to trying new things, so don't be as reserved when it comes to making menu choices. When you do something out of the box, you know there's going to be a percentage of your group [who won't like it]. Plan for that and have an alternative prepared for them."

Trending Now
Edible centerpieces with candies, fruit, granola and trail mix arranged in fun, eye-catching containers



9. TRY UNUSUAL CENTERPIECES.

Besides flowers, unique centerpieces made from alternative or interactive materials are a fun way to create visual appeal and break up the monotony of a typical meeting room environment. "If you are providing any takeaways for your guests, work them into the tablescapes as design elements," says Moschella. "This cuts out visibility issues altogether, creates a unique design, and reduces break down and cleanup."

"At general sessions, consider using snacks to double as room decor, using different containers and different heights," says Rota. He recommends using clear glass containers filled with all different kinds of white candies, or for a healthier option, use homemade granola or a make-your-own trail mix. Creatively arranging goodie bags as tablescapes is a great way to liven up a table and save money.

10. LIGHT THE WAY.

Lighting is one of the easiest and most effective ways to set the right mood and ambiance in a meeting space. It's also a quick, affordable and dramatic way to transform a typical room into a distinctive and captivating environment. "Put a big portion of your budget aside for lighting," advises Rota. "Good lighting can take a \$1 item and make it look like a \$100 item if it's done the right way."

"I always ask for battery-operated, programmable lighting whenever I'm working with a lighting company," he adds. "Some of them can be programmable to your clients' colors, so you can light anything, and you don't have to use cables. It gives you flexibility of where and how you want to light something." Rota also uses motion sensor technology to make projected graphics appear, disappear and transform.

Trending Now
LED lighting/walls and motion sensor technology



KIMBERLY GAVIN; CHRIS FAY