

Caterers deliver the wow factor so you don't have to

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CLASSIC STYLE: Ian Perris is co-founder and executive vice president of Le Basque., whose specialties include seasonal and continental dishes. CEO Alejandro Muguerza says 'conspicuous luxury' is a thing of the past. **Moris Moreno** - For the Miami Herald

BY ELLEN KANNER

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As the holidays approach, local caterers are swirling in the whirlwind that starts with Art Basel and doesn't let up until after New Year's. But they're not complaining. While clients aren't living large the way they did in the 1980s and '90s, they're not as cost-averse as they were in 2008, during the worst of the recession. Definitely, says Sarah Davidoff, CEO of Fare to Remember, "they're spending more."

South Florida's top caterers have found ways to provide client splash while containing cash, thanks in part to culinary trends. Back in the decadent days, clients "wanted conspicuous luxury. It had to sound expensive," says Alejandro Muguerza, CEO of Le Basque. "Now it's about good food, local food. They're not asking for filet or Delmonico, they're asking for short ribs cooked perfectly."

And at least for the holidays, they want mac-and-cheese or mashed potatoes to go with their beef. “When I first started, the Pritikin Diet was hip, then Atkins, then fat-free. This year, clients don’t care,” Davidoff says.

“People want comfort food,” agrees Mena Catering CEO Jorge Mena. It has an added benefit for caterers, too. “When you do stations with a stir-fry of noodles or a Balinese rice dish, it makes it fun and it’s not expensive.”

But these days, prices are affected more by labor costs than by ingredients. “Somebody to buy it, prep, pack it up, serve it, keep the lights, dishwashers and the gas on,” Davidoff says.

And, says Muguerza, “there’s constant competition from new high-end restaurants. To hire and keep quality staff, caterers are paying more than just a few years ago.”

Location logistics, design and rental costs also factor in. So how do caterers price an event?

As a baseline, a buffet of small plates and an open bar starts at \$75 a person. And keeps going. A seated dinner, which requires more staffing, starts at \$150 per person from Bill Hansen Catering, \$175 from Thierry’s and \$200 from Le Basque.

This holiday season, say Miami caterers, seated dinners are in far greater demand than simpler nosh-and-go cocktail events.

Whether clients want farm to table, comfort food, stations or small plates, “everybody is more savvy about food nowadays. Everybody’s a chef, everybody’s an event manager,” says Mena.

Blame Food Network and the Internet. “There *was* no Internet when we started, no social media,” says Thierry’s president, Alina Isambert. “These two mediums have provided awareness and knowledge.”

Connectivity has given rise to another new trend: clients are requesting food tastings. Bill Hansen Catering does up to 10 a week and provides them gratis. “It’s the cost of doing business,” Hansen shrugs. “Some of the costs you just absorb. You don’t earn as much on an event as you could in years gone by.”

On the upside, caterers deliver the wow with imported luxury items like Kobe beef, Jabugo ham and rare cheeses, all more available than they were a decade ago. So is organic produce. “We have micro organic herbs and edible flowers now,” says Isambert. Caterers are showering on the nasturtium blossoms even if the guests are more likely to dig into the truffled macaroni with four cheeses.

Along with greater gastronomic choices is a wealth of rental options for place settings, linens, tables and chairs. When these caterers started, white linens ruled. “Now every party can look different,” says Davidoff.

Every party *is* different. Fare to Remember is catering 40 holiday parties this month, some for 50 people, some for 5,000. Le Basque’s 75 events range from an intimate holiday party for 15 to a Basel gala for 1,000.

In addition to the corporate and social events — weddings, galas and birthdays — that comprise the bulk of catering, both Davidoff and Hansen have found and serve similar niche markets, providing lunches for corporate offices. It keeps them fully staffed throughout the year and provides a financial cushion.

That may not be a worry for caterers or their clients during the Basel and holiday season, but caterers know all that could change.

At the first tremor of economic instability, Mena says, “Corporate clamps down.”

On the other hand, as Isambert says, no matter what state the economy’s in, “People still need to get married — and they want a fairytale wedding.”

Le Basque

CEO: Alejandro Muguerza

Year launched: 1992

Number of employees: 15 full-time, plus another 10 full-time during season. Part-time staff: in the hundreds.

Specialties: High contemporary, seasonal and classic continental dishes.

Events catered in 2014: 275

Since launching in 1992, Le Basque has fed four presidents — Bill Clinton, George Bush (both father and son) and Barack Obama. But the majority of the firm’s clients are companies synonymous with splendor.

However, even Prada and Hermes felt the pinch when the worst of the recession hit in 2008. Consequently, so did Le Basque. “We thought it was the end,” Muguerza says.

It wasn’t. “When the world was in crisis, Miami seemed like a refuge. Luxury brands kept doing parties in Miami. We recuperated quickly.”

There’s been an adjustment in both cents and sensibility, though, and Muguerza welcomes it. He prefers design that’s natural and timeless. Plating food on slate rather than sterling, for instance, may sound counterintuitive, but it provides understated glamour.

“We simplify more — the amounts of food have changed a lot, and the style of cooking. Before, it used to be dishes full of ingredients, full of *everything*. Now there’s no more than three items on a plate, a fish, a side dish or two — it’s a simple approach but perfect execution,” Muguerza says. “The food is nicer that way, too.”

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