

FOOD

Experts dish on the latest food and beverage trends.

NEWS

By Morgan Halaska

Mini tacos from
Naturally Delicious

PHOTO: KATIE OSGOOD



Supper Club

BIRCHTREE CATERING EXPERIMENTS WITH NEW IDEAS AT ITS POP-UP DINNERS.

Allegra Derengowski and Rasa Stirbys Benefico started Birchtree Catering in 2008. With little background in catering, the pair, who met working as servers, hosted tastings for friends and family to practice and garner feedback on the food and service.

Years later in August 2014, the now-established company started Supper Club, a series of seasonal pop-up dinners, with the idea to cook once again for a small group of friends and foodies. Though these days, it's less to practice and more to experiment.

THE PLANNING

Supper Club takes place at a new Philadelphia venue for every dinner, with different vendors to match. "Once we have the space, the theme is chosen, generally by chef Rasa or in collaboration with the team. The venue may lead us to the French countryside or northern Italy, or a medieval feast, or artist's theme. The menu is sometimes driven by straightforward influences such as a region or flavor profile, and sometimes by shapes or colors that we want to experiment with," says Derengowski.

Birchtree works with furniture, photography, live music, floral and décor vendors to help create their vision. "Often a specific vendor will come to mind once we've chosen a theme. Other times, we have a list of people we want to work with and fit a theme around their strengths."

"We're always looking for new and different elements to include in Supper Club, and we had come across a rental company that created [Lazy Susans] as an answer to service issues they were seeing in the field. I was so impressed with the creativity of it, and that I hadn't seen it before at events, so I had to try it. They were as fun to use as they look," says Derengowski.

THE FOOD

"We've typically styled our service around small plates and family-style platters, as the multicourse aspect of these dinners is very important to the overall vibe," says Stirbys Benefico, who gives background on the inspiration and ingredients for each dish as it's presented.

Food and drinks are often paired together. At Yards Brewing Company, Birchtree paired beer flights with a "flight" of salad, poke and pâté. Courses were made to complement cocktails' flavor profiles. At Philadelphia Distilling, Birchtree complemented the cocktails with courses that played on the same flavor profiles; a chilled spring pea soup with herb poached rock shrimp, candied lemon rind and wasabi dust was created to go with the Lemon Hill cocktail, which features snap pea vermouth, sage and lemon.

THE TRENDS

"It's been really fun introducing our guests to some of our favorite trends in food, such as bringing attention to local foraged ingredients like nettles and ramps. We also bring in the interactive, dynamic service styles we're seeing—combining small plates and family-style service or composed plates that guests can make their own with some fun salts, sauces, herbs," says Stirbys Benefico.

"Supper Club keeps us infused with creativity, always looking for the next ideas or trends to try out. Stretching ourselves in this way gives us the expertise that we can bring to all of our events. ... It's also an emotional outlet that reminds us that bringing people to the table for food and conversation is the crux of what we do," says Derengowski.

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BIRCHTREE CATERING | birchtreecatering.com | 215.744.9489

PHOTOS: EMILY WREN PHOTOGRAPHY; ASHLEY GERRITY PHOTOGRAPHY; BG PRODUCTIONS



Q&A

HEALTHY CHOICES

With 47,000-plus square feet of meeting space, executive chef **Thomas Harkins** of Loews Philadelphia Hotel and its on-site restaurant Bank & Bourbon feed many groups throughout the year.



How have you changed catering menus over the years as guests have shifted to be more health conscious?

“Within the past few years, we have seen a large shift for our guests seeking more healthy options and wanting to eat more vegetables, grains and other superfoods; because of this, we have added more of these options on our catering menus.

“Specifically, we have added more roasted and raw versions of salads with vegetables that are not the everyday standard choices. For example, some of our most popular dishes are our roasted cauliflower salad with romesco and our charred broccoli with cured lemon and grains.

“We are also seeing our guests and clients asking where their food is coming from. Bank & Bourbon and Loews Philadelphia Hotel is proud to partner with and support the following farmers: Green Valley Dairy, Lioni Latticin, Bell & Evans. Our mission as a hotel and restaurant has always been about locality, and it is nice to see how much it is now noticed and appreciated by our guests.”

How have diet/allergy/lifestyle choice requests influenced the hotel's overall offerings in terms of health and wellness?

“We are constantly making changes to our menu whether it be for seasonality, trends or guest feedback. We have decided to cook with less flour due to many gluten allergies and have made our plant-based offerings much more robust.”

Are there any specific ingredients/foods that clients have started to request more of?

“Vegetables. We've seen a lot more vegans attending our meetings and events. They are looking to us to be creative with our options and go beyond the typical grilled vegetable plate. To address these requests, our culinary team has created whole grain taco stations and roasted carrot variations; these are extremely popular with meetings and events.”

Are there other F&B trends/shifts you're seeing?

“Plant-based diets are definitely a strong trend. As an operation, we've made some adjustments including using less plastic whether it be through paper straws or corn-based products as takeout containers.”

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LOEWS PHILADELPHIA HOTEL
loewshotels.com/philadelphia-hotel



Local Taste

FLAVOR BY LOEWS HOTELS PARTNERS WITH LOCAL VENDORS TO SERVE THE CITY'S BEST TO HOTEL GUESTS.

Food and beverage are some of the best—and most enjoyable—ways to get to know a place, but traveling for business doesn't always allow for exploration outside the hotel meeting room. Flavor by Loews Hotels partners with local restaurants, breweries and artisans to bring their goods to guests and attendees.

LOEWS PHILADELPHIA HOTEL

La Colombe: Todd Carmichael and JP Iberti founded La Colombe on a simple premise: America Deserves Better Coffee. The first location opened in Rittenhouse Square in 1994.

Metropolitan Bakery makes its breads with all-natural starter and is a Philadelphia institution.

LOEWS REGENCY NEW YORK

Bon Vivant: Each petit four looks like a work of art. The recipe uses eggs

PHOTOS: LOEWS HOTELS



Bon Vivant ▶

◀ La Colombe

Metropolitan
Bakery ▶

Mah-Ze-Dahr ▶



from pasture-raised New York farms and buttercream flavored intensely with lavender buds, vanilla beans or lemon curd.

Brooklyn Gin: Made closely in the Hudson Valley, this handcrafted small-batch gin is good enough to drink on its own. Everything is made during a three-day process in one Christian Carl pot.

Olivella Bread: NYC's resident pizza king is Naples, Italy-born Salvatore Olivella, who made a name for himself consulting with top NYC pizza spots. You can try two exclusive pizzas here: Truffle and Diavolo, both made with a charcoal crust.

Mah-Ze-Dahr: The name of this West Village bakery translates from Urdu to describe the essence, flavor and magic of food. The brown butter blondies and brioche doughnuts have become social media sensations in their own right.

The hotel also recently partnered with **Sigmund's Pretzels**, **Ess-a-Bagel** and **William Greenberg Desserts**.

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FLAVOR BY LOEWS HOTELS | loewshotels.com/flavor

Fresh & Flavorful

**DAVE MARKEN, CO-OWNER
AND EXECUTIVE CHEF OF
WHAT'S THE KITCH?, PACKS A
PUNCH IN EVERY BITE**

SMALL BITES

"[What's the Kitch's] concept was actually born out of the small plate concept. Tasting menus were all the rage, and it really resonated with us as an experience that really was unmatched by any other dining experience. We tested our concept for over a year before launching and took even a further step—making the small plate into the small bite—which defined who we were and allowed us to stand out. I think what sets them apart from other apps is we are a tad daring in

what we offer at what are called 'high-end events.'

"The mac and cheese egg roll is one of our biggest hits—it's so basic in theory but our preparation, seasoning and chic presentation help make it stand out. We make a mini Cuban sandwich, which we call Havana Heaven. Instead of sliced pork, we braise pork shoulder for 24 hours in a mix of 26 different seasonings. And then we add spicy British mustard. When people tell us it's the best Cuban they have ever tasted, it's a validation of how combining flavors that usually wouldn't be found together truly can transform a bite."

EXPERIMENTING

"My personal favorite is the Amarillo slider with guac, roasted poblano pepper, blue corn tortilla chips, melted pepper jack cheese and jalapeño ketchup. We beta test or 'beta taste' everything first many times before adding it to the menu. I absolutely knew this was a great burger, but I also knew it was missing something. We tried a few things before landing on the jalapeño ketchup. I was skeptical to even try it as ketchup and



Mexican Street Corn
Spoon from What's
the Kitch?

PHOTOS: WHAT'S THE KITCH; (OPPOSITE)
PAUL S. BARTHOLOMEW PHOTOGRAPHY



Chef Stations

“The standard buffet is old and tired—to us. No disrespect to the buffet as I recently did some major damage at one in Las Vegas! Also, Jeff and I grew up as best friends, and our favorite place to eat was the local Chinese buffet. So we get it—they have a very important place in the world, we just thought let’s do it different. We like fresh food. Even if it’s a taco—I want it made right there and then, not sitting in a chafer for hours. People really enjoy seeing a waffle come right off the griddle, or a dish of paella made how they want it pan tossed right in front of them.”

guacamole are two tastes I didn’t think belonged with one another. Yet they were an amazing partner to one another on this bite. Blending ingredients together that you wouldn’t think would work has been a key to our biggest successes.

“We love finding new recipes more than anything. When we have a rare day without an event—I and our other executive chef Jeff [Langelli] will have kitchen experiment days where we will try out 20 new ideas we’ve come up with over the last month or so. ... It’s quite entertaining when you think your brilliant idea will be revolutionary and it ends up tasting or looking horrific.”

ENTERTAINING DRINKS

“We focus more on the innovative drink stations. Our adult hot chocolate bar is very popular in the winter months. We have a DIY sangria bar where you essentially make your own sangria exactly how you want it. We also like to use fire and ice in our presentations. People really enjoy getting a cocktail that looks like it just came out of a secret lab as it bubbles out ‘smoke’ because we put a dry ice pellet in the bottom of the glass. When we serve Baileys under a marshmallow that’s currently on fire—it adds a lot of theatrics to something that is typically basic in its own form. We like to add a sense of entertainment and fun to everything we do.”

THE EPIC GRAZING TABLE

“When we first started, we were offering very standard but fancy looking cheese and charcuterie boards. They continued to grow in scope, and one day Natasha [Matallana], who is the

visual genius behind our company, thought she could change it a bit. So she made a small Grazing Table, and it was a hit. Then she made another one, and it got a bit bigger and fuller, and another and another to the point we have done now 24-foot Grazing Tables and a double-tier, 10-foot Grazing Table. Of course it’s delicious, but it’s also a conversation piece.

“A sampling of what it includes: hand-sliced, imported cured meats such as serrano ham, sopressata, fello salami, etc. Many cheeses from aged sharp white cheddar (never yellow), goat cheese, manchego, and triple whipped creamy brie rounds topped with a raspberry reduction and fresh raspberries. Tricolor carrots, purple cauliflower, pan flashed asparagus, house-made hummus with everything seed and honey on top (it’s a hummus hater converter), lots of fruits including star fruit, dragon fruit, radish watermelons, figs, etc. Also has dried fruit, nuts, fresh baked breads, artisan crackers, chutneys, dips, sweet treats, yogurt pretzels, pink Himalayan-salted popcorn.”

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WHAT’S THE KITCH? | whatsthekitch.com | 917.471.2230



ALL ABOUT BOURBON

Bank & Bourbon at Loews Philadelphia Hotel features a barrel-aging program for house-aged liquors and cocktails under the guidance of experienced Bourbon Masters who can assist guests with pairing the right spirit with the right food. Bourbon’s caramel, vanilla and oak flavors pair well with many foods; chef Joe Thomas put careful consideration into the menu for this reason.

The restaurant carries Benjamin Franklin’s favorite milk punch cocktail (called Secret Knock), derived from Franklin’s own recipe he sent to a friend in Boston in the 1700s. Bank & Bourbon’s version—made with milk, green tea, whiskey and lemon juice—is served in brown glass apothecary bottles.

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BANK & BOURBON
bankandbourbon.com
215.231.7346



Roasted heirloom carrots



Summer berry cobbler



Garden in the City

Loren Michelle has been in business with her catering company, Naturally Delicious, for 21 years. She's had a garden from the get-go, but it wasn't always accessible. "We had to do a little construction to get our clients to enjoy the garden, being that this is a brownstone in an urban space. The garden was underutilized when we started our company. We were passionate about bringing our clients into an environment where they can enjoy being outside and seeing where our food comes from."

The 2,500-square-foot garden and Private Dining Room can accommodate 50 people cocktail-style and 18 seated at a farm table; it is complete with ambient lighting. "The way the garden is situated [guests] have a vista of

the entire garden. It's very open and in the background is the F train, so it's really an essential New York City urban space."

FOLLOWING THE SEASONS

"Fall is my favorite season coming into August, September because we've got everything from heirloom tomatoes, corn, peppers, cucumbers, butternut squash ... all the different kabocha, Hubbard squashes, mushrooms are really nice then, too. In the winter we're dealing with a lot of typical things like rutabaga, celery root, Brussels sprouts, parsnips, more of the root veggies, cranberries. ... In the spring we're doing spring radishes, pea shoots, asparagus; in the summer we're getting more into, all the berries are in. We're just really following the

seasons. We really focus on not emphasizing the asparagus and the pea shoots and all the spring vegetables until they're really in season. [Farm-to table] is the undercurrent on every single menu that we do because we want to keep it as seasonal as possible."

PARTNERS & PURVEYORS

"We have a lot of strong relationships with partners, purveyors ... we're getting micro-greens throughout the year, we're getting carrots, yellow beets, red beets. Our partners are also seasonal, we're trying to not buy food from Australia if we can avoid it. We're getting oysters that are seasonal. We like to stay local with Long Island oysters, Montauk oysters are great in the fall. Our fish is likely

PHOTOS: KATIE OSGOOD; MAX FLATOW; (OPPOSITE) BORGATA HOTEL CASINO & SPA



Naturally Delicious' urban garden

to be dayboat fish from our purveyors—that's caught locally."

EVERYTHING MINI

"Like the mini margaritas, tacos and Arnold Palmers with mac 'n' cheese fritters or hush puppies or something like that. Or a mojito with mini Cubans. People just want to see it. It's cute, it's fun. We just did mini paellas in a little cast-iron pan ... you can serve that with pitchers of sangria, or little sips of sangria."

DESSERT

"I think the cupcake is not on-trend anymore. Waffles are a thing, gluten-free, dairy-free, and I think you're going to see that with all sorts of desserts. We do a lot of gluten-free and vegan desserts [like gluten-free orange blossom truffles.]"

MINIMIZING WASTE

"We're limiting as much waste as possible. All of our paper goods that we use for disposables are recycled. It's a big deal to be zero waste. It takes a lot work. My goal in the future is to collaborate with my restaurant neighbors and get one of those macerator/composters that basically churns up your food in 24 hours. My goal would be to have one central composter on my block."

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NATURALLY DELICIOUS
naturallydelicious.com | 718.237.3727



Cooking for Chefs

ATLANTIC CITY hosted the American Culinary Federation's Chef-Connect in February; chef Tom Biglan created the menu for the Feb. 25 black-tie dinner at Borgata.

WHAT DID YOU SERVE?

The academy has a criterion that is presented to the host property. The first course always being foie gras to seafood, salad, center of the plate, cheese course, dessert and mignardises. There are six courses total, in which Borgata chose to serve the following:

1st Course

Pressed Terrine of Hudson Valley Farm Foie Gras

2nd Course

Rice Flaked European Sea Bass

3rd Course

Late Winter Root Vegetable Salad

4th Course

Prime Tenderloin of Beef and Braised Lamb Osso Bucco

5th Course

Cheeses - Chaumes, Tolman, Esquirou Cheese; Fig Spread

6th Course

Valrhona Extra Bitter Crème, Passion Chiboust

WHAT WAS YOUR MISSION/INSPIRATION FOR THE MENU?

"Our inspiration was to express our food as an art theme from the minute the guests arrived to the time they left through presentation and flavors."


WERE THERE ANY COURSES/ELEMENTS THAT WERE PARTICULARLY POPULAR WITH THE GUESTS?

"The feedback was very positive throughout the entire meal. I felt very comfortable with the variety and presentations our chefs put together."

HOW DID THE MEAL SHOW OFF BORGATA'S F&B OFFERINGS?

"The fact that we were cooking for chefs who really appreciate food as an art reinforced our position in the Northeast corridor as having unique culinary offerings and a team that can deliver fantastic cuisine at any level."

WHAT ARE THE NEWEST TRENDS IN BANQUETS, CATERING AND SPECIAL EVENTS?

"I feel the customers are looking for a more diverse assortment of food options. The food industry has become such a melting pot as it relates to cuisine and flavor combinations. It is the key selling point for many groups." 

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BORGATA | theborgata.com