

WINTER 2023

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Show Issue 2024!



Announcing the 2024 ACE Awards Nominees {52}

A Tasty Tomorrow: The 2024 Food Trends {72}

State of the Industry 2023 {100}

The Beauty That is Barbecue {124}

EDUCATION, NEWS, PRODUCTS & IDEAS FOR PROFESSIONAL CATERERS

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Behind the Cover

This month's cover features *Strateje Fourteen's* Fatty Brisket Congee with hardwood smoked brisket with koshihikari rice & smoker drippings congee, shoyu & mirin cured jammy egg, red onion pickles, chili oil crunch, crispy shallot, and barbecued corn. Don't miss *Strateje Fourteen* during Catersource + The Special Event 2024 when they present *Texas Barbecue - The Strateje Fourteen Way - Sides, Sauces & Sweets*; and head over to page 124 for the inside scoop on barbecue. Photo courtesy Deanna Sandoval

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It's Been a Year.

What a year. My goodness. Big breath.

OK, I know when you turn to our State of the Industry feature starting on page 100, you'll get a lot of these facts, but I wanted to point out a few, by way of

the survey we put out a few months ago. People are tired of filling out surveys—I sure am—but they can be really eye opening at times, so thank you to everyone who shared their thoughts with us earlier this year.

Maybe these facts aren't so eye-opening, maybe I'm just commiserating, that "survey says!!" the greatest challenge you faced professionally was a labor shortage and/or a lack of skilled labor. I've heard it—that even when you fill a position, it doesn't mean your hire is solidly ready with the skills you need them to have.

And then as a company, it was cost of goods and services that was most concerning. And yet...and yet!!!...50% of respondents said the number of catered events executed have increased and will continue to increase in 2024. So where does that put us? Between a rock and a hard place, my friends.

And here I am telling you to take some time from your business to attend Catersource + The Special Event in February. Please do. There is so much you can take away from like-minded people who share the same frustrations—but who also may have come up with a solution that will make a difference in your profitability in 2024. The education in the classroom, the conversations in the hallway, the vendors you can talk to with solutions for everything from IT to labor to serving solutions to refreshed décor and on and on and on—will give you a fresh perspective and a firm foothold for the rest of the year. People want to share and talk about catering challenges and joys. They want to discuss new ways to serve small bites, unique ideas to surprise and delight. It's a lovely conflagration of individuals who all pretty much have the same job as you do, just in a different part of the country—or world. Cheer on chefs as they compete in our annual DICED competition. Shop the tradeshow floor and find the next solution that you didn't know you couldn't live without until you owned it. It's all here, plus a handful of evening events we are working on to make your visit to Austin incredibly memorable.

Have a wonderful holiday season and from all of us at *Catersource* magazine, we will see you in 2024!

Kathleen

Kathleen Stoehr, Director of Community & Content Strategy



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Winter 2023 CONTRIBUTORS



Executive **Anthony Lambatos** explores how work environments can impact the industry



Chef **Robin Selden** sheds light on how to successfully run a family business



Sales expert **Meryl Snow** defines the key personality traits of sales professionals



Chef **Jeffrey Schlissel** discusses how mental health can impact your ROI

What do you think of this issue? Like it? Love it? Have something to contribute to our website? We'd love to hear from you. Write us at editor@cattersource.com.

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MAIN OFFICE

605 Third Avenue, 22nd Floor, New York, NY 10158

EDITORIAL & PHOTO SUBMISSIONS

kathleen.stoehr@informa.com
amber.kispert@informa.com
amanda.nicklaus@informa.com

Director of Community &

Content Strategy Kathleen Stoehr, kathleen.stoehr@informa.com

Senior Content Producer Amber Kispert, amber.kispert@informa.com

Content Editor Amanda Nicklaus, amanda.nicklaus@informa.com

Art Director Sharon Carlson, sharon.carlson@informa.com

Managing Director Melissa Fromento, melissa.fromento@informa.com

Group Show Director Tara Melingonis, tara.melingonis@informa.com

Ad Operations Specialist Denise Walde, denise.walde@informa.com

Marketing Manager Yara Eldaly, yara.eldaly@informa.com

EXECUTIVE OFFICERS

Chief Executive Officer Stephen Carter

SVP, Managing Director Aharon Shamash

Vice President, Marketing Alyssa Amatulli

CONTRIBUTORS

International Caterers Association, Anthony Lambatos,
Jeffrey Schlissel, Robin Selden, and Meryl Snow



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Key Personality Traits of Successful Salespeople

Salespeople need a winning personality because, at its core, selling is all about building relationships. A likable and relatable personality helps create a connection. People are more likely to buy from someone they trust and enjoy interacting with.

Think about it—when you walk into a store or engage with a salesperson, you're more likely to make a purchase if the salesperson is friendly, attentive, and understands your needs. A positive personality can also help in overcoming objections and building confidence in the product or service being sold.

It's not just about pushing a product or service; it's about understanding the customer, addressing their concerns, and ultimately making them feel good about the purchase. A good salesperson is like a guide, helping them navigate their options and find the best solution for them.

So, in essence, the right personality traits—such as empathy, good communication skills, and a positive attitude—can be the key to making successful sales.

Successful salespeople often share several key personality traits that contribute to their effectiveness. Here are a few:

Empathy — Understanding and relating to customers' needs and concerns is crucial. Empathetic salespeople can build stronger connections and tailor their approach to meet individual customer needs.

Communication skills — Clear and effective communication is a must. Salespeople need to articulate the value of their product or service, answer questions, and address concerns in a way that resonates with the customer.

Resilience — Rejection is part of the sales game. Resilient individuals can bounce back from setbacks, learn from them, and continue pursuing new opportunities without being discouraged.

Confidence — Confidence inspires trust. If a salesperson is confident in themselves and the product they're selling, it instills confidence in the customer as well.

Adaptability — The ability to adapt to different personalities, situations, and unexpected challenges is crucial in sales. Flexibility allows salespeople to tailor their approach to different customers and circumstances.

Positive attitude — Maintaining a positive and optimistic outlook can be infectious. It helps create a more pleasant buying experience and can influence customers to view the product or service in a favorable light.

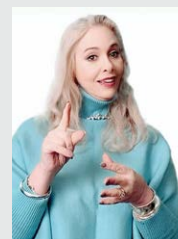
Curiosity — Successful salespeople are genuinely curious about their customers. They ask questions to understand their needs, challenges, and preferences, enabling them to offer tailored solutions.

Time management — Efficient use of time is crucial in sales. Successful salespeople prioritize tasks, focus on high-priority activities, and manage their time effectively to maximize productivity.

Integrity — Trust is the foundation of successful sales relationships. Salespeople with integrity build trust by being honest, transparent, and delivering on promises.

Persistence — Successful sales rarely happen on the first interaction. Persistent salespeople follow up, nurture leads, and stay engaged with potential customers over time, increasing the likelihood of closing deals.

Combining these traits creates a well-rounded and effective salesperson who can navigate the complexities of the sales process and build lasting relationships with customers. **CS**



With 30 years of experience owning event planning, high-end catering, and design and décor companies, Meryl Snow is on a mission to help businesses get on their own path

to success. As a Senior Consultant for **Certified Catering Consultants** and a Senior Consultant & Sales Trainer for **SnowStorm Solutions**, Meryl travels throughout North America training clients in the areas of sales, marketing, design, and branding. As a valued industry speaker, she speaks with groups from the heart with warmth and knowledge and covers the funny side of life and business.

See Meryl Snow LIVE!

You can see **Meryl Snow** live and in-person at Catersource + The Special Event, February 12-15 in Austin, TX during the following sessions:

- Mastering Negotiation and Closing Techniques to Achieve Successful Sales
- Mastering the Art of Sales: Techniques and Strategies for Overcoming Objections and Driving Results

Visit <https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/> for all the details.



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All in the *Family*

When I joined my mom's catering company over 25 years ago, I never imagined we would be where we are today! Truthfully, from the beginning I used to joke that if we didn't fight and kill each other, we'd potentially have something pretty special.

Fast forward to today, and you'll not only find that my brother joined in, but that we have team members who have worked for us longer than I have and who knew me and Jeffrey when we were young kids. How special is that?! These people are as much family to us as our own blood relatives as we spend more time with them than we do our own families. Running a family business that was started over 40 years ago by my mother (who is still very involved) is a delicate dance between preserving tradition and embracing innovation. For our legacy clients, and for my mom, it's crucial to balance time-honored recipes and practices that they have grown accustomed to and giving a nod to what today's foodies are craving so that we remain current and on the cutting edge of creative culinary experience. It's important that we embrace the evolving tastes and expectations of modern consumers and the next generation of our clients. I'm going to delve into some strategies that Jeffrey, Marcia, and I are working through that have infused Marcia Selden Catering & Events with freshness, excitement, and contemporary appeal while also keeping the "name on the door" (in this case our mother, Marcia) happy and comfortable with the direction we are taking with her third child—the business itself.

I'll start by sharing our successful recipe for success, which is what we follow daily:

- Communicate
- Appreciate
- Trust
- Embrace strengths
- Respect

Communicate

Effective communication is the cornerstone of any successful family business. Clear and open communication is crucial among family members and the entire team. Regular meetings, both formal and informal, provide a platform for discussing ideas, challenges, and goals. Encourage active listening and constructive feedback to resolve issues and ensure everyone is on the same page. Trust me, this is not always the easiest thing, as the lines are blurred when working with family members and often feelings are hurt when someone takes things personally. We always must remember that this is business and not personal. Effective communication also extends to your customers—be responsive to their needs and feedback to build strong relationships.

Appreciate

Show appreciation for your family members and employees. Recognize and acknowledge their hard work, dedication, and contributions to

the business. Celebrate milestones and successes together, whether it's a long-term employee's anniversary or a well-executed catering event. We also celebrate birthdays and employee of the month, and when clients shout out an employee, we celebrate that too. These acts of appreciation go a long way when done in a genuine way. The family dynamic in our company stretches throughout our team.

A culture of appreciation boosts morale, motivates your team, and fosters a positive work environment. Who wouldn't want that?

Trust

Trust is the secret sauce and truly the foundation of what makes our family business run smoothly. You've got to trust in each other's skills, dedication, and choices. Skip the micromanaging—let your family and team own their tasks. Each person, whether they are family or not, needs to stay in their lanes and do what they do best. As we always say, it takes a village to accomplish what we do, and each person is integral in making the magic happen. Trusting each other's decisions builds confidence and gives everyone the power to rock their roles. Plus, it sets a great example for building trust with your customers, and that's a big deal in the catering world.

Embrace strengths

Speaking of staying in your lane, let's talk about playing to your strengths here. Every family member and team member brings unique strengths to the table. Identify and leverage these strengths to enhance the overall business. If one family member is



“Running a family catering business in today’s ever-changing market is all about finding that sweet spot between sticking to tradition and embracing innovation.”

excellent at culinary creativity (that would be me), while another excels in business management (and that would be Jeffrey), allocate roles accordingly. Encourage professional development to further enhance individual strengths. Education is huge and that is why we invest in learning from the best in the business at conferences

like [Catersource + The Special Event](#). We are uber-focused on everyone’s growth—help each other and your team to get even better at what they’re already great at. By embracing and making the most of each person’s talents, you’ll create a well-rounded and capable team.

Respect

Respect is non-negotiable in a family business. Treat each family member, employee, and customer with respect and courtesy. Cultivate a culture of respect by valuing diverse perspectives and opinions *and* listening to them all. Ensure that disputes are resolved respectfully and professionally.

By following these “CATER” principles—communicate effectively, appreciate your team, trust each other, embrace individual strengths, and always show respect—you can nurture a thriving family business that combines tradition with innovation, remains adaptable to changing customer preferences, and fosters a supportive and harmonious work environment.

Where tradition meets innovation

With Marcia at the helm, it’s important that we focus on preserving tradition. Our business is deeply rooted in traditions that contribute to our uniqueness and charm. Recipes handed down through generations of our family as well as signature dishes that my mom has been making for decades have become the hallmark of the business. Having said that, we take those special heirloom recipes and turn them upside down, adding a more modern approach to each item while holding onto the integrity of each dish. Maintaining these elements helps to create a consistent experience and cultivates a loyal customer base that values nostalgia and familiarity, but also appreciates how we are changing with the times.

While tradition is important, our company has been growing fast,

See Robin Selden LIVE!

You can see **Robin Selden** live and in-person at **Catersource + The Special Event**, February 12-15 in Austin, TX during the following sessions:

- **Feasts & Fetes: A Savvy Guide to Mastering Corporate Event Planning & Catering Collaborations**
- **Sip, Savor, and Slice: Crafting Unforgettable Tastings for Wedding Catering**
- **DICED Competition**

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and we've embraced and adapted innovation into our business. As I've said before, we must adapt to the changing preferences of today's consumers to stay current and grow. This involves infusing innovative ideas into every aspect of the business. This goes from menu design to customer engagement: integrating new technologies, experimenting with cool new ingredients and equipment, and offering creative presentation styles that have elevated our brand in so many ways and captured the attention of a broader audience.

As younger family members step into leadership roles, their unique perspectives can reshape the business. When I began working with my mom, she was still handwriting all her client proposals, which were gorgeous to receive, but the time involved in that customization was insane. Our compromise is now to send handwritten notes to all clients after their events, which really is a special touch. The next generation expects a business that is not only financially successful but also socially and environmentally responsible. They bring fresh ideas, tech-savviness, and a keen awareness of current trends which we embrace. Concepts such as sustainable sourcing, reduced food waste, and ethical practices resonate deeply with modern consumers and can be key drivers of success. Thankfully that has always been a focus of ours since the business began, as Marcia always says: "We need to take care of the earth for the future generations." Essentially, she's

always thinking of her grandchildren and their kids.

Some of the strategies that are dear to my heart are making sure to keep the essence of our family recipes but constantly experimenting and doing research and development to create new items both on the culinary side as well as in our liquid kitchen and for our vegan brand, Naked Fig Catering. Our end goal is to come up with offerings that are creative, beautiful to look at, and obviously delicious, as well as interactive and experiential. This keeps us current and modern.

It's also very important to me that we continue to establish a strong online presence through our social media platforms. We need to have a user-friendly website and put out engaging content to help attract younger clients. Sharing behind-the-scenes glimpses, cooking tutorials, and client testimonials can build a sense of community as well as show that we are growing with the times.

Running a family catering business in today's ever-changing market is all about finding that sweet spot between sticking to tradition and embracing innovation. The next generation brings their own ideas and expectations into the mix, and it's a big part of moving your company forward while keeping things fresh. By mixing our family's time-honored values with some modern strategies, your catering company can keep team members and customers happy, attract new ones, and chart a successful course into the future, building a legacy. 



Robin Selden is the Managing Partner & Executive Chef of Marcia Selden Catering & Events and Naked Fig Catering, where she oversees the culinary and marketing operations for her family's multimillion-dollar company. In October 2019, Robin was honored to be named to the BizBash1000 celebrating the top 1,000 event professionals in the USA in 2019 and to the BizBash 500 celebrating the top 500 event professionals in 2020 in the United States. Selden is in the President's Council as a past President of the International Caterers Association and won their Chef of the Year award. She's a past Innovative Chef of the Year and a current Ambassador Chef for the Greenwich Wine & Food Festival.



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THE MASTER OF HER Craft

Culinary Crafts' founder Mary Crafts is this year's recipient of the Michael Roman Lifetime Achievement award

By Amber Kispert



(Opposite page) Mary Crafts, founder of Culinary Crafts, is this year's recipient of the Michael Roman Lifetime Achievement Award. Here she participates in one of Culinary Crafts' Chef Dinners, which allows chefs to put their talent and training on display in front of guests. Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts

The Culinary Crafts team frequently comes together for family and friend dinners in order to try out new ideas. Shown is the first dinner following Mary Crafts' retirement. Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts

You might say Mary Crafts' legacy in the catering industry was pre-destined.

"I had a dream one night of how to be a caterer," Crafts told *Catersource*. "In that dream I saw all these catering vans lined up and how beautiful they looked with our logo. I woke up the next morning and I knew just what to do, and I proceeded to do it and stuck to it."

Now, 40 years later Culinary Crafts has grown to become one of Utah's most awarded luxury caterers, and Crafts is the recipient of *Catersource*'s 2024 Michael Roman Lifetime Achievement Award—all thanks to a dream.

"If you don't dream it," says Crafts, "you can't create it."

Crafts will be recognized on February 15th in Austin, TX during [Catersource + The Special Event](#).

"After retiring, there's a constant fear that people don't want to talk to you or that you're no longer relevant," she says, "but this honor really said to me that it's a legacy I've created."

Humble beginnings

We already know that Crafts' path to the catering industry stemmed from a simple dream, but the journey was anything but simple.

"I had \$150 to my name," says Crafts. "Our car had been repossessed. We were losing our condo because of a non-payment of the mortgage. I didn't really even know where our next meal was coming from. We were on welfare."



Smoked salmon duxelle with preserved lemon on chilled watermelon radish. Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts



Crafts had a degree in social work, but she was looking for something where she could spend time with her children (Ryan, Kaleb, and Meagan).

"I think I was dragged kicking and screaming down the road of entrepreneurship. It wasn't what I ever thought I would do. Even though my dad was an entrepreneur and had several businesses, I was really set on having the best stay-at-home mom life," she says.

Eventually, Crafts started selling Avon door-to-door (with her children in tow), which led to selling breads and cookies, which eventually led to birthday parties.

"I would organize the party, play all the games, send the invitations out," she says. "I even dressed up like a clown, and I did all of that for \$50."

"All of the moms just sat on the sidelines and watched me, and I think they thought I was probably quite silly in that costume, but the kids loved me. When it's your company, you're willing to do whatever it takes to make it a success."

Crafts continued to grow her client base and expand beyond children's birthday parties thanks to what she dubbed "catering Tupperware parties" where she would host events at clients' houses and showcase what catering truly could be.

**“If you don’t
dream it, you can’t
create it.”**

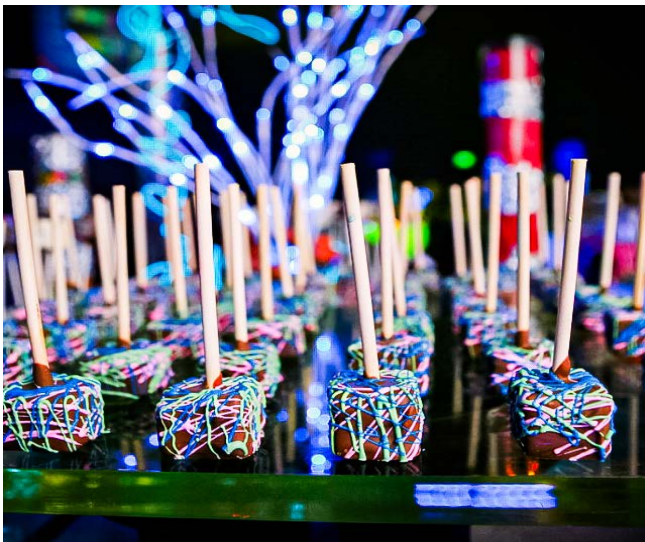
A roaring '20s themed corporate party.
Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts



What Mary Crafts describes as “stuffed mushrooms reimagined” or “next generation mushrooms.” Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts



A salad comprised of fried lotus leaves, edible flowers, and duck breast. Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts



Before cake pops were trending, Culinary Crafts was serving chocolate-dipped homemade marshmallows. Photo courtesy Pepper Nix Photography



Culinary Crafts is always on the hunt for unique vessels. Here a salad comprised of housemade orange rolls on a bed of Asian salad is served in a disposable orb. Photo courtesy Pepper Nix Photography

A caramelized honeycomb. Photo courtesy Heather Nix Photography

“I would bring all the food and I would talk to them about what catering was because in our town in Utah, many people didn’t even know what a caterer was and what they could do for them,” says Crafts. “At that time, catering was a little six-inch plate that you would pick up off a table; there would be a little butter mint, a nut cup, and a little chicken salad sandwich, and I just knew there had to be something else, there had to be a better way. I was able to offer them something more than the crazy little six-inch plate of nothing.”

Being a trendsetter

In the early days, Culinary Crafts was considered a major trendsetter in the area because she was doing things

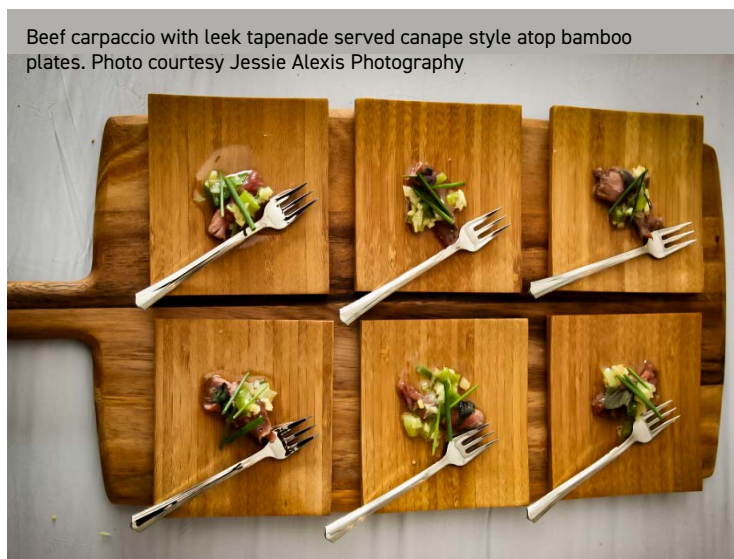
that nobody had ever seen before: chocolate fountains, elaborate dessert displays, elevated buffets, gourmet cupcakes, and even French macarons. These ideas may not seem that innovative now, but this was back in the late ‘90s and early 2000s. Culinary Crafts became so well known that they were even hired to cater the *Sports Illustrated* party as part of the 2002 Olympic Games.

“I wanted to be as innovative and creative as I possibly could,” Crafts says, “and that’s what really kind of put us on the map. We were discovering all sorts of different things: unique serving pieces, different ways to do stations, ways to not have chafing dishes all lined up on the buffet.

“It was a different adventure all the time, but my chefs, they had a love-hate relationship with me; they loved me because I was so creative and I was so fun, but they hated



ed vanilla cake (stacked naked style) topped with
served as centerpieces during an event. Photo courtesy
n Photography



Beef carpaccio with leek tapenade served canape style atop bamboo
plates. Photo courtesy Jessie Alexis Photography



Mini tacos (pulled pork and mango salsa) served in lime
boats accompanied by margaritas served in miniature
tequila bottles. Photo courtesy Pepper Nix Photography

the fact that I was so creative, and every day brought new menus and recipes and they'd have to start all over again perfecting things."

While magazines definitely offered some inspiration, the showcased ideas were already trendy by the time she read them, so Crafts relied on traveling the world and her own background to help Culinary Crafts innovate.

"You can take any recipe and recreate it differently simply by the presentation," she says. "It could be the same food, but it's presented very differently with perhaps a different flavor or a different taste in it."

Crafts eventually took her culinary prowess to the masses through her PBS cooking shows.

"I was Utah's Martha Stewart," she jokes.

Crafting a meaningful life

In reflecting back on her career, Crafts attributes a lot of her success to fear. Fear of failing. Fear of not delivering for her clients. Fear of being forgotten.

"I felt like I lived my entire life in fear, and I was always afraid that I wasn't enough, which to be honest, is what made me such a great caterer," she says. "I was always there. I would never let anyone down. Whatever the client needed, I was there or made sure someone else was. I was approaching everything from this fear-based lifestyle. It wasn't until I was 50, and we're talking now 20 years of living and catering from that lifestyle, that I really became aware that catering gave me the opportunity for so much more. I was able to step out of living a fear-based life and



Clockwise from opposite page:
Culinary Crafts is known for hosting events in unique locations, such as this lavender field. Photo courtesy Kristina Curtis Photography; Culinary Crafts essentially put the Utah catering scene on the map. Here Mary Crafts poses with Visit Salt Lake City. Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts; Culinary Crafts were awarded five CATIE awards in 2019. Here Mary Crafts poses with her sons Ryan (right) and Caleb (left). Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts



**“When it’s
your company,
you’re willing to
do whatever it
takes to make
it a success.**

Continued on page 22

instead I was able to learn how to serve myself and others from love; and when it became no longer out of fear, but when it became out of love, my clients felt the difference, and so did our crew.”

For Crafts, she attributes a lot of her success to her strong sense of integrity.

“I knew that the strongest tool I had in my toolbelt was my integrity,” she says. “People want to do business with people they trust.”

The caveat for getting into catering may have been to spend more time with her children, but Crafts admits that it isn’t the journey she ultimately ended up taking.

“When you start into this, you think you’re going to be your own boss and that you can call your own hours,” she says, “and it’s the one thing that I caution anyone about; if that’s why you’re going into this, run as fast as you can because it doesn’t take long for it to take over your life and it truly is where the buck stops. If you’re going to make a success of it, the bottom line does start with you and stop with you, and I lived my life that way.”

Crafts retired from Culinary Crafts just over five years ago, but she has since embarked on several new adventures: she wrote a book, she climbed Mount Kilimanjaro, she started a podcast, and she started a new consulting business.

“I feel like I loved every single day of my career, but it was time to turn the page,” she says. “I knew I had retired from Culinary Crafts, but I certainly didn’t want to retire from life. The thing I learned about climbing the summit is that it’s never just one. There’s always another one out in front of me.”

Culinary Crafts now rests in the very capable hands of Crafts’ three children, who are more than up to the task of continuing her legacy.

“They were a natural place for me to look, to pass on this legacy to,” she says. “They are heads and shoulders above where I was at their age, and probably heads and shoulders above where I ever was in business, and I love that.”

So, what’s next for Crafts? For starters, she’ll be traveling to Ireland this spring to marry her longtime partner, John; and then, who knows?

“My biggest piece of advice to those who are building their company or to those who have built one is to never forget that our relationships are the only thing we end up with, so we should do our very best to keep them first place in our life.” 



Celebrate with Mary Crafts and this year's Leadership Award recipients on February 15th, 2024 during the annual Awards Ceremony. Photo courtesy Austen Diamond

It's Time to Celebrate

Join us in celebrating this year's Leadership Award recipients at our annual Awards Ceremony on Thursday, February 15th at 5:30 p.m. on the Keynote Stage.

Considered by many to be the Oscars night of the events and catering industry, during the [Awards Ceremony](#) the ACE, Gala, and CATIE awards are bestowed upon the best of the best in our industry. Cheer on the nominees and applaud award recipients as they take the stage to accept our industry's highest honors! With the inclusion of lifetime achievement and volunteerism awards, this will be an unforgettable evening.

Congratulations to this year's winners and we look forward to celebrating with everyone this February!



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State of the Industry – The Work Environment

2023 has been a year of stability for many caterers across the country. After the backlog of postponed events and pent-up longing for in-person celebrations last year, demand for catering has returned to resemble pre-pandemic levels.

Many caterers are cautiously optimistic about the prospects for 2024, anticipating modest growth. Hiring is still difficult with unemployment in the U.S. under 4%; however, finding talent and filling open positions in our industry is easier now than it was in 2022. Catering companies are now shifting toward more emphasis on retaining team members as opposed to attracting new employees, and employee retention starts with the work environment.

The work environment consists of the physical spaces in which people work and the people they work with. It encompasses the terms in which people agree to do their job with elements like compensation, benefits, and work schedules. Finally, it also includes the culture of the organization and how people are treated. It has a direct impact on

“employee wellbeing,” a term that continues to come up across all industries and is at the forefront when making decisions about the work environment. Together this forms a holistic approach to serving team members to ensure they can show up as their best selves and find fulfillment in their lives both personally and professionally. To be intentional about creating a great work environment and mindful about employee wellbeing, caterers should start by focusing on three things:

1. Compensation, perks, & benefits

It’s important to remember that simply paying people more is not an effective long term retention strategy. Companies who go down this path get caught in a constant battle of having to increase wages to keep team members because they have attracted employees who put this as the highest priority and are likely to leave if they can find another company who will pay them a little bit more. Typical benefits have not always been standard in the catering industry, and it can make up a significant portion of an overall compensation package. More caterers than ever are

offering health insurance to their team members, many offer a match on their retirement plans, and paid time off is being mandated in many states. In some cases, these benefits are even available for part-time team members.

In addition to these standard benefits, companies are finding more creative ways to build compensation packages with a variety of perks that support the culture they are creating, such as leadership development classes, gym memberships, wellness credits, access to therapists, free lunches, dining out expenses, charitable match contributions, childcare, and homebuying assistance. As you evaluate your offerings, think about your core values as a company and how you can ensure they are aligned with the perks you offer. If sustainability is a value in your organization, then passes for public transportation or an EV charging station may make sense. If balance is a value you want to highlight, you may look at your maternity/paternity leave policy, or you may think about closing the company on certain days or even offering an employee vacation so everyone can get a break. Every team is unique, so the point is to put energy into areas that will have the biggest impact on your team. When done

well, it enables companies to retain and attract people that appreciate the values of the organization and what it has to offer.

2. Physical space

It can be efficient to produce a large volume out of a relatively small space; however, at some point it can limit the potential for a company to grow. When team members are working on top of each other and can't find what they need because it's buried under stacks of supplies, it creates frustration and can lead to disengagement. Many caterers are looking at expansion plans to build capacity and at the same time spark morale among team members. Getting team members who work in these spaces involved in this process is key to getting it right and creating an environment that feels like their own. They have opinions and expertise on how things should be set up, organized, decorated, and laid out, so it only makes sense to ask them for their feedback and incorporate that into the planning. When we moved into our new location at Footers, our team helped design the workflow of the kitchen, physically painted their own offices so they could personalize them, and took ownership of planting an herb garden that they maintain and utilize.

3. Flexible & remote work

Caterers are getting more requests than ever for remote work and flexible work schedules. A challenge in our industry, though, is that not everyone has a job that they can do remotely. While salespeople and administrative personnel can do much of their job away from the office, operations team members must be physically present to do their job. This dynamic needs to be handled carefully to avoid resentment and a possible divide among departments. Policies must be communicated

with all team members, and in these situations it's critical that everyone has a clear understanding of what other jobs entail.

Although they can't work remotely, there are caterers experimenting with flexible schedules for their operations personnel. Companies create two to three different shifts each day that employees can request or sign up for in the kitchen or warehouse, with some team members coming in first thing in the morning and others choosing to work later into the day. While it creates a little more complexity for managers, it appeals to those who prefer different schedules.

For those employees that can do their jobs remotely, managing them is something that leaders are having to get accustomed to. The adage "if I can't see you, then you're not working" is a roadblock that continues to come up. Leaders must manage performance, not hours. When constructing remote work schedules, it's important to set performance metrics that need to be met. People want to know what success looks like, so it's up to leaders to be crystal clear on what those expectations are, then let their people figure out how to get there.

With remote work a level of trust must also be established. Some companies prefer for this to be earned over time and others are willing to grant flexibility right away

with the understanding that it may be taken away if trust is broken.

Work environment and employee wellbeing are currently a high priority for caterers across the country because when done well, it leads to more desirable workplaces, higher job satisfaction, reduced turnover, and increased productivity. By evaluating perks and benefits, the physical space in which a team works, and policies on flexible schedules, companies can begin to create an intentional strategy around the employee experience and the overall work environment. **CS**

See Anthony Lambatos LIVE!

You can see **Anthony Lambatos** live and in-person at **Catersource + The Special Event, February 12-15 in Austin, TX** during the following sessions:

- Lower Costs, Higher Profits: Pricing in 2024
- Building Relationships at Work
- Employee Well Being

Visit <https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/> for all the details.



Anthony Lambatos grew up in the catering business working for his father and founder of **Footers Catering** in Denver, Colorado. Anthony and his wife, April, purchased the business in 2010 and have successfully made the transition to a second-generation family business. They recently moved Footers Catering into a new facility that will also house their newest venture—an event center called **Social Capitol**. Anthony is passionate about helping other companies create great places to work and inspiring people with heart leadership and does that through his sister company **MIBE** (acronym for make it better everyday).

A GALA EVENT

Swan song finale
coursed dinner stuns

(Opposite page) With sweeping views, Benaroya Hall's circular Samuel & Althea Stroum Grand Lobby was home to the main event: a seated, coursed dinner for the Leading Caterers of America Executive Summit. DSquared Hospitality are the exclusive partners for all food and beverage services at Benaroya Hall.



Guests were invited into the S. Mark Taper Foundation Auditorium of the renowned Benaroya Hall, home of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, for a short recital, pre-dinner.

On a Sunday evening in early November, a pre-conference cocktail party found the Leading Caterers of America atop the Russell Investments Center SkyGarden in downtown Seattle, with a panoramic view of the waterfront and Mount Rainier like a ghost in distant view.

Hosted by DSquared Hospitality/Tuxedos and Tennis Shoes Catering and Lisa Dupar Catering, it was a drink and a delicious bite or three, a chance to catch up, and then many were off with dinner plans before the start of a two-day executive summit.

Monday night found caterers dressed head to toe in flannel and band t-shirts, bobbing their heads to grunge-style Seattle tunes while they toured a commissary kitchen and took selfies with stilt walkers dressed as the Space Needle (for more on that event, turn to our sister publication, *Special Events*, starting on page 110).

So, for the final event of a three-event stretch, it was time to pull out the glitter and glam Seattle-style, the “tuxedos and tennis shoes” as it were, with a seated dinner at Seattle’s sumptuous Benaroya Hall.

One of DSquared Hospitality’s exclusive venues and home to the internationally acclaimed and Grammy Award-winning Seattle Symphony Orchestra, the hall sparkles with the beauty of Dale Chihuly chandeliers, and hosts a seriously pretty promenade overlooking the Grand Lobby, where dinner was set for about 150 people.

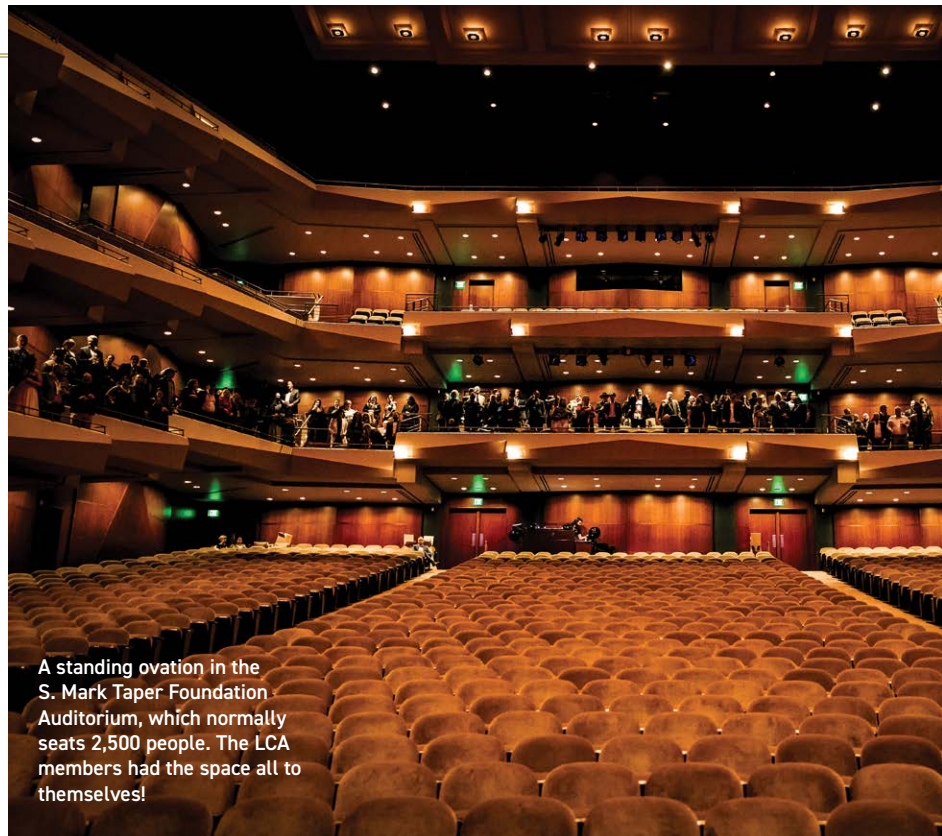
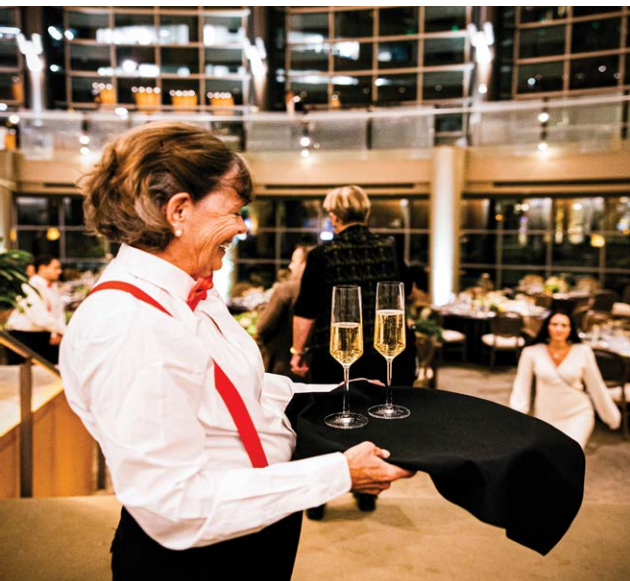
Pre-event cocktails and small bites were served, then a surprise! All imbibers were given “sippy cups” to pour their cocktails into and then were led into the acoustically optimized auditorium for a short program. Despite being seated in the “wayback” of the auditorium, the sound carried magnificently.

But more surprises awaited the group as they took their seats and enjoyed a stellar menu that once again fully opens the argument that *caterers deserve a place within the James Beard Awards!* With a musical interlude between courses, and light music throughout that allowed for conversation among friends and newly-formed connections, each course outdid the next with a stunning end—an interactive apple dessert from Lisa Dupar Catering that one had to crack with a spoon to open.

Finally, as caterers are such gracious people, a nod and applause for those behind the scenes, the servers, bartenders, chefs, and other staff who made the event flawless by their presence. 

Continued on page 30

Welcome beverages upon arrival.



A standing ovation in the S. Mark Taper Foundation Auditorium, which normally seats 2,500 people. The LCA members had the space all to themselves!



Stunning tableset with the menu printed upon the napkins.



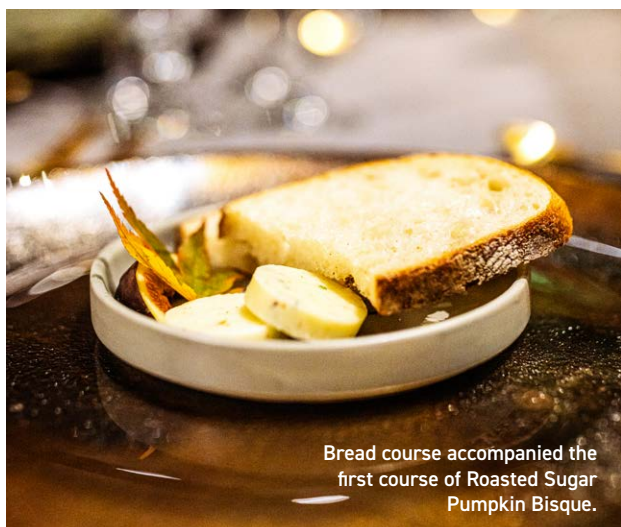
Passed appetizers during the cocktail hour included this Dungeness Crab Pierogi with Ponzu Dipping Sauce from Tuxedos & Tennis Shoes, a DSquared Hospitality Company.



Guests were treated to original music in between courses by vocalist Rich Gray, including his "Sweetness of Seattle."



Vegan Apple Pear Crisp with Hazelnut Oat Streusel & Spiced Coconut Cream (GF/V) was one dessert option.



Bread course accompanied the first course of Roasted Sugar Pumpkin Bisque.



The second course (GF) was Slow Cooked Wild Salmon with Late Harvest Corn Cream Sauce, Celeriac-Parsnip Puree and Roasted Brassicas.



An alternate second course (GF/V) offered Grilled Eggplant & Heirloom Tomato Terrine with Arugula Pesto, Tomato Pomodoro Sauce and Micro Salad.



(Upper left & right) This incredible dessert from Lisa Dupar Catering was interactive: “How ‘Bout Them Apples” offered a chocolate exterior that when cracked, revealed an interior filled with vanilla apple mousse and spiced apple compote.



Trip Wheeler of SB Value receives wine service.

Continued on page 32



As guests below applauded the back of house staff, they too raised a glass to the people they'd served all evening, knowing we're all in the same business: hospitality.

Event sponsors included

Venue: Benaroya Hall | @benaroyahall

Musical Pairings: Rich Gray with Gennavieve Smith, Levi Redmill, Carolyn Scherbinske, Sophie Sen, and Theo Blackmun from @cornishcollegeofthearts | @guywithsongs

Soft Seating: Vintage Ambiance | @vintageambiance

Rentals: CORT Party Rental | @cortpartyrental

Linens & Chargers: BBJ La Tavola | @bbjlatavola

Decor: Seattle Event Décor | @seattleeventdecor

Accent Lighting: Bellevue Lighting | @bellevuelighting

Signage: Epoch Design Co. | @epochdesign.co

360 Photo Booth: 1000 Words Events | @1000words_wa

Double R Ranch Signature Tenderloin: Double R Ranch | @snakeriverfarms

Wine: Mark Ryan Winery | @mark_ryan_winery

Coffee Service: Cafe Lusso Coffee Roasters

Chocolate: Barry Callebaut for Cacao Barry | @cacaobarryofficial

Transportation: Butler Seattle | @butlerseattle

Florals: C Franklin Design | @cfranklindesign

Event Photography: Mandee Rae Photography | @mandeerae

Busker: Evan Daley | @evandaley

Singer: Luke Bob Robinson | @lukebobrobinson

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We're Ready Take on Texas



A photograph of the Austin skyline at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, pink, and purple. The city lights are visible, and the buildings are reflected in the water in the foreground. The text 'to' and 'as' are visible on the left side of the image.

to
as

Catersource + The Special Event head to Austin, TX February 12–15

They say everything is bigger in Texas, and that's exactly what Catersource + The Special Event hope to accomplish when they roll into Austin, TX, February 12–15.

Join Catersource + The Special Event, as we celebrate the next chapter of the catering and events industry!

This year will be bigger and better with several additions, including the return of Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ and the Lunch & Learn, as well as the new Fast Chats. Get ready to grow as we celebrate the wonderful world of catering and events!

Don't miss a moment! Arrive Monday morning 2/12, depart Friday morning 2/16

When making your travel arrangements, plan to arrive by Monday morning so that you can enjoy the entire Catersource + The Special Event experience!

Kick off your week right with our **Taste of Austin** afternoon venue tour, where we'll visit a few of Austin's gems. Next, connect with friends and colleagues at our **Connect Social** opening welcome reception, starting at 7:30 p.m. End your week by joining us at the **Closing Night Celebration** at Superstition. In between, you won't want to miss a thing.

Here's a look at all that will be offered!

Register Now!

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He's back!

Michael Cerbelli will make his triumphant return to the Catersource + The Special Event stage after a two-year hiatus.

Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ provides a unique opportunity for attendees to experience and vet potential vendors and performers before booking them. The entertainment-packed show gives attendees access to a list of new and unique event vendors that they can immediately book.

Watch unbelievable performances and experience live event activations first-hand. The live performances, technology, innovative ideas, and industry secrets from The Hot List™ will equip attendees to energize and modernize their events for 2024 and beyond.

Every attendee of Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ will receive access to a curated list of "MC APPROVED" vendors and their contact information.

Catersource + The Special Event is delighted to welcome Cerbelli back to the stage!

See Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ LIVE

Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ will energize the final day of the 2024 Catersource + The Special Event conference and tradeshow on Thursday morning, February 15 at 8:00 a.m. This is your chance to levitate your events and uncover top vendors and performers first-hand, preparing you for unforgettable events in 2024 and beyond. The Closing General Session is included in the purchase of any pass, from All Access to tradeshow only.

“This is your chance to levitate your events!”

Featured Sessions



Elevate Your Catering Sales & Management Through Inclusive Practices)

8:30 a.m. Tuesday, February 13

Speaker: Cathy O'Connell



Oh, My! What's All This AI?

2:30 p.m. Wednesday, February 14

Speaker: Chip Dizard



A Candid (and Very Important) Conversation about Numbers

1:00 p.m. Wednesday, February 14

Speakers: Chris Sanchez and Dianna Chamberlin



Flavors of the Soul: A Fusion Feast

4:15 p.m. Tuesday, February 13

Speakers: Jolie Oree-Bailey and Christopher Taylor



Liquid Nitrogen: How to WOW the Crowd

2:30 p.m. Tuesday, February 13

Speaker: Phuoc Vo



Warehouse 101 – The Unsung Heroes of Catering

1:45 p.m. Tuesday, February 13

Speaker: Bryan Neuschafer



How to Curate a Successful Tasting Experience for Your Clients

2:30 p.m. Wednesday, February 14

Speakers: Dan Joseph, Trish Vogel, and Charles Haracz



Setting the Stage for Event Serendipity

Speaker: David Adler





***Bridging the Gap
between Sales &
Culinary – How to
Collaborate to Create
a Win-Win for Both
Departments***

**3:00 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speakers: David
Anderson and Allie
Piazza**



***David Merrell &
Susie Perelman
Present: Current
Trends in the Event
Industry***

**Speakers: David
Merrell and Susie
Perelman**



***Barbecue Elevated!
Taking Barbecue to
the Next Level***

**10:00 a.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speaker: Duce
Raymond**



***Avantgarden! Vegan
& Vegetarian Cuisine***

**1:00 p.m. Thursday,
February 15**

**Speaker: Eric
Centeno**



***Better the Second
Time Around: Great
Uses for Leftovers***

**2:00 p.m. Thursday,
February 15**

**Speakers: Hunter Hunt
and Robert Mendoza**



***Fast Chat: Awkward
Networking – Making
Relationships Count***

**10:30 a.m. Wednesday,
February 14**

Speaker: Jen Sulak



***Catering Survival
Guide: How to
Bridge the Gap &
Cultivate a Cohesive
FOH & BOH Team***

**1:45 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speakers: Jenny
Bast and Michele
Yanovich**



Evolution of Mocktails

**1:15 p.m. Wednesday,
February 14**

**Speakers: Jeriesha
Carter Johnson and
Andre Johnson**



Featured Sessions



**Texas Barbecue –
The Strateje
Fourteen Way –
Sides, Sauces &
Sweets**



**1:00 p.m. Wednesday,
February 14**

**Speakers: Keith Lord,
Greg Shapiro, and
Bryce Cherven**



**Buy, Build or
Rent? Creative
Solutions for Your
Ideal Commissary
Kitchen, Tasting
Room & Company
Headquarters**



**4:15 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speakers: Kevin
Lacassin, Jeremy
Brown, and John
Seroch**



**Business
Development - Myths,
Mysteries and Money
Makers**

**10:00 a.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

Speaker: Larry Frank



**Effectively
Communicating for
the Menu Your Client
Wants!**

**11:15 a.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speakers: Meredith
Vaux and Dave
Stratton**



**Menu Trends for
2024 & Beyond**

**4:15 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

Speaker: Rich Shank

**The New Catering
Buyer: Insights to
Help You Win More
Business**

**1:00 p.m. Thursday,
February 15**

Speaker: Rich Shank





**Culinary Influencer:
Unleashing the Flavorful
Potential of Social Media
for Chefs**

**3:00 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

Speaker: Keith Sarasin



**A Candid
Conversation with
Ron Ben-Israel**

**10:30 a.m. Thursday,
February 15**

**Speaker: Ron
Ben-Israel**



**Snatching Wellness
from the Jaws of
Wellness Culture**

**11:15 a.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speaker: Ryan
Crafts**



**Managing the Big 3
Cost Categories of
Catering & Events**

**3:00 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speaker: Sebastien
Centner**



**Thirty F&B Trends to
Watch for in 2024**

**1:00 p.m. Wednesday,
February 14**

**Speaker: Shannon
Boudreau**



**Experience Meets
Innovation – The
Ultimate Leadership
Team**

**3:00 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

**Speakers: Syd Sexton
and Borja Rosales**



**The Deck: Your Sales
Team's Best Friend**

**4:15 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**

Speaker: Tara Maxey



**Breaking Down the
Ops/Sales/Chef
Tensions to Increase
Profit**

**2:00 p.m. Thursday,
February 15**

**Speakers: Vanessa
Vass and Megan
Turbeville**



**How to Design for
the Senses**

**2:30 p.m.
Wednesday,
February 14**

**Speakers: Terrica
and Tiffany Rose
Goodyear**



Top notch culinary

If you hope to expand your culinary operations in 2024 and beyond, there is a terrific lineup of chef-forward classes available on the Culinary Experience stage (located in the conference area) and Culinary & Competition stage (on the tradeshow floor). Chefs will not only talk about their concepts, they will demonstrate them, too.

Gain access to trending recipes, learn the nuances of barbecue, get insight into the art of sous vide, uncover great uses for leftovers, and discover the exciting world of liquid nitrogen—these are just a few of the culinary classes you will experience.

For chefs, by chefs

Coming to Austin early? Experience the Art of Catering Food (AOCF), an event designed for chefs and taught by chefs. Over the course of two days (February 11–12) leading up to Catersource + The Special Event, you'll connect with experienced catering chefs sharing new culinary techniques, the latest trending ingredients, food pricing, and everything else you need to turn your menus into works of art. Turn to page 120 for more on this boutique event.

Certified Catering Consultants

Need a quick consultation about some aspect of your business? The Certified Catering Consultants (CCC) will offer free half-hour appointments on site to address your catering-related challenges, identify your highest value opportunities, and/or help you improve your business and ROI. The CCC team has been consulting with caterers for over 20 years and many of them ran businesses of their own—or still do! Head to rooms 11A/B to sign up for a free consultation during show hours.

Discover new ideas on the tradeshow floor

You'll be able to browse, learn from, taste samples, and buy from a plethora of trendsetting and relevant exhibitors, who are here to help you grow your business.

Additionally, the excitement of the **Closing General Session** with Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ will end the week on Thursday. We'll also be celebrating our amazing exhibitors on Wednesday morning when we hand out exhibitor awards during a **Brunch & Bubbly** celebration. Back on the tradeshow floor again this year is the **Hall Happy Hour** on Wednesday afternoon starting at 4:00 p.m.

Want to know how to build a beautiful tablescape incorporating lush florals? You'll want to be on the tradeshow floor at 11:00 a.m. on Wednesday. Join Michelle Howard, Matthew Crowe, and Colton Staver for a fun and interactive way to express your creativity during the annual **Tablescape Competition**. Four to six teams of four participants each will be tasked to create a fabulous tablescape with all the trimmings. In the fashion of a TV reality series, each team will be assigned a table and an overall client request. They will then have timed phases to design, choose products, and produce a tablescape. Tables will be available for photography afterward!

Finally, three Ignite stages bring more education of all stripes to the tradeshow floor. Join thought experts from across the industry as they present everything from state of the industry data crucial to your business building needs, to “ask me anything” style conversations, to creative ideas on how to set a table.

The chefs compete

Who doesn't love a good culinary competition? Watch DICED on **Wednesday, February 14 at 11:00 a.m.** to see chefs create the latest food trends right before your eyes (while they compete for a prize!). As with any *Chopped* style competition, the chefs won't know what they have to create for the judges until the lids come off of their mystery boxes. But here's a clue...it is Valentine's Day!



There will be plenty of chances to sample on the resource tradeshow floor, as well as during the culinary demonstrations this year. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Chef Christopher Taylor delivers a culinary demonstration in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



The team from Cru Catering demonstrated their *Seven Crazy Stations* during 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Justin Pasha delivers a cocktail demonstration in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Register Now!

New this year! Fast Chats

We're offering quick-hitting 30-minute chats this year where attendees can discuss targeted topics with industry experts. Topics range from technology to sustainability to marketing to operations. Have a little bit of time between appointments on the tradeshow floor or want to learn something quickly? Fast Chats on the Ignite stages are where it's at!

Lunch & Learn returns!

After a brief hiatus, Lunch & Learn is once again back during Catersource + The Special Event. Join Scott Frankel from Animatic Media for ***I Can Top That!— Event Mishap Stories & What We Can Learn from Them*** as he welcomes catering and event professionals to the stage, spinning their brutal truths of near misses, mishaps, and amazing recoveries during their events. Enjoy a delicious three-course themed lunch as you also hear how they overcame their trials and walked away with advice that they will share with the audience. A checklist of dos and don'ts (and a full belly) will be your parting takeaway!

Discover the data

Join industry data powerhouse Technomic during two sessions this year where they'll focus on their deep research: ***Menu Trends***

for 2024 & Beyond (Tuesday) and ***The New Catering Buyer: Insights to Help You Win More Business*** (Thursday).

The Wellness Lounge

Need some time to recharge your internal batteries? Head to the Wellness & Networking Lounge, where soothing music, beautiful scents, and comfortable seating awaits. This isn't a room for chatty interaction, but a place to reflect and recharge. This escape will also be the gathering spot for morning yoga sessions, a chance to mix your own essential oils, crystal consultations, and a lineup of wellness-centric sessions including ***Snatching Wellness from the Jaws of Wellness Culture*** (Tuesday), ***Let's Have a Talk in the Walk-in*** (Wednesday), and Charessa Sawyer's ***Event Therapy Lounge: Meditation & Self Care Strategies*** (Wednesday). Come relax, unwind, and breathe deeply before rejoining sessions and stepping onto the exhibit hall floor. Open Tuesday through Thursday during conference hours.

(Top right, next page) The Lunch & Learn will return after having been absent since 2020; (Bottom left) Charessa Sawyer will once again deliver her ***Event Therapy Lounge: Meditation & Self Care Strategies***. Photos courtesy WASIO Faces
(Below) At the Wellness & Networking Lounge, tranquility awaits. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



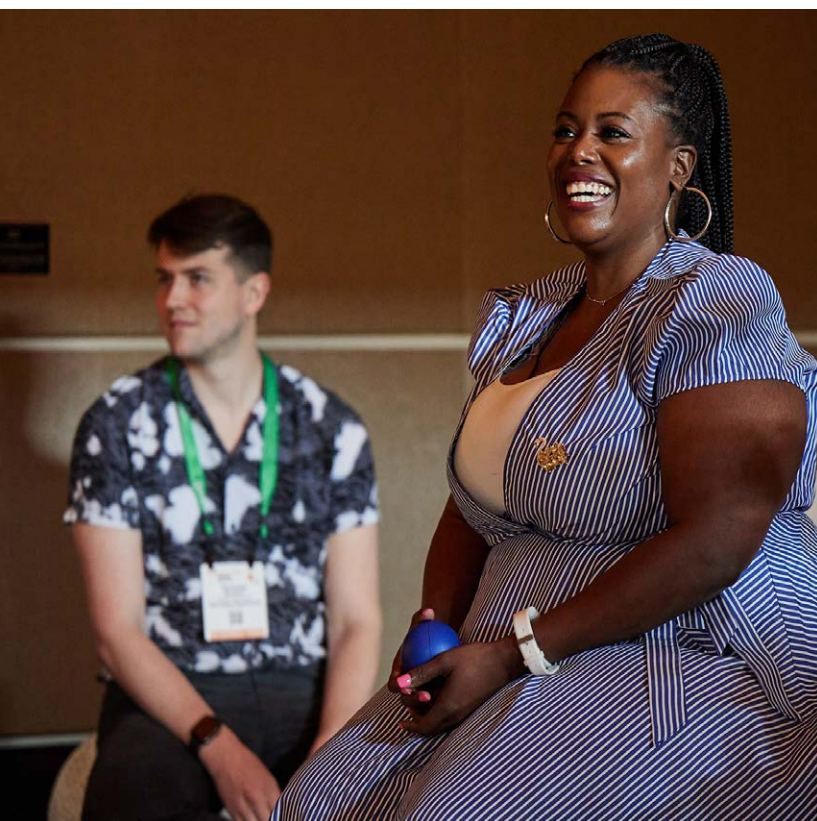


Get a taste of Austin

As part of the Catersource + The Special Event, we invite event professionals to join us on Monday afternoon for an exclusive “Taste of Austin” Venue Tour. Kick off your experience by exploring the eclectic vibes of Rainey Street and journey to the rustic allure of Driftwood—all in one unforgettable tour!

Savor delectable small bites that showcase Austin’s diverse culinary scene, paired with refreshing beverages to tantalize your taste buds. Enjoy a picturesque setting paired with curated bites and craft beverages that highlight the local flavors.

Embark on the journey that celebrates the essence of Austin’s food, music, and hospitality. Join us for the Taste of Austin Venue Tour filled with flavor, fun, and fantastic connections—the perfect start to your Catersource + The Special Event experience in Austin, TX!



Deviled eggs with fermented cabbage, smoked trout roe, and grated ham at Fixe Southern House. Photo courtesy Fixe Southern House

Register Now!



Industry accolades: award recipients

Each year, we honor industry leaders who we, at Catersource + The Special Event, feel have made a significant and positive impact on our industries.

Join us in celebrating recipients **Mary Crafts** (Michael Roman Lifetime Achievement award, turn to page 14 for our feature on Crafts); and **Rob Barber** (Special Events Gala Lifetime Achievement award, turn to page 92 for *Special Events* magazine's feature on Barber) at our annual **Awards Ceremony on Thursday, February 15** on the Keynote Stage, prior to the **Closing Night Celebration**.

We'll also be honoring the World Central Kitchen team, founded in 2010 by Chef Jose Andrés. World Central Kitchen (WCK) is a nonprofit organization that is first to the frontlines providing fresh meals in response to crises. Applying their model of quick action, leveraging local resources, and adapting in real time, WCK has served more than 300 million nourishing meals around the world. When disaster strikes, WCK's Relief Team mobilizes with the urgency of now to start cooking and serving meals to people in need. By partnering with organizations on the ground and activating a network of local restaurants, food trucks, or emergency kitchens, WCK serves comforting meals to survivors of disasters quickly and effectively. To support regional economies, WCK prioritizes purchasing local ingredients to cook with or distribute directly to families in need.

Additionally, you won't want to miss the surprise reveal of the recipient of this year's **Steve Kemble award**.

Catersource + The Special Event 2024 will also feature the annual **ACE, Gala, and ICA CATIE Awards**, which will be presented during the **Awards Ceremony**. Turn to page 52 to see this year's ACE Award nominees.

(Left) Rob Barber is this year's recipient of the Special Events Lifetime Achievement Award. (Above) Jason Collis, Chief Relief Officer, will be accepting the Richard Carbotti Award for Volunteerism on behalf of World Central Kitchen.



Mary Crafts is the recipient of this year's Michael Roman Lifetime Achievement Award. Photo courtesy Mary Crafts



It's the Oscars night of the events and catering industry when the Leadership, ACE, Gala and CATIE awards are bestowed upon the best of the best in our industry. Cheer on the nominees and applaud award recipients as they take the stage to accept our industry's highest honors! Photos courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Register Now!

Enchanting Evening Events



A living statue welcomes guests to the Closing Night Celebration in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Asiago and Sicilian arancini were served during the Closing Night Celebration in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Delectable desserts served during the Closing Night Celebration in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



This action station during the Closing Night Celebration truly came with some action. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



A burlesque show entertained guests during last year's Connect Live (now Connect Social) welcome reception. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Enchanting evening events

Every evening features a different venue and event theme, all developed to bring you the latest trends in a setting that also grants you the time and space to connect with friends, peers, and colleagues.

Monday, February 12 • Connect Social at Speakeasy

Chair: Lauren Kelly, Hello! TX

On Monday evening, kick off your week right by connecting with friends and colleagues at our **Connect Social** opening welcome reception. Immerse yourself in an ambiance that marries the free-spirited essence of bohemian culture with the vivid allure of electric lights. Wander through a maze of eclectic décor, where historic charm meets modern innovation in a celebration unlike any other. Electric bohemian isn't just an event; it's an immersive journey through the intersection of tradition and innovation.

Tuesday, February 13 • Opening Night Party at Brazos Hall

Chairs: Lindsey Ganther, Contigo Catering & Sarah Surprise, Whim Hospitality

Immerse yourself in a trendy showcase with food and beverage highlights that will change your menus during the **Opening Night Party**. Saddle up for an electrifying night at the Neon Cowboy Extravaganza, a dazzling event for event professionals. Get ready to step into a vibrant world where neon meets the Wild West, as Brazos Hall transforms into a haven for event enthusiasts. The Neon Cowboy theme promises a fusion of modern flair with a classic Texas twist, creating an atmosphere that's both edgy and full of southern charm.

Wednesday, February 14 • SEARCH Foundation's Annual Signature Event at Skybox on 6th

The can't-miss networking celebration to raise funds for our industry is back! Join the **SEARCH Foundation** for their **Annual Signature Event** and mingle with top industry professionals all while supporting friends and colleagues in crisis.

Not attending the SEARCH event? This is the perfect opportunity to hit the town with your teams and peers and enjoy a taste of Austin.

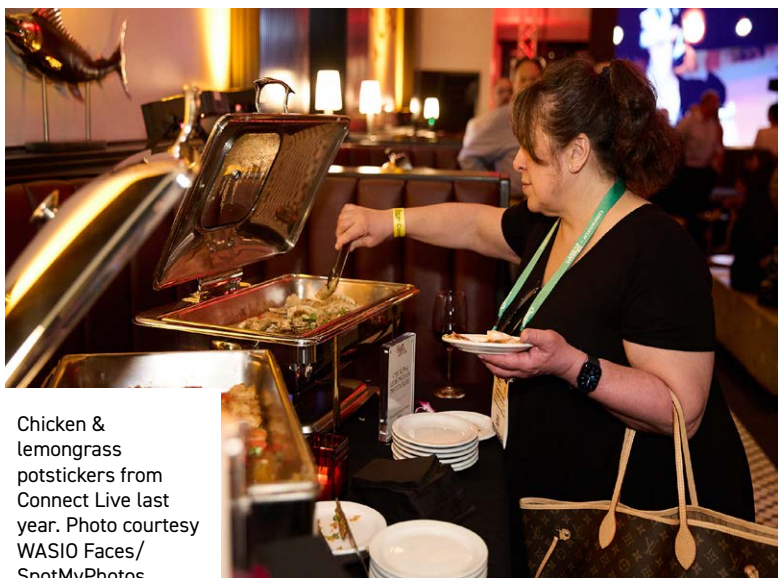
Here are some restaurants we recommend checking out:



A vintage bus was the perfect place for a photo op during the Opening Night Party in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Oysters (with a champagne mignonette) were served as part of Connect Live. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Chicken & lemongrass potstickers from Connect Live last year. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Schedule at a Glance

Monday

Taste of Austin

1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Connect Social at Speakeasy

7:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Tuesday

Conference education

8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Lunch & Learn

12:15 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.

Opening Night Party at Brazos Hall

7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Wednesday

Opening General Session

9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. (doors at 8:30 a.m.)

Tradeshow floor

10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

DICED competition

11:00 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

Conference education

10:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Hall Happy Hour

4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

SEARCH's Annual Signature Event at Skybox on 6th

8:00 p.m. to Midnight

Thursday

Closing General Session

8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Tradeshow floor

10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Brunch & Bubbly

10:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Conference education

10:30 a.m. to 2:45 p.m.

Tablescape Competition

11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

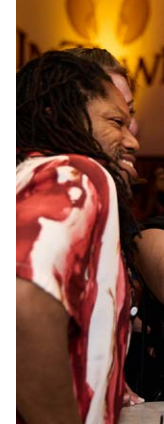
ACE/Gala/CATIE Awards

5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Closing Night Celebration at

Superstition

7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.



Register Now



1. **Franklin BBQ:** Perhaps Austin's most famed barbecue spot, the lines are long for a reason. Pitmaster Aaron Franklin is somewhat of a Texas barbecue legend, so this is the spot if you want to see what the barbecue scene is all about.
2. **Con Todo:** This popular taco truck by Chef Joseph Gomez highlights cuisine of the Rio Grande Valley (but is adamantly not Tex-Mex). Be sure to order your tacos "con todo"—with everything.
3. **Justine's Brasserie:** Justine's is a late-night dining spot known for its vibey nightlife and French cuisine favorites. A perfect spot to end the night.
4. **Odd Duck:** Chef-partner Bryce Gilmore provides a New American take on classic Texas fare, sourcing ingredients from local farms.
5. **Koriente:** Close to the Austin Convention Center, Koriente is a favorite Austin restaurant that serves a variety of pan-Asian dishes in a chill environment.

For more on Austin's food scene, turn to page 84 in the adjoining *Special Events* magazine to hear from Austin locals about what to expect.

Thursday, February 15 • Closing Night Celebration at Superstition

Chairs: Leslie LaSorsa, Crave Catering & Kristi DePew, Eclipse Event Co

Celebrate with colleagues amidst an entertainment-filled experience during the **Closing Night Celebration** as we wrap up a great week for our industry. Join us for an iridescent evening of wonder, where you will

There are plenty of opportunities to network during Catersource + The Special Event: from the evening events to the tradeshow floor to session pass times. Enjoy time with your peers in any of our conference networking spaces. Photos courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

experience a spectrum of culinary flavors, tantalizing entertainment, and dreamscape decor. Be prepared to tempt the taste buds with both new and conceptual culinary delicacies, as well as experience elevated entertainment that will leave you wanting more!

Associations & groups

Associations and groups (some of them new to the conferences) will be present at Catersource + The Special Event, many of which will also have booths on the tradeshow floor and/or in the conference area. Take the time to seek these people out and learn more! We are all in this together and hope to learn from each other.

Here is a look:

- **The Academic Event Professional**
- **AFWPI**
- **Certified Catering Consultants** (CCC)
- **International Caterers Association** (ICA)
- **International Caterers Association Educational Foundation** (ICAEF)
- **International Live Events Association** (ILEA)
- **Leading Caterers of America** (LCA)
- **Meeting Professionals International**
- **National Association of Catering & Events** (NACE)
- **The National Society Of Black Wedding and Event Professionals** (NSBWEP)
- **SEARCH Foundation**
- **Wedding International Professionals Association** (WIPA)

Networking opportunities

Beyond the evening events and Tuesday morning welcome gathering, there's plenty of time between sessions to say hello and move between the tradeshow floor and conference rooms. Most sessions allow 30 minutes pass time. Enjoy time with peers in any of our conference area networking spaces. Also, don't miss our **Hall Happy Hour** and the **Brunch & Bubbly** on the tradeshow floor.



Now!

AND THE NOMINEES ARE...

**Let's give a round of applause to this
year's ACE Award nominees!**

by Amber Kispert

Catersource magazine is delighted to announce the nominees for the 2024 ACE Awards, which will be bestowed during *Catersource + The Special Event* on February 15th in Austin, TX. *Special Events* magazine will also be handing out its Gala Awards. Turn to page 34 in the magazine for this year's nominees.

Without any further ado, please congratulate your 2024 ACE Awards nominees!

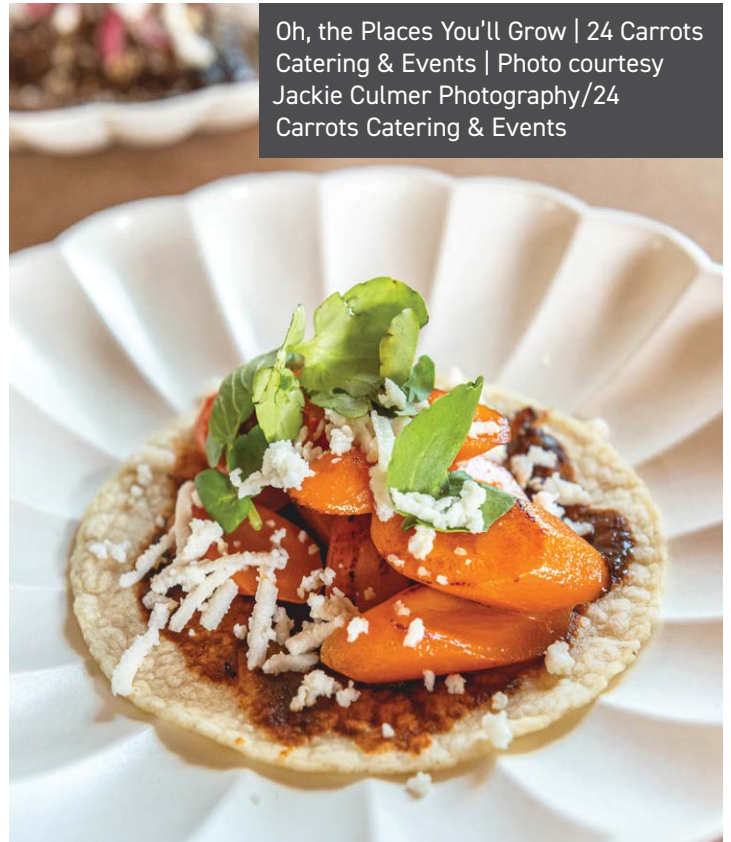
ACE
Achievement in Catered Events

BEST OFF-PREMISE CATERING FOR COMPANIES ABOVE \$2 MILLION ANNUAL REVENUE

Food for Thought | 24 Carrots Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Lorely Meza/24 Carrots Catering & Events



Oh, the Places You'll Grow | 24 Carrots Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Jackie Culmer Photography/24 Carrots Catering & Events



War Eagle! | Proof of the Pudding | Photo courtesy Eric & Jamie Photography

BEST OFF-PREMISE CATERING FOR COMPANIES UNDER \$2 MILLION ANNUAL REVENUE

50th Anniversary Celebration |
District Events & Catering | Photo
courtesy Joshua Aaron Photography



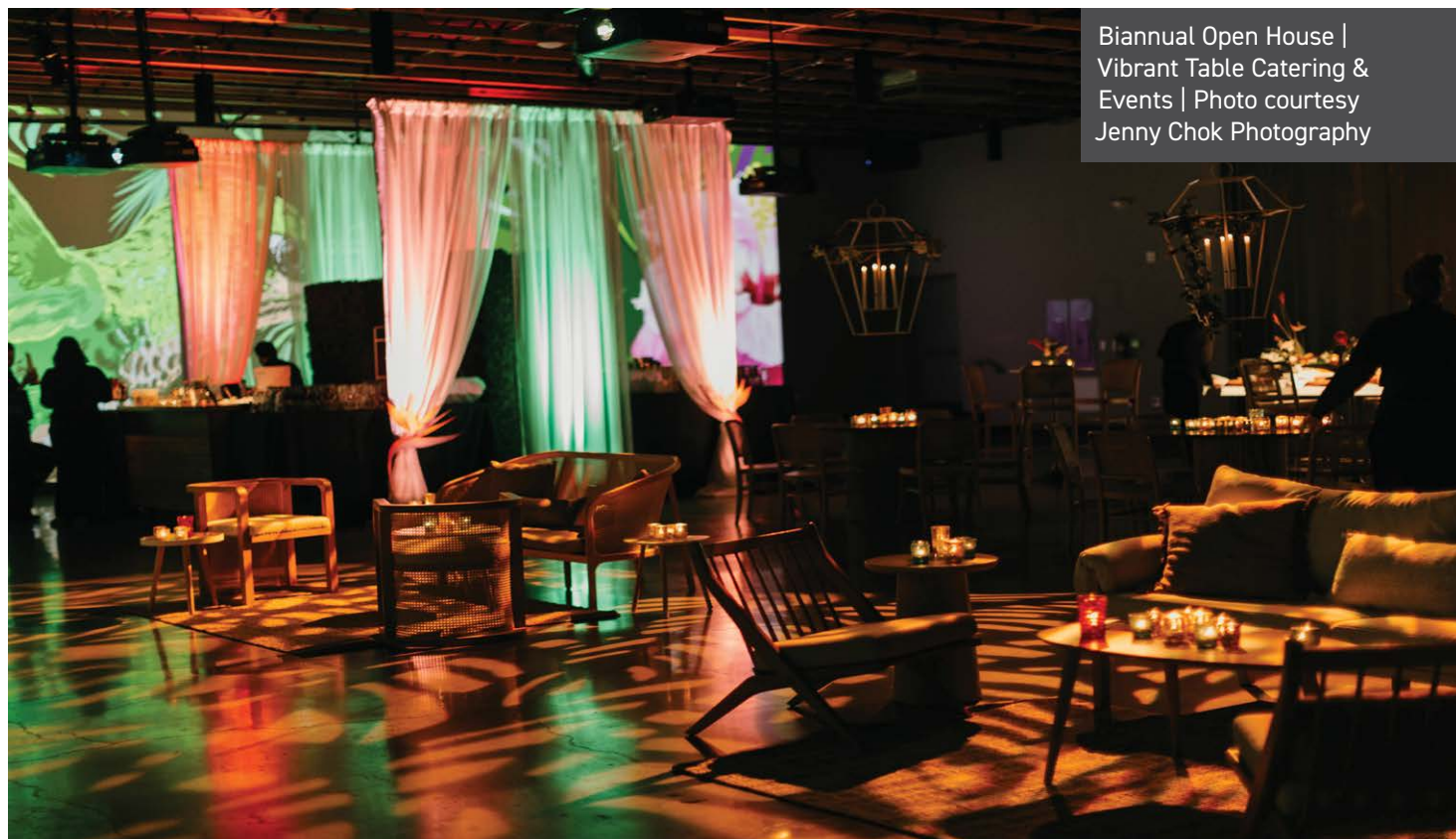
Last Minute Repast Reception |
Exquisite Delites Catering Company
| Photo courtesy Sandra Centeno



2023 Symphony Showhouse |
The Barlor OKC | Photo courtesy
Maggie Sermersheim



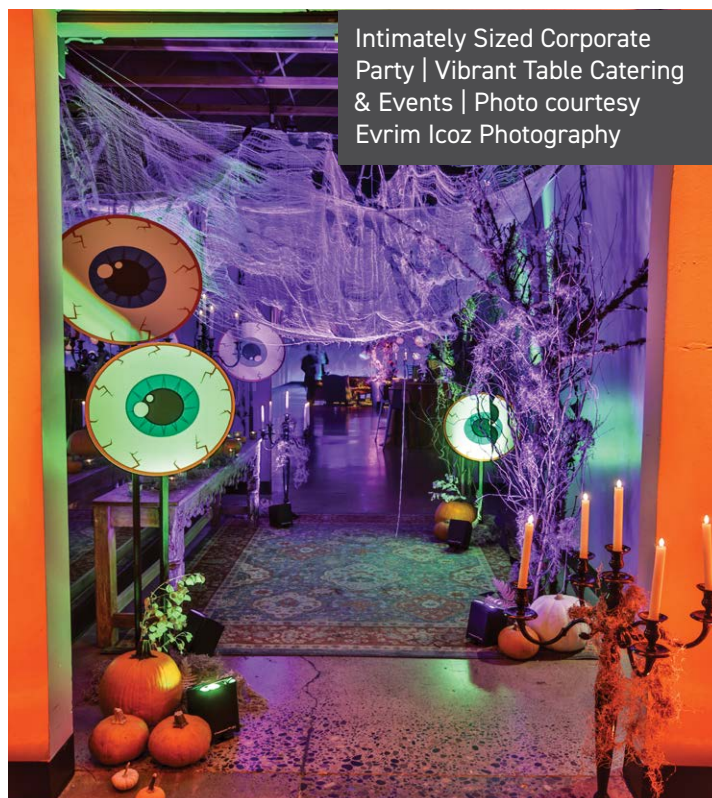
BEST ON-PREMISE CATERING



Biannual Open House | Vibrant Table Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Jenny Chok Photography



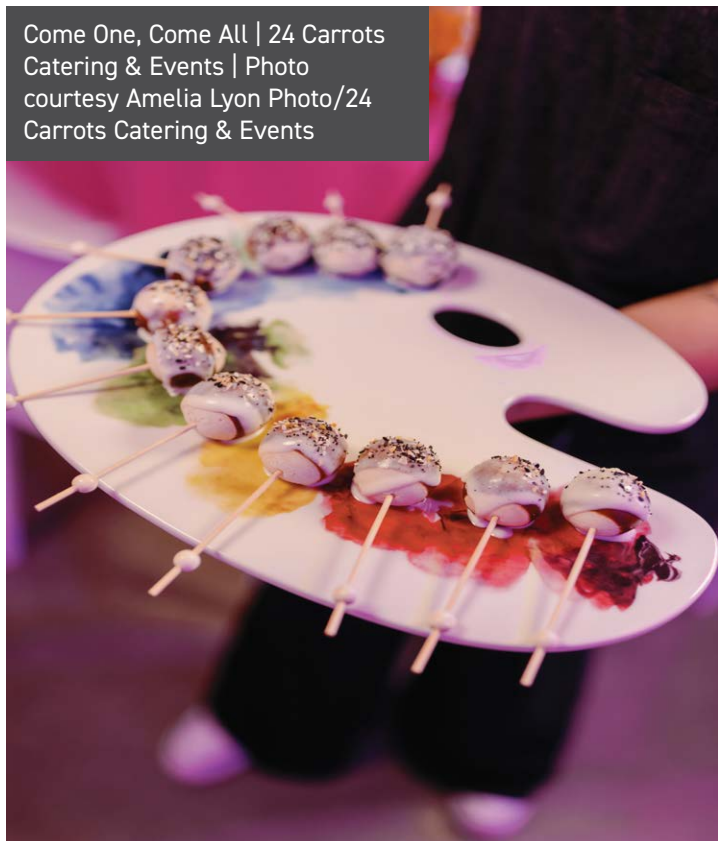
Standing the Test of Time | Proof of the Pudding | Photo courtesy Amanda Mazonkey



Intimately Sized Corporate Party | Vibrant Table Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Evrim Icoz Photography

CATERED FUNDRAISING EVENT OF THE YEAR

Come One, Come All | 24 Carrots
Catering & Events | Photo
courtesy Amelia Lyon Photo/24
Carrots Catering & Events



P is for Party | Partyman
Catering | Photo courtesy
Northglow Photography

Children's Ball | Occasions
Caterers | Photo courtesy
Children's National Health System



CATERED MICRO EVENT OF THE YEAR



She said YES! | Proof of the Pudding | Photo courtesy Amanda Mazonkey

Dinner on the River | Vibrant Occasions Catering | Photo courtesy Lori Sparkman Photography



Inspired by Motherhood Brunch | Colette's Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Lisette Gatliff

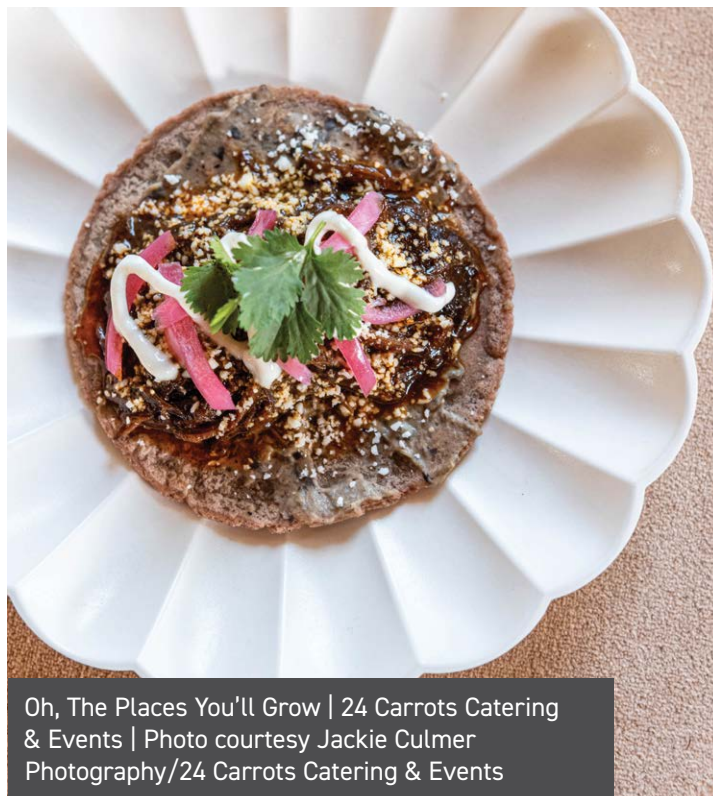
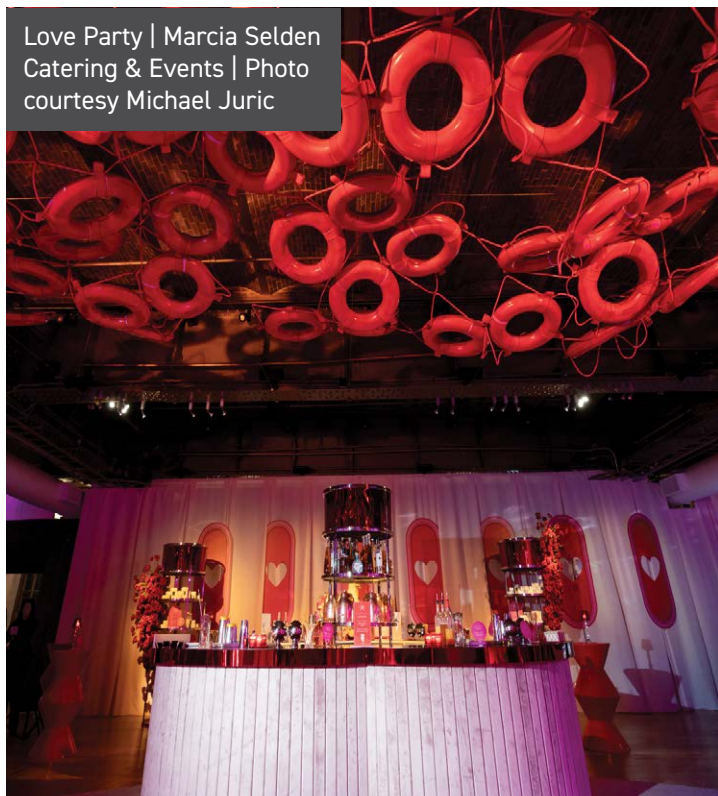


CATERED SOCIAL EVENT OF THE YEAR

Bubbles on the Beach |
Sugar Beach Events | Photo
courtesy MeewMeew Studios



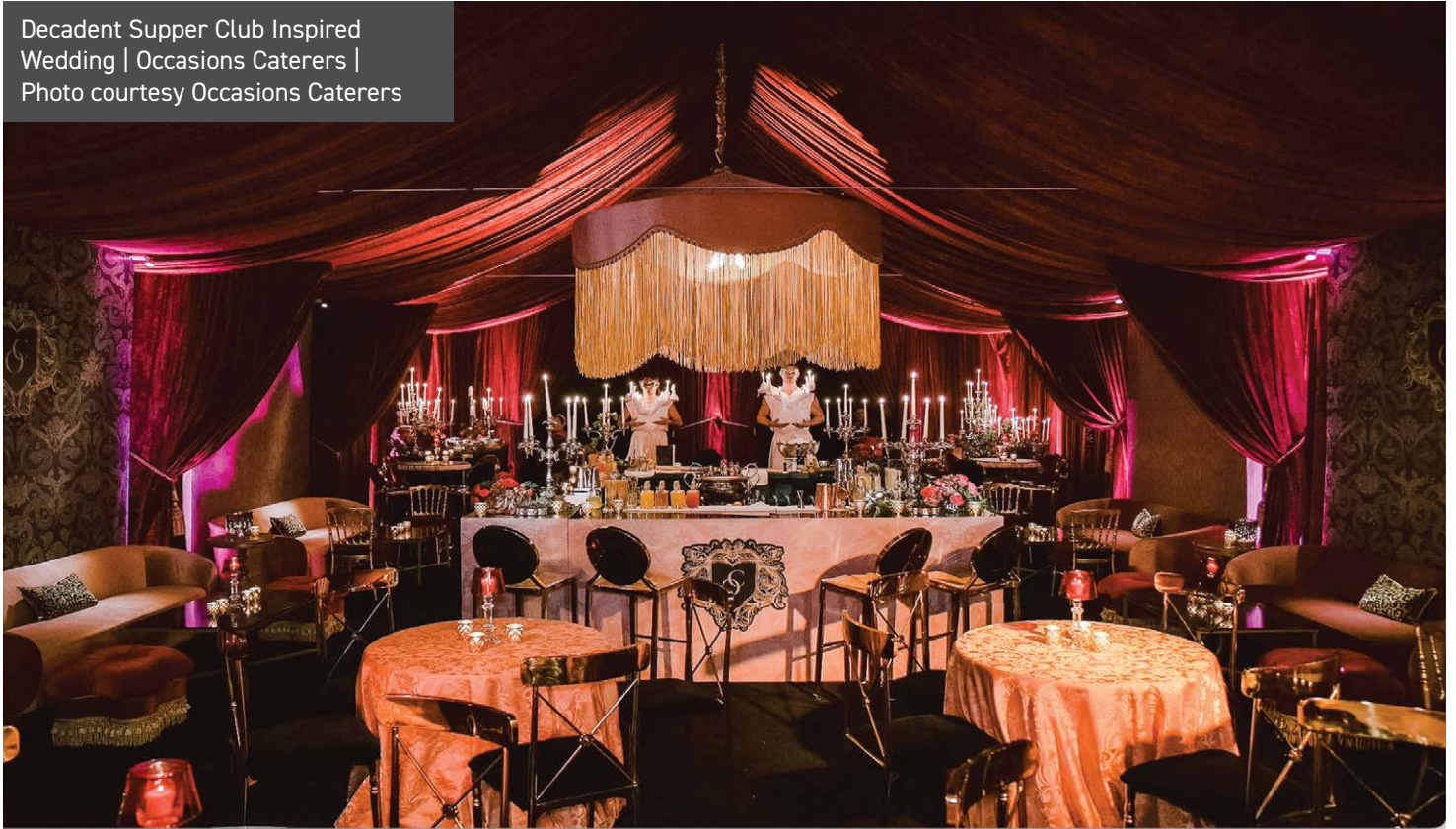
Love Party | Marcia Selden
Catering & Events | Photo
courtesy Michael Juric



Oh, The Places You'll Grow | 24 Carrots Catering
& Events | Photo courtesy Jackie Culmer
Photography/24 Carrots Catering & Events

CATERED WEDDING OF THE YEAR

Decadent Supper Club Inspired
Wedding | Occasions Caterers |
Photo courtesy Occasions Caterers



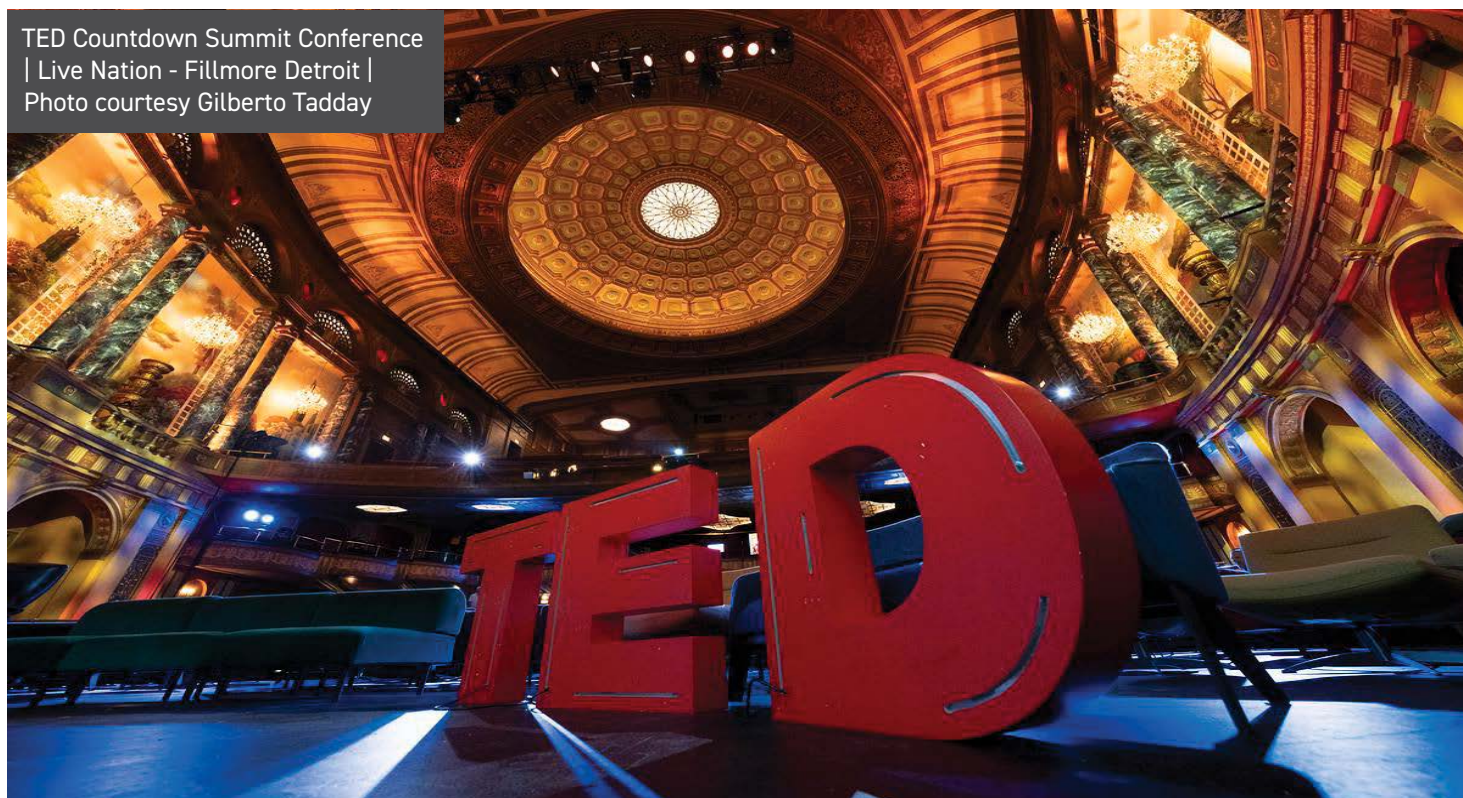
Mediterranean Inspired Wedding
| Dish Food & Events | Photo
courtesy Dish Food & Events

SUSTAINABILITY IN CATERING



Sustainability at Sea | Primal Alchemy Catering | Photo courtesy Primal Alchemy Catering

TED Countdown Summit Conference
| Live Nation - Fillmore Detroit |
Photo courtesy Gilberto Tadday



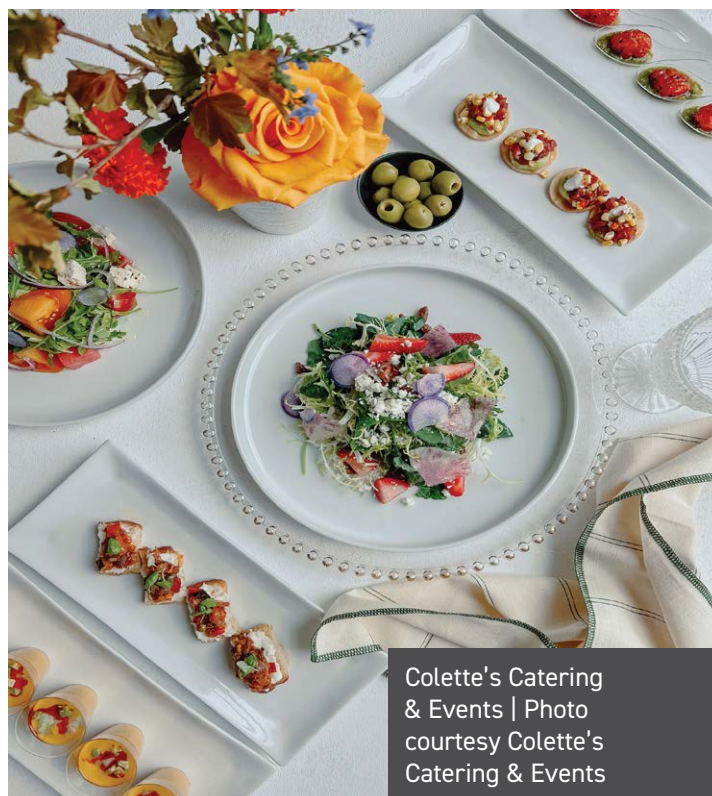
NATIONAL CATERER OF THE YEAR



24 Carrots Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Found Rental Co./24 Carrots Catering & Events



Proof of the Pudding | Photo courtesy Amanda Mazonkey



Colette's Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Colette's Catering & Events

CATERING TO DIVERSITY

BY AMBER KISPERT

“Kosher catering is more than just a dietary commitment to a clean, fresh, and mindful”

—Jeffrey Kollinger (S)



ary choice, it's a
way of eating."

(Spice of Life Catering)

THE SAVORING *of* TRADITION

Kosher catering brings with it dietary laws and nuance

Regarding culinary traditions, Kosher stands as a time-honored and flavorful art. It's not just about serving food; it's about upholding religious beliefs, adhering to strict dietary guidelines, and creating delectable dishes that satisfy both the palate and the soul.

"Kosher catering is more than just a dietary choice," says Jeffrey Kollinger (Spice of Life Catering), "it's a commitment to a clean, fresh, and mindful way of eating."

The Kosher laws

Kosher, derived from the Hebrew word "kashrut," refers to the dietary laws and guidelines (laid out within the Torah) that are followed by Jewish communities. These rules encompass what can and cannot be eaten, as well as how food is prepared and served.

There are several key principles that define Kosher ranging from ingredient choices to preparation to supervision.

"These practices have been faithfully passed down through generations, preserving the heritage and values of Jewish families and communities over centuries," says Kollinger. "As a testament to their enduring significance, Kosher guidelines connect modern generations to the same culinary principles and spiritual traditions that have bound Jewish communities throughout history."

Separation of meat and dairy

One of the fundamental pillars of Kosher cuisine is the strict separation of meat and dairy products. This extends to both the preparation (i.e., separate kitchens) and serving of dishes. Two sets of utensils and cookware are used to maintain this separation.

"The strict adherence to these principles is crucial to maintain the Kosher status and uphold the dietary traditions of the Jewish faith," says Kollinger.

Warm Mushroom Salad
(foraged mushrooms, baby
spinach, hickory smoked
lamb "pancetta," herbed
spätzle, poached farm egg,
and shaved truffle). Photo
courtesy Denis Leon & Co

Ingredient choices

The use of high-quality, Kosher-certified ingredients is paramount. Kosher caterers take great care to source products from reliable suppliers (Kosher products are typically denoted with symbols on the packaging) who meet the stringent Kosher standards.

There are three primary Kosher food categories, which include meat, dairy, and pareve.

Meat includes mammals or birds, while dairy consists of milk, butter, cheese, and yogurt. Pareve (neutral) is any food that isn't meat or dairy, such as eggs, fish, and plant-based foods (see accompanying sidebar for further identification of Kosher ingredients).

Additionally, these animals must be slaughtered following specific rituals to ensure their Kosher status. A shochet is a person specifically trained to butcher these animals while following Jewish laws. Additionally, the meat needs to be soaked to remove any traces of blood before it's cooked.

"For all you know, there's already something on your menu that's already fulfilling a Kosher menu without you even realizing it," says Jenny Bast (*Catering Creations).

Supervision

Many Kosher caterers work under the supervision of a mashgiach, a trained and certified Kosher or kashrut supervisor who ensures that all rules and guidelines are meticulously followed.

"Many rabbis work in the world of Kosher certification, which requires them to supervise the production of food to ensure that the product does not come into contact with non-Kosher ingredients, but there



Star Trax Events took home the 2023 Gala Award for Best Event for a Private Individual for their "Take Over the Night" Bar Mitzvah. Photos courtesy Justin Munter Photography

is no actual blessing required in the process (contrary to popular belief),” says Dave Stasiulis, Executive Chef Zoo Atlanta. “Kosher food is Jewish food. Pretty much any style or type of cuisine can be made Kosher with the proper kitchen set-up, ingredients, and preparation.”

In conjunction with the supervision, many caterers also opt for certification through such programs as AKC Kosher Certification or the Orthodox Rabbinical Board.

Many of these same laws relate to Halal as well, which are a set of dietary laws that are part of the Islamic religion.

“Being Jewish and having grown up within the Kosher lifestyle, I hold a deep respect for the Jewish community and aim for inclusivity in all our culinary endeavors,” says Kollinger. “When it comes to Kosher catering, having individuals who are familiar with Kosher dietary laws and Jewish traditions is invaluable. It ensures the preservation of the culture.”

Modernizing menus

In the past, Kosher meals have carried with them some pretty negative stereotypes.

“There’s a broad belief that Kosher catering is rubber chicken on a plate,” says Michael Waiser (Michael Scott Events), “and that stigma is a pretty hard sell for clients since Kosher is so much more expensive traditionally.”

Today’s caterers, however, have gotten innovative with their menus to ensure that everything is not only Kosher, but also delicious. It’s about creatively blending traditional Jewish recipes with contemporary culinary trends, while maintaining the authenticity of age-old dishes with a modern twist.

“We strive to showcase that Kosher food can be not only flavorful but also gourmet,” says Kollinger.

When developing Kosher menus (when you’re a caterer who doesn’t



MENU EXAMPLE

PASSED HORS D'OEUVRES

Seared Fish

Cake Smokey Remoulade,
Chive Snip

Confit Duck Dumpling

Lemon Grass Shitake Consommé,
Ponzu Drizzle

Ahi Tuna

Ginger-Jalapeño Rice Cake
Cilantro Mayo, Fried Jalapeños,
Scallion

Three Pepper Spinalis

Garlic Crostini

Herb Horseradish, Tomato
Onion Relish

SALAD COURSE

Fall Stack

Red & Yellow Heirloom Tomatoes,
Artisan Lettuce, Peach Pico,
Avocado Broken Champagne
Vinaigrette, Herb Salad

ENTRÉE

Herb Seared Center Cut Ribeye

Tri-Colored Peruvian Fingerling,
Haricot Vert & Baby Carrot
Roasted Shallot Cab Demi,
Tobacco Onion Curls

DESSERT

Cake Trio

Summer Sorbet & Berries

*Information above courtesy Spice of
Life Catering*

Star Trax Events was a finalist in the 2022 Gala Awards with their event “Sami’s Bat Mitzvah,” Shown: Passed appetizers during cocktail hour. Photo courtesy Dianne Scafone Photography



Pastrami King Salmon (red and yellow beets, homemade sauerkraut, toasted mustard seed, parsley and rosemary gremolata, and pumpernickel tuille). Photo courtesy Fred Marcus Studio

INGREDIENT CHOICES

MEAT

The only Kosher mammals are those that are herbivores, ruminant (chew their own cud), and have cloven hooves. Additionally, this meat must also come from the forequarters of these ruminant animals.

Allowed

- Cows
- Goats
- Sheep
- Deer
- Antelope
- Bison

Not Allowed

- Pigs
- Rabbits
- Squirrels
- Camels
- Kangaroos

Horses

Note: Meat products must come from the forequarters of the animal; hindquarter products (sirloin, flank, short loin, shank, and round) are not permitted under Kosher

POULTRY

The Torah lists 24 species of fowl that are forbidden by Kosher law. All other birds are considered Kosher.

Allowed

- Chicken
- Duck
- Goose
- Turkey

SEAFOOD

Kosher fish must have fins and scales, and seafood that does not meet those basic requirements is not Kosher.

Allowed

- Cod
- Bass
- Herring
- Mackerel
- Salmon

Trout

- Carp
- Flounder
- Not allowed**
- Shrimp
- Lobster

Crab

- Oysters
- Abalone
- Prawns

PAREVE

Pareve (neutral) foods have the fewest restrictions, providing the producer prepares them according to Kosher rules.

Allowed

- **Fruits and vegetables:** If fruit and vegetables come into contact with meat or dairy during processing they are not Kosher. It is also important to check products for insects or larvae, as these are not Kosher.
- **Grains:** Grains and pulses are Kosher. However, if products, such as bread, contain animal shortening, or their processing equipment also handles meat or dairy, they will not be Kosher.
- **Oils:** It is important for all stages of oil refinement and processing to be free from contamination with meat or dairy for the final products to be considered Kosher.
- Eggs from a Kosher animal.

It's also important to note that some foods that are Kosher year-round are not necessarily Kosher during Passover. Foods to avoid during Passover:

- Leavened grains
- Bread
- Cake
- Cookies
- Cereal
- Pasta
- Most alcoholic drinks

Information above courtesy Medical News Today

specialize in this area already), what you are able to present to clients might vary depending on who the client is. On the one hand you may have clients who are very strict Kosher, but on the other you might have clients who simply request no pork, or request that meat and dairy are not served together. This is where discussing options with clients becomes so important.

“It’s really dependent on the flexibility of that person because there’s so many sects within that religion,” says Bast. “It’s really difficult sometimes to pinpoint what they fully want.”

“This adaptability allows for a beautifully tailored culinary experience that respects both personal convictions and the diverse preferences of those partaking in the meal,” Kollinger agrees.

For many Kosher caterers, they’ll start by presenting the current menus that they offer, before discussing with the client how to customize them and tailor them to be Kosher.

“We can customize each and every Kosher menu to suit unique client needs,” says Stasiulis. “We start by sharing the non-Kosher menu to spark some ideas, and then, we’re able to make them Kosher for the event.”

Take chicken and waffles or chicken biscuits. Typically, both items would contain dairy, but Proof of the Pudding (an Atlanta, GA caterer) is able to use dairy alternatives and still create the same great flavor. As for desserts, don’t underestimate the appeal of dairy-free desserts such as brownies, mousse shots, cookies, and mini cupcakes with icing.

Comparatively, Michael Scott Events says they serve a lot of briskets and homemade pastas during their Kosher events.

“Modern Kosher cuisine often reflects a creative fusion of traditional practices with contemporary culinary trends, combining these time-honored dietary rules with a flair for delicious and diverse flavors,” says Kollinger. “Kosher menus offer a variety, much like typical catering choices. You’ve got options that span from casual, comfort-food feasts to more upscale, gourmet experiences. It’s all about tailoring the menu to fit not only your taste but also your budget, so whether you’re aiming for a relaxed get-together or a high-end event, there’s a Kosher culinary solution to match your style and financial plan.”

Herb roasted whole chicken served with garlic roasted potatoes, a cucumber tomato salad, roasted green beans with Cipollini onions, and a mixed berry delight. Photo courtesy Taylor Neimer for Spice of Life Catering





(Above and right) Proof of the Pudding is the exclusive Kosher caterer for Savanna Hall (a one-of-a-kind event destination) at Zoo Atlanta. The Kosher team comes fully equipped with specialized capabilities to host events with cultural preferences, dietary needs, and menus, taking Atlanta Kosher events to the next level. Photo courtesy Proof of the Pudding



Citrus grouper with herbed risotto and roasted caulilini in a citrus vinaigrette. Photo courtesy Proof of the Pudding



Pan seared salmon with roasted potato and root vegetables in a citrus white wine sauce.
Photo courtesy Proof of the Pudding

Going Kosher

There are a few different ways to approach Kosher from a catering perspective (i.e., weddings, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, Shabbat dinners, etc.).

“I think it’s awesome to expand your own knowledge on a different cultural custom while expanding your clientele,” says Bast.

To start, you can invest the time, cost, and experience that is necessary to become a fully Kosher catering company, meaning you have fully Kosher meat and dairy kitchens while also using Kosher ingredients.

“Having a distinct Kosher kitchen facility on our premises ensures that we can provide unforgettable menu offerings and event planning opportunities you won’t necessarily find at other destinations in Atlanta,” says Jennifer Smith, vice president of strategic partnerships and initiatives at Zoo Atlanta (where Proof of the Pudding is the exclusive caterer).

This option definitely requires the most investment, though.

“For some caterers, I’m of the opinion that if it isn’t broken, then don’t fix it,”

says Waiser. “I don’t think that people understand the true cost of operating in a Kosher setting. Everything is just more expensive.”

The other way to approach providing Kosher menus is to partner with Kosher kitchens (such as those at a synagogue or Jewish community center) where you can prepare Kosher meals offsite for an event.

“I’d make sure that you’re always listening to the rabbi and not the party planner,” says Bast, “because the party planner may want a certain something, but at the end of the day, the rabbi has the expertise.”

Lastly, if it doesn’t make business sense for your company to embrace fully Kosher menus, but you still want to provide Kosher meals upon request during events, there is the option to partner with a Kosher caterer to provide Kosher meals for an otherwise non-Kosher event.

“I think it’s been awesome to be able to provide food to anyone regardless of their background,” says Bast. “I look at it just like you would if we were fulfilling anyone with a dietary restriction; I want

THE LAWS

Although the details of Kosher or kashrut are extensive, the laws all derive from a few simple, straightforward rules:

- 1.** Certain animals may not be eaten at all. This restriction includes the flesh, organs, eggs and milk of the forbidden animals. This applies only to eating the animals. You can play football with a pigskin ball or wear pigskin gloves or shoes.
- 2.** Of the animals that may be eaten, the birds and mammals must be killed in accordance with Jewish law.
- 3.** All blood must be drained from meat and poultry or broiled out of it before it is eaten.
- 4.** Certain parts of permitted animals may not be eaten.
- 5.** Fruits and vegetables are permitted but must be inspected for bugs (which cannot be eaten).
- 6.** Meat (the flesh of birds and mammals) cannot be eaten with dairy. Fish, eggs, fruits, vegetables and grains can be eaten with either meat or dairy. (According to some views, fish may not be eaten with meat).
- 7.** Utensils (including pots and pans and other cooking surfaces) that have come into contact with meat may not be used with dairy, and vice versa. Utensils that have encountered non-Kosher food may not be used with Kosher food. This applies only where the contact occurred while the food was hot.
- 8.** Grape products made by non-Jews may not be eaten.

*Information above courtesy
[Jew FAQ](#)*

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to be able to please that client and make sure that that guest is also having a great experience.”

“Planners don’t necessarily think of food and beverage as a diversity and inclusion issue, but it very much is,” said Tracy Stuckrath, CSEP, CMM, CHC, CFPM, [in an article for PCMA](#).

The evolution of Kosher

As the culinary world continues to evolve, Kosher remains resilient and innovative. In fact, According to Proof of the Pudding, the Kosher market was evaluated at over \$19 billion in 2018 and is expected to grow to \$26 billion by 2026.

A large segment of the growth in the industry is due to the many customers who want third-party auditors inspecting their food and the added health benefits that they prescribe to Kosher foods.

Kosher is bought by people for a variety of reasons. According to independent market research, the vast majority of Kosher consumers buy Kosher for health and safety reasons.

They appreciate that their processed food will be audited by a third party. Vegetarians and vegans value the Kosher symbol as a way of ensuring that meat or dairy is not in a product.

Modern Kosher caterers are increasingly experimenting with international flavors and innovative techniques while upholding the Kosher dietary laws. This evolution ensures that Kosher catering remains relevant and appealing to a broader audience.

“Kosher catering is a tradition steeped in respect for the process and it’s a way to celebrate a wonderful culinary culture,” says Kollinger. “It’s an art of infusing each dish with deep respect while embracing innovation to ensure that every bite is full of flavor and every presentation is a work of art. To be a successful Kosher caterer is to embrace tradition and innovation to create extraordinary dining experiences.”

Catering Creations is a proud member of the Leading Caterers of America, a consortium of the top catering and event planners throughout the United States and Canada. **CS*

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A Tasty Tomorrow

A SAMPLING OF THE 2024 FOOD TRENDS

BY AMBER KISPERT



Mango-Black
Bean Slider from
Chowgirls Catering.
Photo courtesy
Lucas Botz

As we approach the cusp of 2024, the culinary world is once again poised with exciting and innovative food trends. With a focus on sustainability, complex flavors, and health, the year ahead promises to be a gastronomic adventure like no other.

"Trends—what do they mean, and why? This is a question that is often asked and is always hard to answer, especially in our industry," says Todd Annis (Cru Catering). "It depends on who you are and what position you hold."

Plant-powered revolution

Veggie-centric dining continues to be a dominant force in the food industry, and 2024 will be no exception. According to a 2023 survey from Elohi Strategic Advisors, 69% of consumers of plant-based meat expect to eat more plant-based alternatives this year, with an additional 29% of these consumers expecting to eat the same amount.

In 2024 we can expect to see an evolution of the plant-based movement through product and technological innovations.

Putting plants back in plant-based

Consumers and producers alike are looking to rely more heavily on traditional plant proteins (such



(Left) Blossom Catering out of Napa, Calif. has developed a vegan foie gras made from cashews, which was served during a pop up event called M(Eat) Carnival this past October in Livermore, Calif. Photo courtesy Bryan Ngo; (Below) Carrot Tartare (roasted carrot and parsnip purée with carrot chicharron and cardamom-carrot vinaigrette) from Constellation Culinary Group. Photo courtesy Carolina Guzik

as mushrooms, walnuts, tempeh, and legumes) in place of complex meat alternatives. Think pulled portobello sandwiches in place of pulled pork, black bean burgers, carrot tartare, and vegan foie gras made from cashews.

Where science meets culinary

Given the current popularity of *Lessons in Chemistry* (based on Bonnie Garmus's best-selling book) on Apple+, where food and science collide, it's no surprise that the culinary world is seeing tremendous technological advances in relation to plant-based products.

First up is precision fermentation, which is a technique that makes cheese with the help of yeast—no cow required.

Another alternative for producing food outside of traditional agriculture

is cultured meat, which is cultivated from animal muscle and fat cells. In other words, products that taste like the original, but for which no animals had to be slaughtered. In 2023, two companies, UPSIDE Foods and GOOD Meat, received the first-ever regulatory approval to sell cultivated meat in the USA. This makes the United States the second country after Singapore to allow the sale of lab-grown meat.

Another innovation on the market is Motif FoodWorks's innovative ingredient advances to texture and taste. Their HEMAMI™ ingredient is comprised of a heme protein derived from cow muscle tissue (bovine myoglobin) which they make animal-free using precision fermentation. It provides the same umami, meaty flavor, and aroma of the real thing, but without the animal. Conversely, their APPETEX™ addresses the texture of meat by recreating connective tissue

found in analog products that provide the springy chew and bite, which they recreate with plant fibers, specifically soybeans.

"Operators wanted a product with a richer, meatier taste, flavor, and texture and to create an eating experience more akin to animal meats," says Julia Dacri with Motif.

Regenerative agriculture

The focus is no longer just on the food that ends up on our plates, but rather on the way food is produced. 2024 will witness an even stronger emphasis on regenerative agriculture, where the focus is on restoring soil health, reducing the carbon footprint, and increasing biodiversity. Diners will find themselves more connected to their food sources as operators highlight their dedication to sustainable farming and ethical practices.



A Tasty Tomorrow – 2024 Food Trends



2024 will witness an even stronger emphasis on regenerative agriculture, where the focus is on restoring soil health, reducing the carbon footprint, and increasing biodiversity. Photo courtesy Lolagrace Photography



Plant-based Chicken Katsu from Motif FoodWorks.
Photo courtesy Motif FoodWorks



Breakfast Empanadas made with Motif FoodWorks' plant-based protein. Photo courtesy Motif FoodWorks

"There's a real advantage to creating a cuisine, a menu where the vectors don't all point at you, at the chef, but where the food that you're eating points out to something larger," said Chef Dan Barber (Blue Hill at Stone Barns) in season one of the Netflix series *Chef's Table*. "When you are chasing after the best flavor, you're chasing after the best ingredients; and when you're chasing after the best ingredients, you're in search of great farming. It's not just about the dish, it's about what the radish represents, it has to add up to something larger than a plate of food."

"Chefs play a huge role; we have this power now that we never had before. We can introduce change. We need to look at modernity and science when it comes to flavor. That is the

future of really great cooking and really great farming. When you treat nature well, it gives you the gift of great food."

Count on cacao

For a long time, cacao pulp (the white mucilage that surrounds cacao beans) was seen as a waste product from the process of chocolate making, but cacao-pulp is now getting new life.

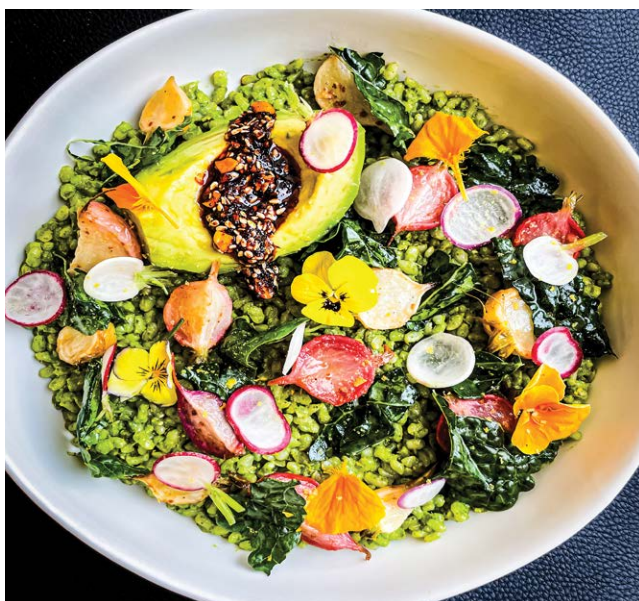
The flavorful pulp is increasingly being used to make cacao pulp juice, a beverage that has a delightfully fruity taste. What makes cacao pulp juice even more trend-worthy is its health-giving properties. The beverage is naturally rich in fiber as well as antioxidants. Additionally, the pulp is being



Chicken Burrito Bowl from Restaurant Associates at Novartis Cambridge. Photo courtesy Tara Fitzpatrick



Poke bowl with tuna, seaweed, furikake steamed rice, and lotus crisps from Tuxedos and Tennis Shoes, a DSquared Hospitality Company. Photo courtesy NXT Creates



Farm Vegetable Grain Bowl from Gate Gourmet. Photo courtesy Gate Gourmet



Farro and Roasted Vegetable Bowl from Chef Cori Boudreaux. Photo courtesy NAM Future Menus 2023 Report

made into jellies and jams. The emergence of cacao fruit powders in 2023 also presents an opportunity for brands seeking a new sugar alternative without compromising on sweet, ambrosial flavor.

Bowl them over

Bowls have been popular for quite a while, but they're poised to make a stronger standing in 2024.

According to Unilever Food Services Future Menus report, bowls can help contribute to the low waste movement by making clever use of ingredients. Given how versatile bowls are, this incredibly popular menu item is a great dish format to use a multitude of ingredients in varying

flavors and textures. Think of using parts of veggies that might otherwise hit the waste bin, like beet greens densely packed with nutrients or delicately flavored celery leaves. Trimmings of ahi tuna can be minced into the ever-popular spicy tuna for the perfect premium protein add-on to bowls. Noodles will also be popular in bowls as consumers look for ways to dress up this food item with quality ingredients and tantalizing flavors.

Heritage grains and ancient ingredients are also poised to make a comeback in the culinary world. Quinoa, amaranth, teff, and heritage wheat varieties are great additions to grain bowls, adding depth of flavor and a healthy twist to classic recipes.



Sansho pepper yakitori
with spicy furikake.
Photo courtesy
McCormick for Chefs

Caterers can also definitely tap into the bowl trend through creative action stations and build-your-own-bowl stations.

Sweet heat

Complex heat continues its evolution with global peppers taking off in every aisle—and the trend is only getting hotter. According to McCormick for Chefs, heat continues to push beyond the singularly spicy realm and takes off on a journey where heat and ingredient pairings come together to shape how heat is perceived and how long it lingers and finishes.

Specialty varieties like scorpion peppers, guajillo, or Hungarian Goathorn peppers are found fresh, whole, ground, or pickled, and a new wave of pepper-infused drinks, chili oils, and botana sauces are becoming increasingly popular, with the trend spreading to cheese. Even tajin is expanding from candies and cocktails to spicing up grocery store sushi, desserts, and more.

2024 will also present a growing interest in foods defined by a spicy and sweet flavor combination known in some circles as “swicy.” While Americans love spicy foods, this “swicy” combination expands the appeal and approachability of hotter flavors. Hot honey, mango habanero, and other combinations are helping to create more complex, nuanced, and broadly appealing flavors across a range of applications.



Cholula® Smoky Chipotle Carnitas and Carne Asada tacos. Photo courtesy McCormick for Chefs

These ice cream bars offer up a multi-sensory experience when it comes to the complexity of heat. Your first bite is the raspberry shell garnished with freeze-dried raspberries and a dusting of cayenne, followed by a luscious no-churn vanilla ice cream kissed with crushed red pepper and the sweet-heat of a Frank's RedHot® and cayenne red pepper raspberry swirl. Photo courtesy McCormick for Chefs

A Tasty Tomorrow – 2024 Food Trends



Whipped organic mashed potatoes loaded with Hope Creamery butter and local cream, topped with caviar and creme fraiche from Chowgirls Catering. Photo courtesy Amber Kispert

Fin and fancy free

With tinned fish, oysters, and caviar taking off earlier this year, and plant-based seafood on the rise throughout 2023, it's prime time for the fancy fish trend to really take off.

Watch out for carrots in place of lox, trumpet mushrooms for scallops, and the root vegetable konjac getting its moment in sushi rolls and poke bowls.

Looking beyond product, seafood is also seeing an evolution in how it is sourced.

Today's seafood farming, a practice known as aquaculture, is a far cry from what decades ago sparked visions of crowded tanks and dirty water. Today, over half of all seafood we eat in the U.S. is farm-raised, according to the Aquaculture Stewardship Council.

"I think the key with sustainable seafood, specifically farm-raised, is that consumers need to understand that well-managed farm-raised seafood tastes better. It is higher quality. There is a lot of science that goes into proper aquaculture and it shows in the taste and nutrition," says Chef Andrew Gruel (Calico Fish House) in an article for ASC.



A Watermelon Poke Bite featuring watermelon poke marinated in yuzu and furikake on a nest of watermelon rind topped with watermelon "caviar." Photo courtesy Buzz Orr Multimedia

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(This page and opposite page) Javo's energy lemonades boost energy while also providing the added benefit of mental focus. Photos courtesy Buzz Orr Multimedia

Function over fashion

Functional beverages are a growing opportunity, particularly as Gen Z and Millennials are more likely to want functional health benefits from their beverages. Consumers will seek out foods with functional benefits through ingredients like adaptogenic herbs, CBD-infused drinks, and stress-reducing nutrients, which will gain popularity as people prioritize holistic wellness through their diets.

According to *Datassential*, there is a 64% interest in the functional beverage market.

"It's this idea that it has to do something for me, it can't just taste good," said Kelly Dykhuizen in *Datassential's Future Drinks* webinar.

This important segment includes natural wine and low-calorie/carb beer and cocktails, but also interesting takes on better-for-you drinks like functional sodas and detoxifying cocktails.

(Right) HFactor Hydrogen Water; (Opposite page, top left); Illicit Elixirs offers dopamine-producing beverages; (Opposite page) Functional beverages with turmeric support healthy liver function. Photos courtesy *Datassential*



One such option is Hiyo, an effervescent “social tonic” that skips alcohol in favor of adaptogens, nootropics, and functional botanicals. In other words: herbs, mushrooms, roots, and other compounds that fight stress and promote healthy brain function.

Another is Javo’s energy lemonades, which boost energy while also providing the added benefit of mental focus.

A few other broad examples that are on the market are hydrogen-infused waters, mood boosting drinks that include such additives as ashwagandha, mushrooms, or turmeric, dopamine-boosting beverages, and CBD and THC beverages.





(Left) Macadamia Mediterranean Muffins. Photo courtesy World Macadamia Organization; (Top) Macadamia Nut & Coconut Pancakes with Honey. Photo courtesy National Honey Board; (Above) White Chip & Macadamia Nut Fudge. Photo courtesy Hershey Foodservice

Macadamia's magic moment

The macadamia nut market is growing fast as consumers turn to the nut, which boasts a bounty of nutritional benefits, as a healthy snack option.

Celebrated for their rich creaminess, the nuts are versatile and used in everything from baking to savory sauces.

"Macadamias are a unique, untapped whole food and have long been a well-loved tree nut with a positive health halo that product manufacturers and consumers enjoy as a specialty nut for everyday snacking as well as special occasions," said Jillian Laing, chief executive officer, World Macadamia Nut Organization. "The timing could not be more fortuitous," added Laing, who noted that macadamia supply increases are arriving just as key relevant food trends take hold worldwide. Among them:

- **Functional nutrition.** Macadamias are a "naturally functional food," Laing said, easily meeting

consumer desire for functional ingredients.

- **Healthy fats.** Consumer attitudes have evolved and now demand healthy fats in their diets, which macadamias readily provide.
- **Carbs: fewer and better.** Macadamias are an ideal choice for keto, low carb, and other similar meal plans.
- **Nutrient density.** A remarkable superfood, macadamias connect with consumers' increased desire for nutrient density in their food choices.
- **Flavor and texture.** Macadamias' rich, subtly sweet, and creamy flavor and satisfying crunch delight consumers who seek healthy, indulgent snacks.

"Macadamias are where health meets indulgence, and with growth increasing at least 11% a year for the next several years, it's never been more attainable for premium nut and snack mixes," Laing added.

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Buckle up for buckwheat

Gaining popularity as a cover crop to support soil health, buckwheat is a superfood seed containing protein, carbs, and fiber. Plus, it's naturally gluten free. Buckwheat has already been seen in the form of soba noodles, but with more brands on a mission to improve agriculture, it's now in everything from plant-based milk alternatives to crackers and granola.

Just add booze

Alcohol is moving beyond the bar and finding its way into fun and creative desserts.

Boozy popsicles in custom flavors are an amazing treat for outdoor events. They can be served in wine glasses to keep it chic and neat and then topped off with your favorite libation for an extra kick. Another growing trend is modernized and revamped Jell-O shots, which are being served alongside cocktails or as a singular bite.

"These are not the Jell-O shots you remember from college; these are essentially designed to be a high-end cocktail in a bite," said Dykhuizen in the *Datassential* webinar.

Beyond desserts, alcohol is also finding its way into soup stations where a spirit can be added for a little something extra.

"It's kind of that idea of a sensory experience," said Dykhuizen.



(Top) Ginger, turmeric, cardamom, buckwheat, and honey oatmeal. Photo courtesy National Honey Board; (Above) At Milady's bar in New York City, an updated, upscale version of Jell-O shots lets guests eat their cocktails. Photo courtesy Shannon Sturgis; (Left) Chilled pineapple, yellow watermelon, and golden tomato soup with added tequila from D'Amico Catering. Photo courtesy Bellagala Photography

A Tasty Tomorrow – 2024 Food Trends



Meyer Lemon Olive Oil Meringue Pie with Herbes de Provence Crust. Photo courtesy Bryce Cherven

Grapefruit-Rosemary
Shrub (citrus, vinegar, and
singed rosemary) from
Chowgirls Catering. Photo
courtesy Lucas Botz



Embracing botanicals

The demand for wellness-related products in 2024 will also result in a rise in the use of botanicals, a group of ingredients that include herbs, roots, and flowers. Rarely consumed on their own, botanicals are increasingly being added to beverages and food to boost their healthiness and add complex flavors.

As the term “botanicals” encompasses a huge array of differing herbs, roots, and flowers, the culinary applications for them are nearly endless. This versatility will likely see botanicals featured in a range of food as well as drinks during 2024, including yogurt and pizza crusts. Some of the trending flavors in 2024 may include lavender and hibiscus; subtle herbal flavors like chai, earl gray, and black tea; and on the savory side, herbs such as rosemary, sage, and thyme.

“The simplest and most accessible ingredients are often overlooked; utilizing local flavors for [recipes] can easily take things up a notch,” says Matt Foster (Culinary Canvas). “Making items with native flowers and herbs in your area, or even plants from the couple’s garden, is an authentic and

accessible way to personalize your menu.”

As we step into 2024, the world of food is brimming with innovation, sustainability, and an unquenchable thirst for flavor exploration. From plant-based breakthroughs to creations that transport your clients’ taste buds, the coming year promises a thrilling journey through the culinary universe. So, get ready to savor tomorrow’s trends, because you’re in for a treat!

“Trends come and go, and each caterer, planner, florist, musician, photographer, and the guests themselves want to create the best experience for all,” says Annis. “As caterers, we will always try to go above and beyond with every client and guest.” 

Get More Trend Insights

Want more insight into 2024’s trends? Then don’t miss Catersource + The Special Event, being held February 12–15, 2024 in Austin, TX, for all the latest trend information under one roof.

Here’s a taste of some of the sessions you can expect:

- **Thirty F&B Trends to Watch for in 2024**, presented by Shannon Boudreau
- **2024 Floral Tips, Tricks, and Trends in the Catering World**, presented by Lisa Roser
- **Caterers, Assemble! Tantalizing Trends, Captivating Concepts, Inspired Interactivity 2024**, presented by Michael Stavros
- **Menu Trends for 2024 & Beyond**, presented by Rich Shank
- **The New Catering Buyer: Insights to Help You Win More Business**, presented by Rich Shank

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By Amber Kispert

Peachy Nirvana (tequila, mezcal, Chile Ancho Liqueur, fresh lime juice, smoked maple syrup, ripe peach, and smoked serrano salt). Photo courtesy @Cocktail.Vision2021



A TWIST
ON

Tequila

Tequila is poised to become the best-selling liquor in the United States

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TEQUILA CAN SOMETIMES get a bad rap. Many people may not necessarily have the best of memories (or relationships) with tequila, thanks in no small part to spring break trips, college parties, and Cinco de Mayo celebrations. And who could forget Paul Reubens' infamous bartop dance to The Champs' "Tequila" in *Pee Wee's Big Adventure*?

But it's really not fair to assign blame to tequila, when most often the bad memories come from bad choices, especially since tequila has proven time and again its ability to create complex, delicious cocktails.

Tequila has begun to break away from its former reputation now that it's dominating bar menus around the world. According to the [Distilled Spirits Council of the US](#), agave-

based liquors like tequila and mezcal were the fastest-growing spirits category of 2022 and are now poised to overtake vodka as the best-selling liquor in the United States this year. Tequila exports reached a record \$3.6 billion between January and October of last year. This is an increase of 34.1% over the same period in 2021, according to data from [The Ministry of Economy and the Agricultural Markets Consulting Group](#).

"The booming interest in both tequila and mezcal is really being driven by the spirits' deep-rooted heritage and tradition," said [Chris Swonger](#), president of the [Distilled Spirits Council of the U.S.](#) "America has such great affinity with Mexican culture; we clamor to go and eat Mexican food and tequila is very complementary to that."

The art OF THE AGAVE

There's often a misunderstanding of what tequila actually is since it's often used interchangeably with mezcal or other agave-based spirits. However, to be legally called "tequila" certain requirements must first be met.

Similar to how scotch and bourbon are types of whiskey, tequila is a type of mezcal. Mezcal is the overarching category of Mexican spirits fermented and distilled from several varieties of the agave plant. It is

produced all over Mexico under various names and designations.

All tequila is mezcal, but not all mezcal is tequila.

To be classified as tequila, the spirit must be made in one of the five specific regions of Mexico (Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacan, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas) and made from 51% blue agave (at minimum), whereas mezcal can be made from a wide variety of agave.

Mezcal is often classified as having a smokier flavor profile than tequila.

"In my view, authentic tequila has a richness, complexity, and depth of flavor unmatched by other spirits," said [Juan Coronado with Mijenta Tequila](#).

But not all tequila is the same either.

Tequila made from agave that is grown in the valley will have a slightly different taste than tequila from agave grown in the highlands. In general, tequila from the valley will be bigger and bolder with herbal, floral, vegetal, citrus, and earthy aromatics and flavors. Tequilas from the highlands tend to be a bit softer, more delicate, and a tad bit sweeter.

"Make sure you're tasting your tequilas, because not every tequila is created equal," said Ivy Mix (Leyenda) in a [session for Tales of the Cocktail 2020](#). "If you're passionate about your own unique tequila creations, really think about the different qualities and characters that tequila brings to your cocktails and you will be better set up and better prepared to make cocktails that way."

There are also two other agave-based spirits that fall under the umbrella of mezcal: bacanora (made from wild plants of agave pacifica) and raicilla (made from two varieties of agave—lechuguilla and puta de mula). Further complicating things is sotol, which is not made from agave but rather another succulent plant called desert spoon.

"Spirits truly are an agricultural product," said Mix.



Bloody Maria (tequila, tomato juice, fresh lemon juice, Worcestershire, Mexican hot sauce, celery salt, and ground pepper). Photo courtesy Teremana

Continued on page 93



TOMA-TINI

The Tequila Martini is a unique variation that goes in a new direction while paying homage to the original, according to [Punch](#). It's a marriage of two omnipresent trends: martinis and tequila. Martinis are everywhere; nobody can get enough of them. But savory (dirty) martinis are particularly in demand. In fact, the tequila-based "Mexican Martini," as it's sometimes called, is the unofficial signature cocktail of Austin, TX (where [Catersource + The Special Event](#) will be held February 12–15, 2024) where it has a deeply devoted following, according to [Liquor.com](#)

Recipe courtesy Nik Sparks, Brooklyn, NY for [Punch](#)

Photo courtesy Shannon Sturgis for [Punch](#)

YIELD: 1

INGREDIENTS

- 1½ oz tequila, preferably El Velo Blanco
- ¼ oz mezcal, preferably Los Vecinos
- ¼ oz manzanilla sherry, preferably Lustau
- ¼ oz dry vermouth, preferably Gonzalez Byass Vermut Seco
- ¼ oz pickled tomatillo brine (see pickled tomatillo recipe below)
- ¼ oz tomatillo syrup (recipe below)
- Garnish: pickled tomatillo (recipe below)

METHOD

1. Combine all ingredients in a mixing glass with ice and stir until chilled.
2. Strain over a large ice cube.
3. Garnish with pickled tomatillo.

INGREDIENTS FOR PICKLED TOMATILLOS

- 360 g white vinegar
- 360 g water
- 14 g kosher salt
- 14 g white sugar
- 450 g (about 8 to 10) tomatillos, husks removed
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 ea. serrano chile, sliced lengthwise
- 2 g cumin seeds, crushed
- 2 g black peppercorns, crushed

METHOD

1. Combine the white vinegar, water, salt, and sugar in a saucepan. Stir, bring to a boil, then remove from heat. Rinse, stem, and quarter tomatillos. Add tomatillos, roughly chopped garlic, serrano, cumin seeds, and peppercorns to a Cambro or other non-reactive container.
2. Pour the hot mixture over other ingredients. Let cool, then seal the container. Let sit in refrigerator for at least 24 hours (preferably a week).

INGREDIENTS FOR PICKLED TOMATILLO SYRUP

- 1 part pickled tomatillos
- 1 part white sugar

METHOD

Blend ingredients until completely incorporated. Fine-strain, then bottle and store.

KNOW YOUR TEQUILAS

Tequila is often classified by how long it is aged, which is why tequila can be found in five different types: blanco, reposado, añejo, extra añejo, and cristalino.

Blanco

A blanco, sometimes called plata or silver tequila, mostly remains unaged and retains a crystal clear appearance. Some are lightly rested in oak barrels for no more than 60 days, which can give them a pale green hue.

FLAVOR: Blancos can have a variety of flavor profiles, from sharp notes of citrus and pepper and a spicy finish, to creamy and smooth, with touches of vanilla and honey.

Reposado

Reposado (which means “rested”) sits in a barrel for two to 11 months. This is the predominant style of tequila consumed in Mexico.

FLAVOR: Reposado tequilas have prominent blue agave flavors and are often known to have notes of vanilla, honey, and toasted nuts and tend to have an easier finish on the palate than blancos.

Añejo

Añejo (old) is aged for one to three years in an oak barrel. Any

type of wooden barrel can be used but ex-American whiskey and French oak barrels are used the most.

FLAVORS: Flavor can vary widely from oaky and spicy to buttery and warm, but añejo tequilas often carry a lot of flavors like vanilla and brown sugar.

Extra añejo

Extra añejo tequilas mature for three years or longer in oak barrels. Extra añejo is considered ultra-premium and the pricing reflects that. Since this “extra-aged” spirit spends more time in contact with wood than any other variety of tequila, it has the strongest aromas and the richest amber color of any type.

FLAVORS: Notes of caramel, chocolate, cinnamon, and vanilla.

Cristalino

This is a new classification consisting of aged tequilas, usually añejos and extra añejos, that are filtered through charcoal. This process aims to remove tannins, enhance fruity and floral notes, and achieve a clear blanco-esque appearance.

FLAVORS: They offer a softened approach to a reposado, añejo, or extra añejo, often slightly sweeter with a lighter mouthfeel than their unrefined versions. For the most part, cristalinos maintain aged taste characteristics with pronounced aromas of caramel and vanilla.

Joven or Gold

Jovens are any blanco tequila that has an aged expression (reposado, añejo, or extra añejo) blended into it. Gold tequila is usually colored and flavored with oak extract, caramel, glycerin or other additives.

Information courtesy Sip Tequila





RANCH WATER

The unofficial West Texas cocktail, according to Liquor.com. Legends of its origins abound: One rumor alleges a 1960s wild-haired rancher invented the drink, which caused him to follow the stars all the way from Fort Davis to Marathon before falling asleep under a piñon tree. Another theory is more likely: The thirst-quenching concoction was a makeshift happy hour special of West Texas ranchers, who would take a swig of Topo Chico before adding a shot of tequila and squeeze of lime. Ranch 616 in Austin, TX claims honors for the drink's evocative name having put it on the menu in 1998, eventually trademarking the name.

Recipe courtesy Liquor.com

Photo courtesy Liquor.com/Tim Nusog

YIELD: 1

INGREDIENTS

1½ oz Tequila Blanco

½ oz lime juice, freshly squeezed

Top with Topo Chico, chilled (about 6 oz)

Garnish: lime wedge

METHOD

1. Add all ingredients into a Collins or highball glass over ice and stir briefly and gently to combine.
2. Garnish with a lime wedge.

MARGARITA TRES CAPAS

Recipe courtesy

Ryan Manning

Photo courtesy WASIO

Faces/SpotMyPhotos

YIELD: 4-5

INGREDIENTS

5 oz Classic Margarita (recipe below)

1 oz Tepache Pineapple (recipe below)

1 oz red sangria foam (recipe below)

METHOD

1. Spoon the tepache pineapple mix on the bottom of the rocks glass.
2. Pour a solid layer of ice over the pineapple mix to avoid the layers mixing.
3. Pour the classic margarita over the ice up to about an inch below the rim.
4. Top the cocktail with the foam.

INGREDIENTS FOR MARGARITA CLASSICO

5 oz tequila blanco

3 oz triple sec

16 oz water

6 oz fresh lime juice (zest first and save zest for service)

2 oz granulated sugar

METHOD

1. Blend all ingredients together in a blender, except the zest.
2. Transfer to plastic bottle for service and then label, date, and refrigerate.
3. Wrap the zest tightly with plastic wrap (pressed directly onto it to prevent it from turning). Wrap, label, date, and refrigerate for service storing with the margarita batch.

INGREDIENTS FOR TEPACHE PINEAPPLE

1 ea. pineapple (skin and core removed, small diced)

4 oz brown sugar

½ oz cinnamon, ground

METHOD

1. In a saucepan add all ingredients together over medium heat.



2. Cook for about five minutes stirring constantly to prevent burning. The finished product should form a syrup, but the pineapple will remain solid.
3. Chill until service.

INGREDIENTS FOR SANGRIA FOAM

Red wine sangria (store bought)

5 drops Wonder Foam

METHOD

Combine sangria and Wonder Foam in shaker. Shake until a foam consistency is achieved.

Perfect PAIRINGS

As every good caterer knows, every good cocktail deserves the perfect bite to pair it with. While wines, beers, and bourbons lend themselves easily to food pairings, tequila might be a bit unfamiliar to some. Here are a few food ideas that can beautifully be paired with tequila.

- Loaded nachos
- Grilled bone marrow
- Crawfish boils
- 'Nduja broiled oysters
- Lettuce soup
- Lightly grilled meats and fish
- Chocolate
- Mexican Chicken Mole
- Arepa
- Fried chicken
- Apples
- Peanut butter, banana, and bacon sandwiches
- Smoked beef cheek
- Bananas
- Charcuterie
- Raw fish
- Aged gouda Manchego
- Grilled octopus
- Grilled steak
- Tacos
- Grilled seafood and squid or prawns
- Vegetables (asparagus, corn, avocado, tomatillos, and green peppers)
- Recipes that use citrus
- Recipes that use coriander
- Pork

Information above courtesy: [VinePair](#), [Food & Wine](#), [Matching Food and Wine](#)



LA PALOMA

The details of the paloma's origin are a little murky. Unlike many classic cocktails, which predate Prohibition, the paloma didn't arrive on the scene until after 1938, when Squirt was first invented in Phoenix, AZ, according to [Texas Monthly](#). It's unclear how or when the paloma got its name, which is Spanish for "dove." Some say it could have been confused or exchanged for pomelo, Spanish for "grapefruit," as the spellings are similar.

Recipe and image courtesy
©Cocktail.Vision2021

YIELD: 1

INGREDIENTS

2 oz Tequila Espanita
1 oz grapefruit juice
½ oz lime juice
½ oz cardamom infused maple syrup
2 dashes grapefruit bitters
1½ oz red grapefruit ginger beer
Garnish: fresh grapefruit and curry leaf

METHOD

1. Place a long shard of ice into a Collins glass.
2. Add the rest of the ingredients gently one at a time. Top with ginger beer and stir gently just to combine the ingredients. Garnish.



MEMORIES OF FUTURES PAST

Recipe and image courtesy
@Cocktail.Vision2020

INGREDIENTS

1½ oz tequila
½ oz Mezcal
½ oz Amaro Ramazzotti
1½ oz Agave Paloma Mix
1 oz fresh grapefruit juice
½ oz fresh lime juice
Rosemary sprig
Pinch Hickory Smoked Salt

METHOD

In a cocktail shaker with a pinch of salt gently muddle a fresh rosemary sprig to extract the essential oils. Add the rest of the ingredients and plenty of ice. Shake it up well to chill and dilute your cocktail. Double strain into a chilled glass. Garnish with a rosemary sprig.

“In my view, authentic tequila has a richness, complexity, and depth of flavor unmatched by other spirits.” —Juan Coronado, Mijenta Tequila



Carrot King (Teremana Reposado, fresh carrot juice, fresh lemon juice, ginger syrup, hot sauce, and celery salt). Photo courtesy Teremana



Teremana Hot Chocolate (Teremana Blanco, agave nectar, brewed unsweetened hot chocolate). Photo courtesy Teremana



Le Pasion (Illegal Mezcal Joven, creme de cacao, Lustau Amontillado Sherry, passion fruit syrup, and Topo Chico sparkling water). Photo Brynna Ringling (IG: @Brynna.Nic)



Teremana Two Step (Teremana Blanco, tonic, grapefruit bitters, and grapefruit). Photo courtesy Teremana

MIX UP Your Bar Program

Are you hoping to up your bar game in 2024? Don't miss these beverage-centric sessions at Catersource + The Special Event 2024 (February 12-15 in Austin, TX):

- **Bar & Beverage Catering 101 & Beyond!**, presented by Roy Porter (Engage Works)
- **Thirty F&B Trends to Watch for in 2024**, presented by Shannon Boudreau (Lazy Gourmet)
- **Evolution of Mocktails**, presented by Jeriesha Carter Johnson and Andre Johnson (Divine Star Creations)
- **Cocktail Cheat Codes**, presented by Shannon Boudreau (Lazy Gourmet)



Who says tequila has to be solely reserved for beverages? During the grand opening for Equestria West at Bavaria Downs (Chaska, MN), D'Amico Catering (Minneapolis) presented a station dubbed "Du Jour: Chilled Soups with Spirit", which featured chilled summer soups that can be enhanced with a spirit, including tequila (pineapple, yellow watermelon, and golden tomato). Photo courtesy Bellagala Photography

TRENDS IN *tequila*

Tequila's momentum can in part be attributed to the proliferation of celebrity-owned and endorsed brands, with everyone from George Clooney to The Rock to Kendall Jenner to Guy Fieri getting in on the action as the spirit's popularity continues to soar.

Another trend within the tequila market is the rise of unique flavored tequilas, [according to Dimensional Insight](#). Fruit-flavored tequilas, such as lemon, lime, and grapefruit, are rising in popularity. These tequilas are designed to be sweeter and more approachable than traditional options, making them ideal for new customers who may previously have been intimidated by tequila's bold reputation.

For the more experienced or adventurous tequila sippers, pepper infusions, such as jalapeños and ghost peppers, are also growing in popularity.

Some tequila brands are also experimenting with more unconventional ingredients, such as rose, elderflower, and cucumber. These unorthodox flavors make them ideal candidates for craft cocktails as well as presenting new options for consumers who have grown weary of traditional brands. On the cocktail side of things, Ranch Waters are all the rage, as are Mexican Martinis, Palomas, and of course, the classic margarita.

Check out the recipes on the previous pages to help your menu put a new twist on tequila.

"Agave has to be grown with respect, harvested with respect, fermented with respect, distilled

with respect, aged with respect, and in the end, you will hopefully get a beautiful distillate that you yourself can drink and then you can put those into your cocktails," said Mix.

Cheers! **CS**



Ballet Of Eventide
(Buenbicho Joven Mezcal
Artesanal, sour apple
liqueur, wheatgrass
pineapple cold-pressed
juice, fresh lemon juice,
kiwi, and green chartreuse
rinse). Photo courtesy
©Cocktail.Vision2021

Food for Thought

Creative Process Q&A with 24 Carrots Catering & Events

The creative process is always a bit of a mystery, isn't it? When attending events, you get to see the final product, but many don't let you go behind the curtain and unveil their creative secrets—that is, until today.

This past spring, 24 Carrots Catering & Events opened up the doors to their facility in Irvine, Calif. for an ICA workshop. Every member in attendance was blown away by their level of creativity and attention to detail in food, design, and service. At first glance, the agenda seemed like your run-of-the-mill workshop event. However, throughout the entire day and a half workshop, the 24 Carrots team pulled out all the stops, delighting guests with surprises and creative inspiration quite literally around every corner.

Some highlights were custom cocktails, sandwich-themed agendas (check out their Instagram for the visual), bold florals on every table, a picnic-inspired stage for presentations, and food that was just as delicious as it was fun.

We sat down with Carizza Rose, Marketing & Creative Director, and Laura Fabian, Chief Executive Officer, to get a rare behind-the-scenes look at the company's creative process. We hope it inspires you to mix up your standard processes to infuse a bit more wonder and excitement into your own events, from conceptualization to execution.

24 Carrots Catering & Events is a proud member of the ICA. For more information on how to join the ICA and to be notified of future catering industry webinars, events, and education opportunities, visit internationalcaterers.org.

“It isn’t always about coming up with the next super-unique idea that no one has seen before. It is about finding inspiration from everything around you and applying creativity based on the goal at hand.” —Laura Fabian

Explain your creative process for events like the ICA catering workshop. When did you initiate the planning phase?

Carizza Rose: We started diving into the full planning phase about a month before the workshop itself. Prior to that, we as a leadership team had identified our key priorities, so we already knew our company goals from a high level, and each department worked toward those. The details and decisions on each menu item and guest touchpoints really didn’t start getting pinned down until much closer to the event itself. That pressure and deadline also allowed us to make decisions quickly; if we’re grappling with something that our gut second-guesses, we don’t spend more time spinning our wheels. We also had the luxury of this fast-tracked timeline because we were the client in this instance and didn’t need to build in extra time for client approval.

Do you begin with the creative concept and then design the menu, or is it the reverse?

CR: Integrating a creative concept with the menu development is a dialogue.

For us, it typically starts with a jumping-off point that serves as your creative foundation and North Star. This could be a menu item, an experience, a display, anything really.

In this case, we hosted a similar event a few years ago, and we wanted to make sure that this guest experience was varied from the previous one and had its own signature. Then, I typically do a brain dump of multiple



(Opposite page) “Apples to Oranges” lunch menu featuring vibrant flavors with apple and citrus accents. Photo courtesy Lorely Meza

(Clockwise from left) Charred Forest Salad with koji miso maitake mushroom, English pea espuma, arare rice, and chicken dashi; 24 Carrots founder, Norm Bennett, with a fleet of miniature 24 Carrots trucks filled with a pallet of treats; The 24 Carrots Culinary Team prepares an amuse-bouche of ricotta knole with agrumato lemon. Photos courtesy Lorely Meza

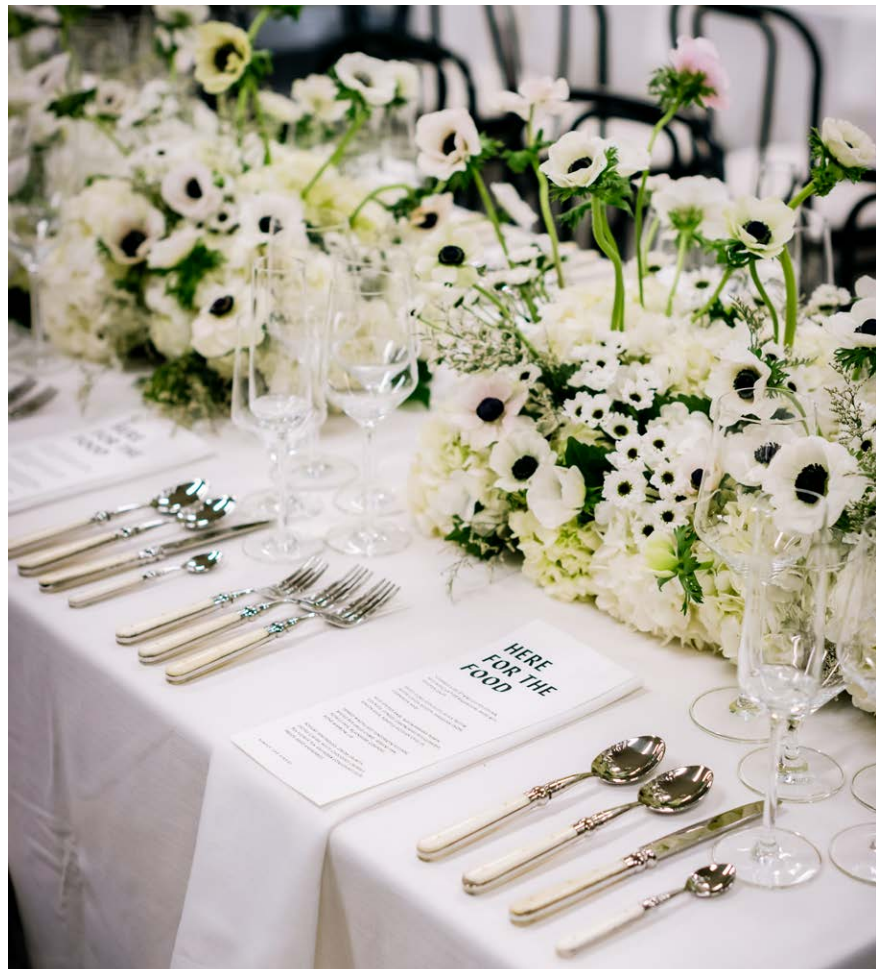
interpretations of that spark and dedicate time to pull together inspiration. When the creative cream rises to the top, you're left with the strongest concepts. From there, we pull together a mood board for the culinary team. We use a combination of visuals and words to convey the goal. Often, we may not have an exact inspiration image, so we'll have to paint the picture with texture, color, and sometimes even stories. We meet with the chefs to discuss, and from there, we ask lots of clarifying questions, throw out ideas, throw away ideas—it's very similar to the client experience. We usually don't create the menu right then; the culinary team takes some time to collaborate among themselves, propose the menu, and go through any necessary rounds of research and development.

I certainly view menu research and development as an extension of the creative process—and of course, the most delicious part!

What aspects of the creative process are managed in-house, and what parts are outsourced?

CR: Creativity, even if you narrow it down to the field of hospitality, it still contains an extensive spectrum of skills. I usually recommend leveraging the skills you have in-house and outsourcing the pieces that don't fit with your team (until you can potentially hire for them).

For us, our strongest creative skills are vision, communicating that vision, and applying it practically to the tactile field of catering. While we have the capacity to do many things internally, it all depends on varying factors (scope of the project, timeline, efficiencies, labor, etc.), so we collaborate with an assortment of vendors and partners so that we have depth of bench creatively: printers, graphic designers, fabricators, woodworkers, florists, etc. A lot of our most impactful vendors actually don't work in the event or hospitality





(Far left) Mini Korean Gamja Corn Dog with bulgolgi sausage, spicy ketchup, and yellow mustard; (Left) The 24 Carrots Catering & Events team preps koji miso maitake mushrooms for a "Charred Forest" Salad in the kitchen during the tour of the commissary; (Below left) Florals were provided by The Bloom of Time and tabletop linens and rentals were provided by BBJ La Tavola; (Below middle and right) Sweet corn agnolotti with black truffle, Meyer Lemon ricotta, parmesan snow, and cornhusk nage. Photos courtesy Lorely Meza



space at all—they're just really good at their craft, so we don't have to be.

When seeking inspiration for all events and creative endeavors, where do you draw from?

CR: I used to say that I drew inspiration from dining adventures—from eating off a local taco truck to a fine dining experience with theatrics and flair. I'd also get inspiration from other industries, with fashion, technology, and automotive being at the top of the list; they're all creative spaces that had nothing to do with what our company did and offered a challenge to bridge the gap between our worlds.

All those sources continue to inspire me. And yet, the more I've learned, the more I'm realizing that creativity is truly limitless.

How did you cultivate the theme for the workshop?

CR: Our overall motif for the workshop was Food for Thought. We're in the business of playing with our food, so we wanted to present our take on the workshop as a combination of education alongside fun and play. This also reflects who we are as a company and reflects our brand strongly; even our company name, 24 Carrots, is a play on words and food, and we take pride in being playful with our concepts.

Food for Thought also reflects our encouragement of curiosity and conversation for the workshop.

Our team wove a consistent message that every company and team is uniquely themselves and may have a different way that works better for them.

What do you personally think was the most unique concept you were able to bring to life?

CR: Definitely the welcome cocktails!

For most of the workshop planning process, we hadn't arrived at a beverage offering that we loved, just sort of defaulting to a tried-and-true classic. Something in me felt restless and unfulfilled by that, since everything we create has an opportunity to inspire, and thus far, it had felt like it was just "okay"—a concept that doesn't sit well with the 24 Carrots team. Ten days out from the workshop, I texted Laura, our CEO. I pitched some ideas and then ended with one concept that I prefaced with, "I know, I know, it's ridiculous." Naturally, we went with the ridiculous one because if we weren't going to go for it in this setting, then we weren't practicing what we were teaching.

This concept proposed custom cocktail hour beverages for every single guest, inspired by omakase dining experiences that are summed up in the translation as "I trust." An omakase cocktail experience is typically one reserved for the most bespoke of cocktail lounges or elite bar programs. Translating this to the catering and events world was a challenge that required information from each guest on their unique preferences, along with time to build these cocktails. Upon registration check-in, guests were asked to fill out an "icebreaker" without being told what it was for. It asked five simple questions regarding their preferences—only one of them beverage-related, but the rest based

on personality and style. To buy us time, we built in the element of surprise. After guests filled out their icebreakers, they dropped them off with us and started their guided tours. The answers to these questions were processed by our bar team, each of the answers giving a clue for each guest. To translate this to catering service, we utilized Seven Days Cocktails, a cocktail base that allows for consistency across the board. This allowed us to have a great foundation for all our curated beverages and gave space for unique additions of bitters, liqueurs, tonics, garnishes, presentation, etc.

We set up the bar station on the tour path, so when each tour group came across it, they were greeted with a curated cocktail based on their answers. Each glass was presented on the icebreaker coaster that each guest filled out with their own name, making it easy to pick up without servers having to find a beverage that matched the guest.

It was a joy to watch the groups have a moment of discovery, surprise, and delight. And even more so, it was rewarding to take a high-level hospitality concept and apply it to the challenging world of catering. It was not only fun and playful but also



Don't miss the ICA during Catersource Conference & Tradeshow

Stop by the ICA Inspiration Zone during Catersource Conference & Tradeshow 2024 to join friends, peers, and colleagues.

showed our commitment to creative hospitality, where one size fits one.

What advice do you have for caterers looking to establish an effective creative process for their teams?

Laura Fabian: In order for a caterer to establish an effective creative process for their team, they must fully commit to the process and recognize the value it brings to not only their clients but their team as a whole.

At 24 Carrots, we know we are more than “just a caterer.” We are driven by innovation, creativity, and unsurpassed service. This made the step into investing in creativity

an easy decision. We want to provide more for our clients and for ourselves, so we lean in hard to the creative process. We want our displays, buffets, and overall service to be unique and very “24 Carrots.” In doing so, we not only create a new revenue stream, but we also provide endless amounts of creative opportunity across all departments within 24 Carrots.

To be successful, this commitment has to be made at the top of the organization. As CEO of the company, I push and support creativity throughout the company. I encourage vulnerability in the process and truly believe that we should be



(Opposite page, top) Mini Al Pastor Taco, pineapple chili chutney, beet tortilla; (Opposite page, left) Philly Cheesesteak Bao Bun; (Opposite page, right) Seared Wagyu Beef Tenderloin Roulade, wilted red Swiss Chard, Iberico ham, potato pave, blackberry compote, and bone marrow jus; (Above) The cocktail concept for the event created custom cocktail hour beverages for every single guest, inspired by omakase dining experiences that are summed up in the translation as "I trust." Photos courtesy Lorely Meza

open to all ideas that come from our team. I also ensure we properly budget for new supporting rental inventory for our creative team each year. Having access to new and exciting display pieces and equipment keeps the creativity going throughout our organization and takes away some of the monotony that can happen when you cater over and over again each week.

Hire someone to drive your creative process. Someone needs to own it, stay on top of it, and drive it forward. It can't be left as a floating idea throughout the organization. Having a creative manager on your team makes it real, focused, and tangible. This team member has an important role in collaborating with the sales, culinary, and operations teams and is a vital component to having a successful creative process. This person needs to be passionate about food, and they must be creative (of course), collaborative, organized, and have the ability to see opportunity and inspiration in their surroundings.

But most of all...

Have fun and take risks.

Push the boundaries.

Think outside of the box.

Bring creativity to the organization that is unique to you.

There is so much inspiration available to all of us. Take that inspiration and make it your own.

Know who you are as a company and add your twist to whatever inspires you at that moment. It isn't always about coming up with the next super-unique idea that no one has seen before. It is about finding inspiration from everything around you and applying creativity based on the goal at hand.

Always remember that some of the craziest ideas morph into some of the very best ideas—so lean into those crazy ideas. **CS**

Are you ready to be inspired?

Experience the Art of Catering Food, presented in partnership between the International Caterers Association, February 11-12 in Austin, TX.

AOCF is an event designed for chefs, and taught by chefs. Over the course of two days leading into Catersource + The Special Event, you'll connect with experienced catering chefs sharing new culinary techniques, the latest trending ingredients, food costing, and everything else you need to know to turn your menus into works of art.

Whether you are looking for ways to enhance your operations or want to liaise with, learn from, and see what catering chefs around the country are doing to appeal to new clients, the Art of Catering Food has something for you!

Find all the details at <https://informaconnect.com/art-of-catering-food/>



Get industry insight
from these experts
during Catersource +
The Special Event,
February 12–15 in
Austin, TX.

Paul Buchanan

Sebastien Centner

Clint Elkins

Anthony Lambatos

Roy Porter

Meryl Snow

Catersource State of the Industry 2023

Caterers grappled with rising costs & decreasing budgets, while creativity remained top of mind. By Amber Kispert



It's been quite a roller coaster for the catering and events industry thanks to lingering effects from the pandemic followed by substantial growth during recovery, forcing everyone to embrace a new normal. Fluctuating prices, technological advancements, staffing shortages, and changing consumer behaviors are just a few factors that forced the catering and events industry to adapt.

As 2023 comes to a close, the catering industry finds itself at the intersection of tradition and innovation, so let's take a look back at a year that challenged caterers to tap into their most creative solutions.

"Remember, it's not what happened," says Roy Porter (Engage Works), "it's how you react to what happened. Your positive attitude will help you react in a positive way and find the underlying opportunities."

Survey says

Earlier in the third quarter, *Catersource* released a survey to our readership. Surveys are always a good place to start an end of the year report. Let's first look at some of the questions we asked, and some of the interesting responses we received, and then we will move into the *Catersource* State of the Industry 2023.

Catersource State of the Industry 2023

Who responded to our survey?

- 35% identified as Owner/CEO
- 23% as Director/VP
- 17% as Event Planning & Staff
- 16% Sales/Marketing

Interestingly, 25% noted that they have been in the events industry for 10–14 years, 18% have been in the industry for 15–20 years, and an

impressive 44% have worked in the industry for more than 20 years.

This year's survey looked at everything from staffing to client spend to guest counts to client requests. Take a look at the accompanying data to hear from your peers on what they encountered this year.

Corporate catering makes a comeback

From the nuances of business events to the tailored experiences demanded by corporate clients, 2023 proved to be an interesting one for the corporate catering industry. According to *Catersource's* 2023 State of the Industry (SOI) survey, just 30% of respondents indicated that the corporate catering market is strong, whereas 47% said they still see the market segment as still improving. However, 35% of respondents did indicate that they generated the most business in 2023 from corporate catering. According to data from *Datassential*, 41% of restaurants offer catering in some capacity, resulting in catering being the most offered service by restaurants.

The advent of remote and hybrid work models has profoundly impacted corporate catering. In 2023, caterers have had to meet the demands of virtual events, creating innovative solutions for delivering culinary experiences to dispersed teams. Virtual tasting sessions, curated meal kits, and technology-driven catering services have become essential offerings as corporate clients seek ways to foster team engagement and connection in a digital workspace.

In its annual [Lunch Report](#), ezCater surveyed 5,000 workers across the U.S. to explore the relationship between food at work—specifically around lunchtime habits. At a high level, findings show that providing a catered lunch is a win-win-win for companies, employees, and restaurants.

- Lunch breaks benefit both workers and employers, showing the value of workplace catering for restaurants. Most (78%) workers agree on one thing year after year: taking a lunch break improves



Top Trends of 2023

We asked, you answered! Here are the top trends that took the spotlight throughout 2023 according to the *Catersource* State of the Industry survey.

- Interactive food stations
- Small bites
- Health and wellness
- Outdoor events
- Vegan and vegetarian
- Allergy conscious menus
- Comfort food with a twist
- Build-your-own bars
- Family-style service
- Grazing tables
- Fusion/global influences
- Customization
- Farm to table
- Extravagant florals
- Signature cocktails
- Dessert stations
- Personalized décor
- Late night snacks
- Experiential
- Themes
- Casual with a formal flair

their job performance, with over half (53%) saying they have more mental clarity when they stop for lunch.

- In addition to increased productivity, 67% of hybrid workers say free lunch would impact their decision to work onsite and commute.
- Workers in Atlanta were the most likely to say their employer pays for lunch at least once a week (44% vs 31% nationally)

Additionally, consider these statistics from the *Catersource* survey:

- Lunch is the most prevalent mealtime in corporate catering (53%)
- Full-service catering is the most prevalent type of corporate catering (47%)

Corporate catering in 2023 is not just about feeding employees either; it's about nourishing their well-being. The trend toward healthier, plant-based options and customizable menus that cater to diverse dietary needs has gained momentum. In 2024, expect corporate caterers to delve deeper into wellness-oriented menus, integrating nutritional expertise into their offerings to align with the growing emphasis on employee health and vitality.

According to ezCater, some ideas to capitalize on the current trends in corporate catering include:

- Creating menus to target:
 - [Bleisure](#) travelers who want a meal with friends and family in a hotel
 - Remote workers who come together for meetings and teamwork
- As the remote work trend continues, coworking can create opportunities too; these rented out spaces also fuel catering sales

- Creating unique dining experiences for affluent customers, e.g., a seasonable menu with extraordinary ingredients
- Blending entertainment and dining experiences for customers, e.g., a themed menu

Making a moment

If 2022 was the year for getting back to pre-pandemic event levels, then 2023 has been the year for getting re-inspired. Catered events were no longer just about great food, but an experience as well.

Throughout 2023, caterers have been exploring customization, personalization, and interactive dining concepts to captivate the taste buds of their clients. Personalized menus tailored to dietary preferences and cultural considerations have become a hallmark of successful catered social events, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity and customer satisfaction.

Immersive experiences

In the realm of event catering, a transformation is unfolding—a shift from traditional behind-the-scenes kitchen work to immersive and engaging dining experiences.

Immersive experiences are not necessarily new, but according to [SupHerb Farms' 2024 Food & Beverage Trend Report](#), there is a new breadth of experiences now available to consumers, as well as the venues in which these experiences can be found.

(From top) Apple-Y Ever After Market Salad (shaved brussels sprouts, candied walnuts, Granny Smith apples, currants, pecorino, and red wine vinaigrette), elote-style mini street corns, and the beverage stand featuring several specialty cocktails and non-alcoholic beverages during 24 Carrots Catering & Events' Autumn's Up Fall Festival ACE-winning corporate event. Photos courtesy Andy Rodriguez



Catersource State of the Industry 2023



Star Trax Events designed a custom bar, which served specialty Detroit cocktails, for the 2022 North American International Auto Show. Photo courtesy Star Trax Events



Star Trax Events hosted the Allure - Corporate Charity Preview Event as part of the 2022 North American International Auto Show. Photo courtesy Star Trax Events



RED VELVET hosted the Gala-nominated Jimmy John's Château JéJé corporate event. Photo courtesy Holly Cowart



Custom sandwiches from Jimmy John's were delivered to guests fine dining style during the Château JéJé event. Photo courtesy Holly Cowart



Contemporary Catering wanted to ditch the “boring” plated salads for its CATIE-nominated event. After some brainstorming, they took the traditional “champagne wall” concept and applied it to tasty, fresh salads! Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Contemporary Catering



During the CATIE-winning La Caille Tasting, LUX Catering & Events designed a culinary experience to ignite varied senses—olfactory, visual, touch, and taste. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull

At-table preparation, interactive dishes/beverages, or items that require some prep can help create mini-immersions for consumers.

“Weddings are becoming more experiential as couples want to get their loved ones involved in their big day,” says Hannah Friedenbach (Culinary Canvas).

“Clients are seeking a new, different, and unique experience,” adds Porter. “Give it to them because they will pay more for it!”

Eventbrite found that 75% of diners believe it’s worth paying more for a one-of-a-kind experience.

Experiential catering is the natural progression of the open kitchen concept. Think back to those classic omelet and carving stations; they’ve been a staple in catering for years. However, today’s guests seek more than just a meal; they desire an active role in their culinary journey.

The rise of social media and a desire for shareable, engaging experiences to share with their followers has shifted expectations and made interactive catering stations an ever-more attractive event integration.

“Immersive catering means crafting experiences that go beyond presenting to or at a guest, but rather actively inviting the guest to become a participant in that experience,” [according to an article from Schaffer](#). “It’s no longer simply about serving food; it’s about creating unforgettable moments. These experiences engage the senses, spark conversations, and leave lasting impressions.”

Taking the immersive concept even further is **sensory dining**, where guests use all their senses to enjoy a meal: smell, sight, touch, sound, and of course taste.

Details matter

In 2023, and moving into 2024, caterers are placing heightened importance on the aesthetics of their culinary creations. From meticulously arranged platters to avant-garde serving vessels, the visual appeal of food is a powerful tool for creating a lasting impression. Instagram-worthy moments are not just a trend; they are an integral part of modern catering.

“We’ve made cakes with hyper-personal touches like a topper welded by the groom or decorating end-of-the-night cookies with the bride and groom’s silhouettes,” says Laurie Lewis (Culinary Canvas).

Next up, vague menu descriptors are in the past as more transparent listings become en vogue, according to **Technomic**. Cocktails won’t contain just any apple flavor, but rather that of a Granny Smith apple.



Fried white and green asparagus with a truffle fig aioli served during LUX Catering & Events' CATIE-winning La Caille Tasting. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/LUX Catering & Events



Marcia Selden Catering & Events' Boursin Panna Cotta with Sunchoke Bisque and Crispy Garlic Chips. The soup is poured tableside, which makes for a beautiful presentation. Photo courtesy Julie Bidwell



Schaffer's Edible Garden: bite-sized crudite plated in edible soil made from puffed rice and breadcrumbs, and accompanied by watering cans filled with dressing. Photo courtesy Lex Gallegos



Guests opened these white boxes to reveal a smiling message and the CATIE-nominated torched avocado toast with blue crab salad, lemon ricotta, and colorful edible flowers from Footers Catering. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Footers Catering

Generic red wine vinegar will move aside for Barolo wine vinegar. And raw beef dishes will become more distinct as filet mignon carpaccio and tenderloin steak tartare. Not only will ingredient varietal types find momentum in menu descriptions, but so will callouts of regions or countries of origin and influence, especially lesser-known ones, such as Haitian honey and Senegalese-style chicken. This in-depth menu detail will further push quality, premiumization, and transparency in the consumer mindset.

Additionally, the era of one-size-fits-all catering is fading. In 2024, successful caterers will go beyond crafting personalized menus; they will extend customization to every aspect of the dining experience. From tailored table settings that reflect the event theme to personalized service styles that resonate with the client's vision, attention to detail will

be a hallmark of bespoke catering services. Every element, from linens to lighting, will contribute to a cohesive and immersive experience.

"Think about going fully custom with your food and cocktails by implementing cocktails that pair with every part of the meal," says Friedenbach. "One drink introduces the appetizer, another pairs with the main entree, and a final glass pairs with desserts. You can even go the unexpected route and play with salty, spicy, and umami flavors with the evening's entree. Plus, guests might not always leave room for dessert while dancing the night away, but they'll sure be intrigued by a decadent dessert cocktail or boozy ice cream scoop."

The triple threat

Caterers are still having to find ways to adapt to the three-headed monster

that has plagued the industry for the past couple years: a tight labor market, a chaotic supply chain, and runaway inflation. According to a survey from the International Caterers Association, these challenges equate to a 75% decrease in business for Q1 year-over-year.

A tight labor market

The hospitality industry began 2023 with optimism, with the majority of people expecting revenue to rise by 10% or more, even as they increased pay to attract workers in a competitive market, according to Instawork's [State of Hospitality Staffing report](#).

However, despite consecutive employment growth for 24 months, the industry is still roughly 450,000 jobs below pre-pandemic levels, according to a white paper from SupHerb Farms, [Facing the Labor Dilemma](#).

Continued on page 111



Culinary Canvas has been utilizing native state flowers and wildflowers for cakes, while also exploring drying florals and using them for a pressed look. Shown: these flowers were handpicked from the groom's grandfather's garden. Photo courtesy Culinary Canvas

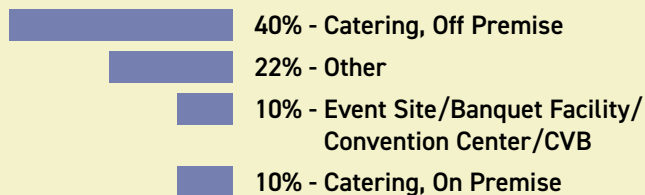


Culinary Canvas likes to add hyper-personalized touches to desserts, such as a cake topper welded by the groom. Photo courtesy Culinary Canvas

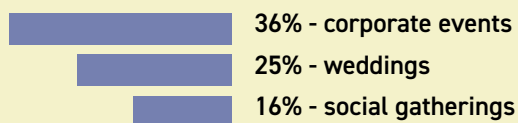


SURVEY SAYS

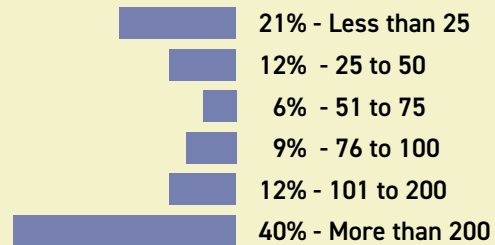
Which of the following best describes your company's primary business?



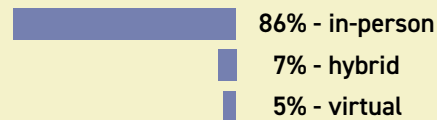
Which business sector have you garnered the most business from thus far in 2023?



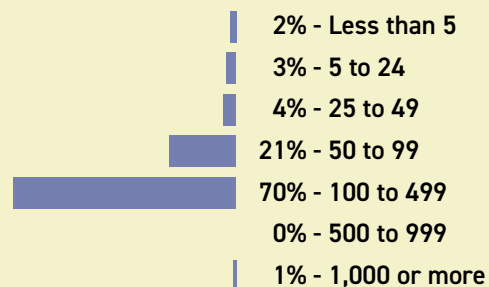
How many events of any kind have you been contracted for in 2023?



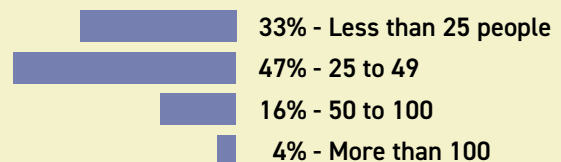
How often do you produce the following types of catered events?



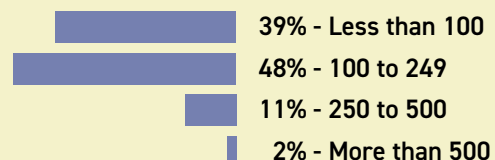
How many guests on average attend your clients' weddings?



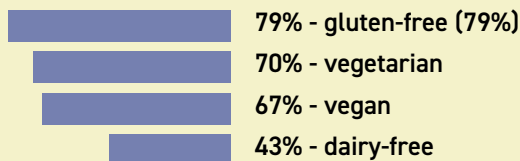
What is the average size of your drop-off corporate catering orders?



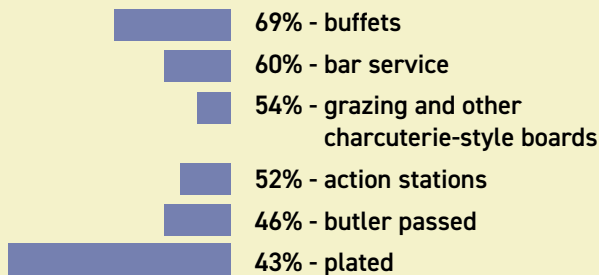
What is the average size of your full-service corporate catering orders?



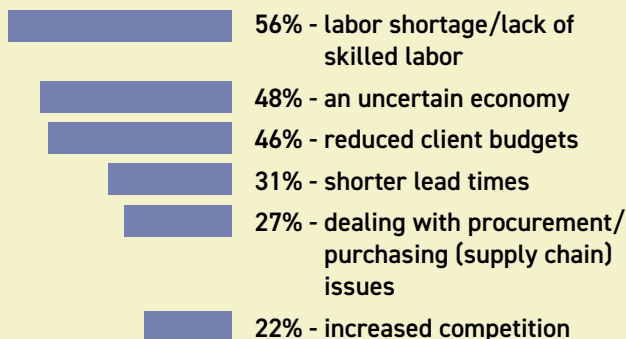
What eating styles/diets have been most requested during your events in 2023?



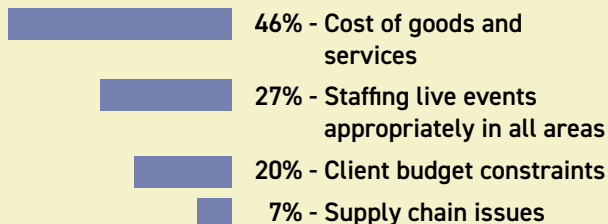
What catering styles or requests were highly requested throughout 2023?



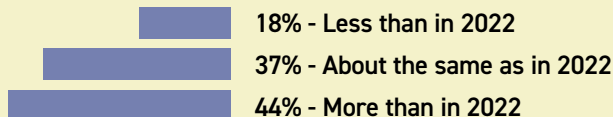
What are the greatest professional challenges facing you in 2024?



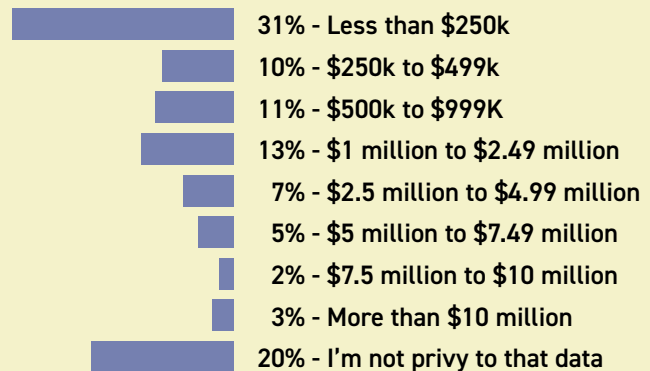
What has been the most concerning for your company in 2023?



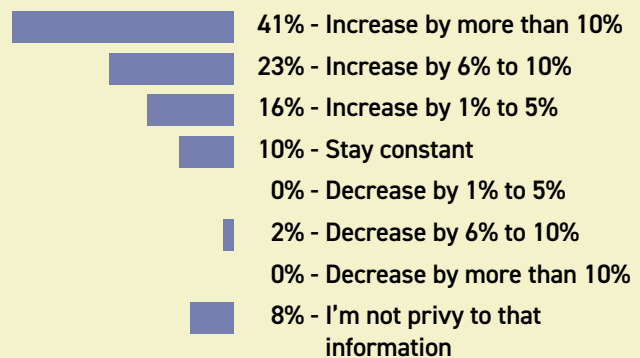
How does the 2023 projected profit compare to 2022?



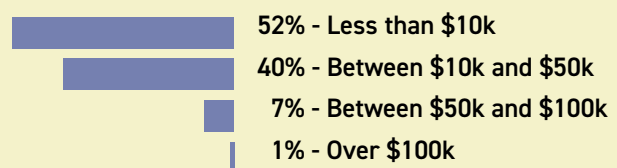
What is your projected overall profit for 2023?



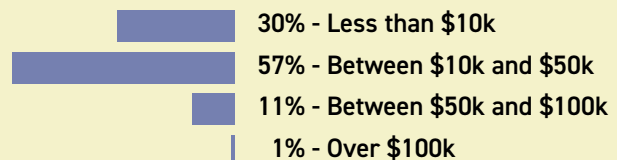
How do you expect your organization's 2024 expenditures to change compared with 2023?



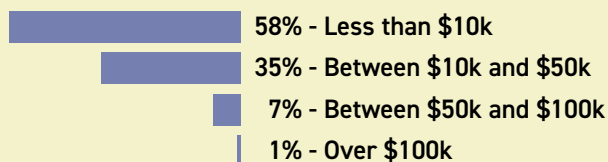
What is the average client spend for corporate events in 2023?



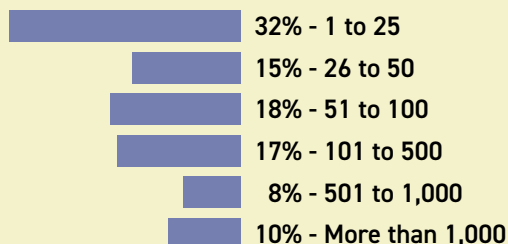
What has been the average client wedding budget in 2023?



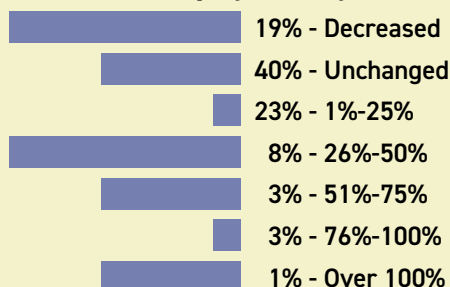
What is the average client spend for social events in 2023?



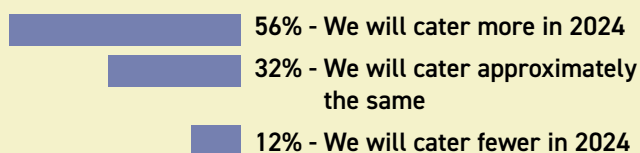
What is the approximate number of people employed by your company, across all locations?



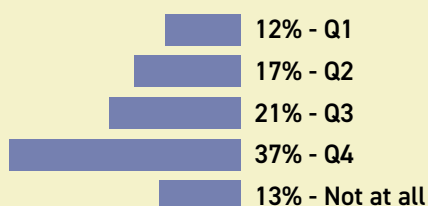
What is your rough estimate of the number of employees at your company this year compared to the number employed last year at this time?



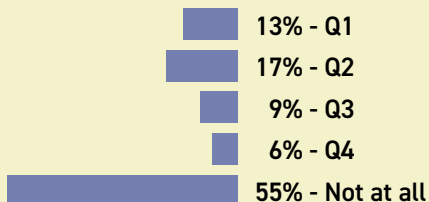
What is your prediction for the number of events you will cater in 2024 versus 2023?



How far into 2024 are events of any kind being booked?



How far into 2025 are events of any kind being booked?



What key steps are you taking in 2024 to improve your business?



Additionally, relative to consumer spending and adjusted for inflation, employment in key industries like foodservice and accommodation is still well below pre-pandemic levels, with almost two million jobs below the trend based on consumer spending, according to the Instawork report.

These continued labor shortages limit how much revenue the industry can bring in. For example, operators have had to reduce the number of events they accept because they literally can't find enough employees to staff them.

Additionally, SupHerb Farms reported that 65% of operators are hiring less qualified staff, with 32% reporting that their culinary skill is lower today than it was a year ago (just 6% reported higher culinary skill).

Turnover is steep and the staff

that food businesses do retain are demanding more money than ever—with 75% of operators noting an increase in labor costs, according to SupHerb Farms.

"We all know that staffing is a big issue," said Francisco Christian (Taylored Hospitality Solutions) in an ICA webinar.

A chaotic supply chain

Caterers continued to grapple with supply chain disruptions throughout 2023, and this is expected to continue into 2024. According to SupHerb Farms' white paper, *Navigating the Supply Chain*, three in four operators are experiencing more out-of-stock ingredients this year than ever before.

Methods for building resilient supply chains included such solutions as

exploring local sourcing options and strategic partnerships. Technology also played a crucial role in enhancing supply chain visibility and mitigating risks, ensuring a steady and reliable stream of ingredients for catering operations.

Operators have discovered that versatile ingredients used across numerous menu items can help to ease sourcing headaches while also offering the benefit of price breaks. What's more, by reducing the number of ingredients on which your staff needs to be trained, operators are seeing an upturn in overall efficiency. According to a press release from Craftable, a hospitality management program designed to drive profitability and lower labor costs, menu engineering—a technique that analyzes each item's contribution to the profit against

Continued on page 113



During the International Caterers Association Workshop in August, attendees enjoyed an al fresco dinner at The Foundry Courtyard hosted by Dish Food & Events. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Dish Food & Events



Staff prep dinner during the International Caterers Association Workshop at Dish Food & Events in August. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Dish Food & Events

Catersource State of the Industry 2023



Constellation Culinary Group employed a kitchen robot during its Apéritif Reception. Photo courtesy Carolina Guzik Photography



Flippy from Miso Robotics is the world's first-ever AI-powered robotic fry cook. With its incredible multitasking capabilities, Flippy can fry frozen ingredients and plate finished food with remarkable precision while keeping multiple recipes on the go. Photo courtesy Miso Robotics



Moley Robotics' robotic kitchen features a dexterous robot integrated into a luxury kitchen, that prepares freshly-cooked meals at the touch of a button. Photo courtesy Moley Robotics



Nala Robotics exhibited during the National Restaurant Association Show (held in May in Chicago) where it demonstrated its Pizzaiola (robotic pizza maker). Photo courtesy Nala Robotics



Dexai's robot dubbed "Alfred" is a food safe-certified robotic arm that can sit in front of a row of hotel pans of ingredients, and uses traditional kitchen utensils like scoops and tongs. Photo courtesy Lane Turner/Boston Globe

how often it is purchased—is the key to consistently high margins when used effectively.

Runaway inflation

Pricing is obviously one of the more challenging areas of running a business, as you must balance the market value of your offerings with the costs of operating. For catering and foodservice companies, such a calculation gets trickier as the cost of ingredients and other products are subject to change with the market.

“Runaway inflation and staff shortages have increased the cost of food and labor. Surfing the breaks and swells brought on by circumstances beyond their control requires the restaurant industry to adopt a new way of thinking to adapt to the ebbs and flows,” said Brian Duncan, President of me&u USA, in a press release.

Food prices rose 3.7% between

September 2022 and September 2023, according to the most recent consumer price index (CPI) report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. By comparison, at the same time in 2022 prices rose 11.2% over a one-year period. According to SubHerb Farms, there has been a 29% average price inflation reported by fresh fruit and vegetables this year. According to Christian, inflation will most likely end the year around 4.3% with a potential drop in January and February.

“Those prices are not going to come down, we just hope they stay the same,” said Clint Elkins (SB Value) in the ICA webinar.

In addition to food prices, inflation is also having an impact on what clients are willing to spend on their events.

According to the *Catersource* survey, clients are becoming more budget conscious. “Clients are requesting to sacrifice quality for price,” said one respondent.

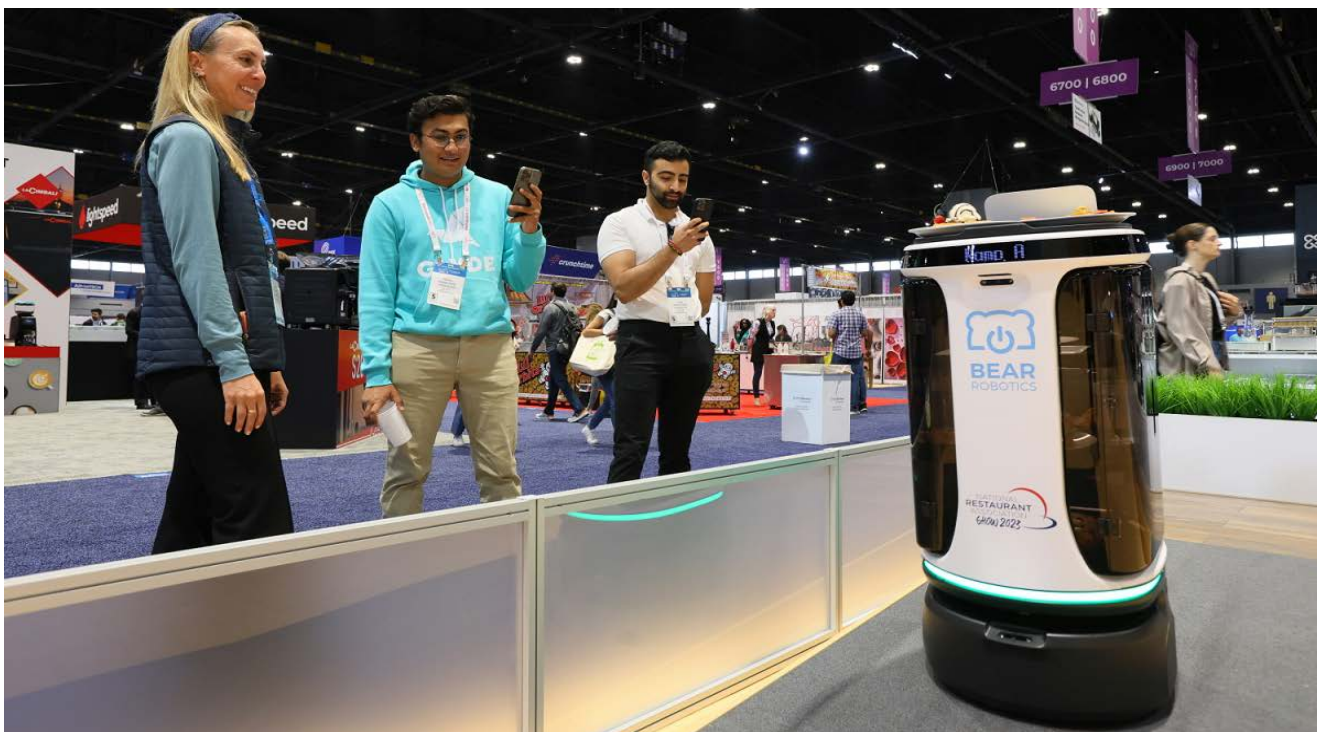
“Budgets are tighter than 2022 and that is driving menu selection,” said another.

The tech revolution

Efficiency is the name of the game in catering, and technology is the linchpin; the modern kitchen is becoming a tech hub.

From AI-powered menu customization to blockchain-enabled supply chain transparency, catering businesses are leveraging technology to streamline operations and stay ahead of the curve. Online ordering platforms, virtual tastings, and interactive menus are becoming standard practices, catering to the digital preferences of today's consumers.

“When new technology comes out, people tend to fall into one of two camps: either they are excited by the potential benefits and become early adopters or they are leery about the downsides that may come with



Bear Robotics displayed its Servi robots during the 2023 National Restaurant Association Show. Servi can help run food or bus dishes. Photo courtesy National Restaurant Association

it, and they wait to explore it until the kinks have been worked out or it becomes absolutely necessary to adopt,” said Anthony Lambatos in an article for [Catersource](#).

Artificial intelligence

In 2023, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as an essential ingredient of food and beverage innovation. AI is being used to optimize everything from crop growth to formulating innovative products to recommending menu items.

“Though AI is far from its full potential, it’s clear that the food industry will find countless tasks and uses for this emerging technology,” says the SupHerb Farms’ trend report.

A few of the ways AI can be applied in the catering industry include:

- Menu planning and optimization: AI algorithms can analyze customer preferences, dietary restrictions, and trending food items to suggest optimized menus. Additionally, predictive analytics can help caterers anticipate demand for specific dishes, reducing food waste and optimizing inventory.
- Order management: AI-powered systems can streamline order processing, managing orders efficiently, and reducing errors. Additionally, chatbots or virtual assistants can handle customer inquiries, process orders, and provide real-time updates.
- Supply chain management: AI can be used to optimize supply chain logistics, helping to manage inventory levels, predict demand, and reduce costs. Additionally, automated systems can track and manage the procurement of ingredients, ensuring timely deliveries and minimizing disruptions.
- Personalized customer experience: AI can analyze customer data to personalize the catering experience, providing tailored recommendations and offers. Additionally, chatbots and virtual assistants can handle customer queries and provide information about menu options, pricing, and event details.
- Predictive maintenance: AI-powered systems can monitor catering equipment and predict when maintenance is needed, reducing downtime and preventing unexpected failures.
- Quality control: AI vision systems can be used to monitor the quality of food preparation, ensuring consistency and adherence to quality standards.

AI can even help [improve sales processes and results](#).

Throughout 2023 there was also growing demand for smart appliances, such as smart ovens that can automatically adjust cooking

times and temperatures based on the type of food being prepared or AI-powered refrigerators that can monitor expiration dates and suggest recipes based on the ingredients available.

[The AMEX 2024 Global Meetings and Events Forecast](#) found that 42% of respondents said they expect to use AI in 2024.

“As caterers and event professionals we must embrace these advancements, the stage is set for a tech-driven renaissance that will define the industry landscape in 2024 and beyond,” says Meryl Snow (SnowStorm Solutions).

Robotics

Robots, once limited to the realm of science fiction, are now making their mark in the catering world.

These intelligent machines are transforming the way caterers prepare, cook, and serve food, offering unprecedented levels of efficiency, precision, and consistency.

Between the emergence of robot chefs, fully-automated robotic kitchens, and service robots, 2023 has been a game-changer in the catering industry.

These technology innovations that automate and streamline processes are freeing up catering and event professionals to focus on the creative and relational work that is so pivotal to the industry, leaving the repetitive, tedious tasks to tech.

“Humans do what they do best. Let robots do the rest,” said Steve Kane, who works with Pringle Robotics in their Hospitality Innovation department in an article

for [Catersource](#). “Robots, especially service robots, exist to do the dull, dirty, or dangerous jobs that can sap people’s time, joy, and motivation at work. Now no one’s saying that catering is dangerous, but there can be a lot of repetition, a lot of physical strain, and steps involved in catering and events work. When robots can automatically do some of the not-so-fun tasks, it creates a better environment for workers and their customers. People can focus on the higher-value work that’s uniquely human. And they do all of this without tiring. Basically, they allow great catering staff to be even better because they have the time and energy to focus on guest experience.”

The key to harnessing the power of these new and emerging technologies, though, is a thorough evaluation of the benefits.



Pringle Robotics currently offers a number of different service robots including KettyBOT, which can simplify hosting, guiding, delivery, and advertising. Photo courtesy Pringle Robotics



Chippy from Miso Robotics is designed to fry one or two high-volume products that need seasoning and finishing—such as tortilla chips. Photo courtesy Miso Robotics

Catersource State of the Industry 2023



World Centric aims to provide their customers with products that can improve sustainability goals and help increase the diversion of organic materials away from landfills. Photo courtesy World Centric



World Centric has both single and double compartment catering platters, matching flat and raised lids, as well as serving utensils. Photo courtesy World Centric



World Centric offers products that are made from plant-based or recycled materials, and their products are either compostable or recyclable. Photo courtesy World Centric



These container sleeves, which help keep food safe and trays closed during transportation, are 100% compostable. Photo courtesy World Centric

“Just because new technology exists doesn’t mean it should be implemented,” said Lambatos. “While artificial intelligence tools, robots, and other emerging technologies dominate headlines, leaders need to determine what is applicable to their businesses and their teams both in the short and long term. By evaluating the resources necessary as well as the impact on both guests and employees, they can make informed decisions that will lead to the successful implementation of new technology.”

Going green

Sustainability is no longer a buzzword; it’s a crucial aspect of businesses today.

As environmental consciousness grows, sustainability has become a focal point for the catering industry. Consumers are increasingly demanding eco-friendly options,

pushing caterers to adopt sustainable sourcing practices, reduce food waste, and embrace eco-conscious packaging while ensuring a smaller carbon footprint.

“Sustainability has never been more important to a wide range of consumers, especially given the last few years of significant and more extreme weather events,” the SupHerb Farms’ trend report states. “Though consumers have been challenged to spend the same amount of money on sustainable products in the face of inflation in 2023, there’s no question that sustainability is now elevated in many consumers’ minds and that they will begin to seriously seek out sustainable options once inflation begins to subside. Sustainability will impact food ingredients, packaging, delivery, and manufacturer and operator in-house behavior.”

Ingredient sourcing

Sourcing ingredients from far and wide can carry a significant price tag as you shoulder the costs of climate-controlled storage and transportation.

“Needless to say, shipping food around the world is not an eco-friendly solution,” said Elkins in an [article for Catersource](#).

So instead, skip the shipping and handling surcharges and take advantage of your local food scene, including butchers, farmers, beekeepers, brewers, and other specialists.

Some caterers are even getting extra local by [producing their own ingredients](#).

By working only with vendors who follow [sustainability practices](#) and source responsibly, you can reduce the damaging effects of your event and actually harness long term community.



Boxed Water is a sustainable alternative to plastic bottles and aluminum cans that is 92% plant-based and 100% recyclable. Photo courtesy Buzz Orr Multimedia



The CanSPEP 2021 conference worked with a reusable container company to replace disposable food packaging. Photo courtesy Explore Waterloo Region



For a wedding by Kathryn Cooper Weddings, the couple used their personal collection of glassware and antique books as the centerpieces for their wedding. Photo courtesy Kathryn Cooper Weddings



M Culinary Concepts uses compostable bowls and provides clearly labeled recycling and compost bins to better reduce waste. Photo courtesy M Culinary Concepts

Reducing food waste

With nearly one-third of all food produced being wasted, the food and beverage industry is looking for every opportunity to [upcycle would-be-waste](#). By repurposing by-products or discarded ingredients, companies can reduce waste while producing delicious and sustainable products.

Earlier this year, [Special Events magazine](#) took a deep dive into the steps the events industry can take in an effort to reduce carbon emissions, a key step being reducing food waste.

According to a [report by Hubspot](#), some of the best ways to reduce carbon emissions from food waste include:

- Minimize excess food from the start through accurate measurement and clear communication (between catering team, attendees, client, etc.)
- Donate leftover food to local organizations for redistribution
- Provide organics waste removal for composting food waste
- Practice sustainable sourcing, food waste diversion, and use biodegradable or reusable materials for dinnerware and food station setup

Another exciting area in the fight against food waste is technology which enables companies to reduce waste during production. One recent example is the use of AI and robotics to [sort compost from trash](#).

“70% of what goes into the recycling container at any of your homes and any of your businesses is all straight to the landfill, because you put it in the wrong things, or those products can’t be recycled,” said Chef Paul Buchanan (Primal Alchemy) during his Catersource + The Special Event 2023 session *Talkin’ Trash: A Candid Conversation about Zero Waste*.

Unconventional serving ware

There has been a significant shift from single-use plastic and paper products. Yet, while moving to reusable items like china and glassware is a step in the right direction, it’s not entirely zero-waste. After all, they require electricity, water, dish soap, and labor to properly clean, sanitize, and store.

Instead, the food and beverage industry is pivoting toward sustainable packaging solutions, aiming to reduce its carbon footprint. From plant-based plastics to zero-waste packaging, businesses are innovating to meet consumer demand for eco-conscious alternatives.



Offering guests reusable bottles keeps material in the supply chain and eliminates waste immediately. Photo courtesy M Culinary Concepts

Nearly one-third of U.S. consumers recently switched brands based on plant-based and compostable packaging in both foodservice and grocery channels, according to World Centric. Additionally, in the past year, over half (55%) of U.S. consumers have changed their brand purchasing behaviors in grocery or foodservice channels because of access to compostable or plant-based packaging.

Edible packaging is quickly becoming a solution to cut out waste by harnessing innovation. For instance, you might swap out a traditional glass bowl for a cored apple served with gelato in it. Or perhaps you replace metal spoons with a garlicky spoon-shaped cracker to serve with a tasty bowl of bisque. In fact, earlier this year, the University of Cambridge spun off Xampla, a startup developing edible and biodegradable plant-based packaging.

The sustainable packaging market for food and beverage is expected to exceed \$100 billion in value over the next five years, according to [Gourmet Pro](#).

More often than not, what's good for the planet is also good for your local community. And what's good for your community is good for your catering business.

Looking ahead to 2024

As we savor the triumphs and challenges of the catering industry in 2023, our gaze inevitably turns toward the future. What lies ahead for catering businesses in 2024?

A major shift in 2024 will be clients' increased reliance on caterers, on more than just food.

"There will be more interest and buying of services beyond outstanding food," says Porter. "More prospects will look for caterers and special event producers that can take on more event execution production responsibility. The better prospects and clients don't have the time to shop all around and deal with coordinating 10 creative partners for an event. So be ready to act more as a general contractor instead of just a food provider.

"We're going to have to develop a Seal Team Six attitude—service anywhere, anytime, and under any condition."

This may be due to the fact that consumers are nervous about a possible recession.

"Consumers are just a little bit lost right now," said Datassential Senior Director, Publications Ann Golladay in a [webinar](#). "One month things can feel pretty good and then a month later, things kind of head a little downhill again. There's a lot of variation and uncertainty."

However, the foodservice industry is more positive than negative, which could lead to things like menu innovation or upgrades.

Additionally, we can expect the business boom of the last two years to start leveling out in 2024, and we may even see a drop in wedding business because not very many new relationships started during the pandemic.

"In my career to date, I don't think I have ever been as excited as I am for 2024," says Sebastien Centner (Eatertainment Events & Catering). "I believe 2024 will bring stability back to our industry after three years of the roller-coaster ride created by the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Companies and clients will of course still need to navigate ongoing economic and social challenges, but behind us will be the unknown of whether the world may come to another full or partial stop. We will be able to plan for the medium and long-term future, start thinking about events, programs, and conferences two and three years out (like we used to) and best of all, be able to invest in growing our businesses with a more positive sense of confidence of where things are going." 

You're Invited: The Art of Catering Food

**Save the date for when we make our way to
Austin, TX February 11–12, 2024**

By Amber Kispert



(From left to right) Chris Towne served both
courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos; Nett
Shrimp, artichoke, peas & lemon orecchiette

**“
This conference is my
jam, and you are my
people.”**

— Chef Karen O'Connor



James Beard-nominated Chef Tavel Bristol-Joseph is the pastry chef and Partner at Emmer & Rye, Hestia, Kalimotxo, Canje, and Ezov in Austin, TX, as well as Ladino in San Antonio. Photo courtesy Tavel Bristol-Joseph

(Below, left) Last year's Lunch & Learn touched on all things tacos. Photo courtesy Savannah Spirov; (below) Chef Jason Sutton took a deep dive into Beef & Reef last year. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



...a miniature Chicken and Waffle Cone and pork belly steam buns during his session last year. Photo
...ie Frank delivered some delicious doughnuts during her 2023 session. Photo courtesy Savannah Spirov;
...e. Photo courtesy Savannah Spirov

the **ART** of CATERING FOOD

Are you ready to be inspired? *Catersource*, in collaboration with the International Caterers Association, will once again be delivering Art of Catering Food, taking place February 11–12 at the Austin Convention Center.

Focused through the lens of the catering chef, AOCF is a boutique event created by chefs for chefs, bringing attendees a two-day intensive that focuses closely on catered events and the food and logistics it takes to make them so memorable.

All the hallmarks of AOCF are in place: the quick-burst Round Robins that keep attendees moving and learning; two high energy Lunch & Learns that pair culinary concepts with a solid learning experience plus networking, and a captivating keynote featuring Austin-based Chef Tavel Bristol-Joseph that will open your minds to Caribbean cuisine and the ideas you may never have considered for your own kitchens.

TWO TASTY LUNCH & LEARNS

Attendees to this year's AOCF will have two Lunch & Learn opportunities.

The first, *The Four Stack Method*, will take place on Sunday at noon. Plating quickly, efficiently, and beautifully is key in catering. The four-stack method isn't new, but it's surprising how many catering companies still don't employ (or know of) this time-tested technique. Join

chefs Jason Sutton and Jay Varga as they demonstrate with the help of volunteer attendees. Lunch is served!

The second Lunch & Learn, *A Trip South*, is on Monday from 12:15 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. It's time to celebrate Black History Month! Chef Keyon Hammond will highlight Black food history while exploring the chefs and culinarians who have contributed abundantly to food culture.

Don't miss either of this year's Lunch & Learns! You'll gain new knowledge while enjoying lunch with your colleagues. Note: all dietary restrictions are noted on the schedule, which you can view in its entirety [here](#).

CHEF-DRIVEN SESSIONS

AOCF's chef-driven education program will focus on technique, problem solving, and unique ideas while helping attendees navigate new industry trends, with sessions such as: *From Flour to Feast: The Art and Science of Pasta Making*; *Incorporating Funky Ferments into Your Everyday Menu*; All Things Charcuterie; *Sugar Rush: Master Sugar Flowers with Chef Ron Ben-Israel*; *LowCountry Lowdown*; *Secret Sauce! Elevate Your Entrees with a Flavorful Finish*; *Where There is Smoke, There is Yumminess*; and *Menu and Research & Development*.

Many sessions include samples, prepared in the nearby field kitchen, visible to all.

A CAPTIVATING KEYNOTE

James Beard-nominated Bristol-Joseph is the pastry chef and Partner at [Emmer & Rye](#), [Hestia](#), [Kalimotxo](#), [Canje](#), and [Ezov](#) in Austin, TX, as well as [Ladino](#) in San Antonio. He began his culinary journey as a young boy when he spent every Saturday afternoon baking cookies, cakes, and pies with his aunt. After moving to the United States from Georgetown, Guyana when he was 17 years old, Bristol-



An AOCF 2023 retrospective: (Left) The 2023 Lunch & Learn served tacos using such ingredients as: braised lamb, roasted root vegetables, birria, salsa quemada, and roasted poblano slaw. Photo courtesy Kathleen Stoehr; (Above, left) Following Yia Vang's keynote, attendees could sample his skirt steak. Photo courtesy Savannah Spirov; (Above, right) Chris Towne's pork belly steam buns; and Chef Jason Sutton's steak bite accompanied by a gorgonzola dipping sauce (below). Photos courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



(Clockwise from left) Tavel Bristol-Joseph will deliver this year's keynote. Photo courtesy Tavel Bristol-Joseph; Chef Ron Ben-Israel will share some of his coveted methods and secrets of creating sugar flowers to the audience at Art of Catering Food. Photos courtesy Kathleen Stoehr

Joseph attended the New York Restaurant School.

Bristol-Joseph worked in a variety of restaurants in New York before moving to Tucson in 2006, where he joined Fox Restaurant Concepts. He worked within the restaurant group for two years before going to Zona 78 where he met and began working with Chef Kevin Fink.

Fink and Bristol-Joseph decided to move to Austin to open Emmer & Rye in November 2015. Emmer & Rye has been included in *Bon Appetit's* "America's Best Restaurants 2016," list, as well as named *Austin American-Statesman's* "2018 Best Restaurant in Austin." In 2020, Bristol-Joseph opened Hestia with Fink, which has been named "#1 Best New Restaurant in America" by *Robb Report*. Bristol-Joseph was named one of *FOOD & WINE Magazine's* "Best New Chefs of 2020," and in 2022, Canje was awarded "Best New Restaurant 2022" by *Bon*

Appetit and featured in *The New York Times* as one of "America's Best Restaurants of 2022." Bristol-Joseph was also a 2023 James Beard Award semifinalist for "Best Chef: Texas."

ROUND ROBIN SESSIONS

Don't forget about the Round Robin sessions, a favorite at just 20 minutes in length. Four "quick burst" classes will be held simultaneously and run four times, offering attendees a chance to get up, stretch, and move from area to area as they learn. And as always, samples will be offered in most every session, so that as chefs present their concepts, attendees can taste the concept. This year's lineup includes *Elevate & Sophisticate the Simple Classics*; *Freeze Your Assets! Keep Food Costs Down During Inflation*; *Over the Top: Garnishes That Will Take Your Dishes to The Next Level*; and *Craving Caviar*.

WEAR IT WITH PRIDE

Attendees are encouraged to wear their chef coats: networking opportunities abound between sessions, during breaks, and at the Sunday afternoon happy hour—so wear your chef coat if you wish and show solidarity for your profession!

Registration is open & waiting for you!

Quick! [Head blue to https://informaconnect.com/art-of-catering-food/](https://informaconnect.com/art-of-catering-food/) and get your ticket to Art of Catering Food. Over the course of two days, you'll have the opportunity to connect with experienced catering chefs sharing new culinary techniques, the latest trending ingredients, food costing, and everything else you need to know to turn your menus into works of art.

Hotel and travel information can also be found via the navigation bar at the top of the screen. 

A high-quality food photograph featuring a rustic wooden cutting board. On the board, there is a small black bowl filled with finely chopped green onions, a bunch of fresh thyme, and several slices of barbecue ribs. The ribs are cooked to a medium-rare doneness, showing a pinkish-red interior and a dark, charred exterior. The background is dark and moody, emphasizing the textures and colors of the food.

the smo show

*The beauty that
is barbecue*

Take a seat

Dry-aged tomahawk steak with homemade malfatti pasta in a creamy truffle sauce. Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts

Barbecue has long been quintessential American fare. From ribs to briskets, there's just something about it that can't be replicated.

"The popularity of barbecue can be linked to a great combination of attributes. Barbecue has depth with its intensity of flavor, it solicits feelings of nostalgia, and it is an example of many food traditions that often include the fellowship of large groups of people," says Patrick Wagner, Culinary Institute of the Carolinas at Greenville Tech (South Carolina).

Now, barbecue may not scream "elegance" when associated with a wedding or other catered event, but it has moved beyond its roots of backyard cookouts. Caterers are now discovering the secret to mastering the art of smoke and fire. From corporate events and weddings to outdoor festivals and family reunions, barbecue is a crowd-pleaser that can turn any gathering into a memorable experience.

"People tend to underestimate the art of barbecue," said Einway Gefen, Corporate Executive Chef for Unilever Food Solutions in a [video for the Culinary Institute of America](#). "Barbecue, like many other things in food and in cooking, is a matter of perception."



Culinary Crafts' "Scenic Route" Burger (house-made brioche bun toasted and brushed with butter, an heirloom tomato and crisp leaf of butter lettuce, a thick slice of local Beehive cheese, house-made chocolate ketchup and garlic aioli, and a hand-shaped patty made with a special blend of custom spices and grilled over a mesquite charcoal grill). Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts

Slow and steady wins the race

There's a common misconception among consumers that grilling and barbecue are interchangeable, but in reality they are actually quite different. In a nutshell, barbecue requires smoke to properly flavor and color the food. So basically, grilling means to cook over a fire, hot and fast. Barbecuing refers to cooking at low temperatures for extended time.

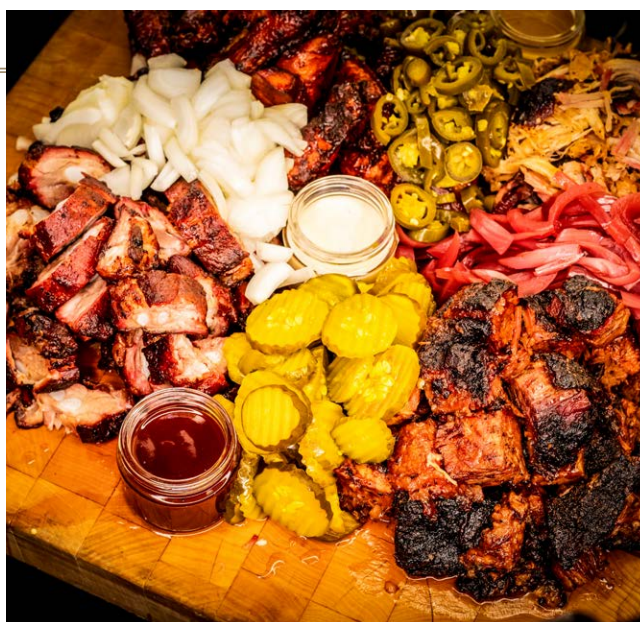
"Low and slow is key to most great barbecue for sure," says Duce Raymond with SBR Events Group out of Illinois (and [Catersource + The Special Event 2024](#) speaker!). "Besides quality meat, the best advice I can give to people about barbecue is to learn how to get a consistent temperature; this comes with experience, so the more you do it the better you will get."

Beyond that, controversy reigns.

"Barbecue is life for a lot of people," said Bill Twaler, former chef at Truist Culinary and Hospitality Innovation Center (CHI) at Greenville Technical College, in a ChefsForum video for the American Culinary Federation titled [Modern BBQ Techniques](#). "Don't ever ask someone what their favorite barbecue is; those are fighting words in the South."

Fiercely passionate

Chicago and New York have their pizza war, but perhaps no other food in the South evokes such passionate opinions as barbecue. It's one of those foods that can make you instant friends or enemies depending on sauce preference and meat preference.



(Above) A Super Bowl barbecue platter from SBR Events Group; (Below) A combo platter from SBR Events Group. Photos courtesy Duce Raymond

Barbecue isn't just a style of cuisine; it's also about tradition, cultural identity, and in many cases, closely guarded secrets.

"We have a taste for what we have grown up with, we are proud of our traditions, and weekend pit masters often invest lots of pride, time, and effort into their barbecue," says Wagner.

This passion for barbecue is presumably the catalyst for the high number of barbecue competitions that put the skill and expertise of barbecue masters on display.

"I think it comes down to people being proud of where they come from," says Raymond. "Certain locations,





DUCE'S SOUTH AMERICAN PORK RIBS with a Brazilian Twist & Spiced Agave Glaze

Recipe and image courtesy Duce Raymond, SBR Events Group

INGREDIENTS for the Ribs

2 ea. racks of baby back ribs

INGREDIENTS FOR THE RUB

2 T Duce's Wild Texas Rub

1 T paprika

1 T ground cumin

1 tsp ground coriander

1 tsp dried oregano

INGREDIENTS for the Spiced Agave Glaze

1 cup agave nectar

2 T Duce's Wild Competition Sauce

2 T apple cider vinegar

1 T ground cumin

1 T paprika

INGREDIENTS for the Homemade Chimichurri

1 cup fresh cilantro, finely chopped

1 cup fresh parsley, finely chopped

3 ea. cloves garlic, minced

½ cup olive oil

2 T red wine vinegar

Salt and pepper to taste

METHOD

1. **Prep the Ribs:** Remove the membrane from the back of the ribs to allow better penetration of flavors.
2. **Prepare the Rub:** In a bowl, combine Duce's Wild Texas Rub, paprika, cumin, coriander, and oregano.
3. **Season the Ribs:** Generously coat both sides of the ribs with the prepared rub.
4. **Smoke the Ribs:** Preheat your smoker to 250°F (65°C). Place the ribs in the smoker and cook for about three hours, or until they are tender to your liking.
5. **Prepare the Spiced Agave Glaze:** In a saucepan, combine the agave nectar, Duce's Wild Competition Sauce, apple

cider vinegar, cumin, and paprika. Simmer until it reaches a glaze-like consistency.

6. **Finish on the Grill:** Preheat your grill to medium-high heat. Remove the ribs from the smoker and place them on the grill. Brush generously with the spiced agave glaze and grill for 10-15 minutes, turning occasionally to prevent burning and to allow the glaze to caramelize.
7. **Prepare the chimichurri:** In a bowl, combine the finely chopped cilantro, parsley, minced garlic, olive oil, red wine vinegar, salt, and pepper.
8. **Serve:** Remove the ribs from the grill and finish with a generous dollop of homemade chimichurri just before serving.

specifically the South, do things in a specific way and that is what they know as barbecue.”

Regional tastes

Barbecue differs greatly from region to region (hence the fierce regional rivalries). Some believe that pork is the only real barbecue, but beef, mutton, and even goat (kid) are traditional choices for others. Some argue in favor of a thick, tomato-based sauce, others for a thin, vinegar-based sauce. Some prefer hickory for fuel, while others tend toward pecan, maple, or oak.

“There should be respect and truth in regional barbecue,” says Wagner.

Here’s a breakdown of some of the most popular regional barbecue styles (according to *Delish*):

Central Texas

Central Texas is considered by many to be the epicenter of barbecue culture thanks to Lockhart (which neighbors the Catersource + The Special Event 2024 locale of Austin) holding the distinguished title of “The Barbecue Capital of Texas.”

Central Texas is all about dry rub (smoked brisket, pork ribs, and hot gut sausages) smoked over mesquite, pecan, or oak wood.

East Texas

In East Texas, you can almost guarantee the meat will fall off the bone. The famous chopped pork and beef sandwiches are marinated in a tomato-based sauce and usually smoked over hickory wood.

South Texas

Because of the nearby Mexican border, you’ll find a lot of Tex-Mex barbecue here, including barbacoa and molasses-based barbecue sauces.

West Texas

Unlike the rest of Texas, in the west part of the state, they cook over direct heat with mesquite wood, so it’s more like traditional grilling than it is to smoking.



Barbecued Coca-Cola chicken skewers from Chef Jennifer Hill Booker (*National Culinary Review*). Photo courtesy American Culinary Federation



(Above) Pork Belly Bahn Mi. Photo courtesy Barrel & Bones



(Right) James Beard-award winning pit master Aaron Franklin (Franklin Barbecue) is one of the most highly-regarded barbecue chefs in the world. Photo courtesy Wyatt McSpadden



DUCE'S SMOKED ALABAMA CHICKEN RECIPE

Recipe and image courtesy Duce Raymond, SBR Events Group

INGREDIENTS

- 1 ea. whole chicken, split in half
- 3 cups buttermilk
- 1 cup pickle juice
- 2 T Duce's Wild Poultry Rub (for the brine)
- Duce's Wild Poultry Rub (to taste, for coating the chicken)
- Duce's Wild Alabama White Gold BBQ Sauce to taste
- Cornbread and bread-and-butter pickles for serving

METHOD

1. **Brine the chicken:** In a large bowl, combine 3 cups of buttermilk, 1 cup of pickle juice, and 2 tablespoons of Duce's Wild Poultry Rub. Add the chicken halves, ensuring they're fully submerged. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for at least two hours.
2. **Preheat the smoker:** While the chicken is brining, preheat your Gateway Drum Smoker to 325°F.
3. **Prepare the chicken:** After brining, remove the chicken from the mixture and pat it dry. Generously apply Duce's Wild Poultry Rub on both sides of the chicken.
4. **Smoke the chicken:** Place the chicken halves on the smoker, skin side up. Smoke until the internal temperature reaches 165°F. This usually takes about one hour, but the exact time may vary depending on your smoker and the size of the chicken.
5. **Dunk the chicken in the sauce:** Once the chicken has reached the correct internal temperature, remove it from the smoker and quickly dunk it in Duce's Wild Alabama White Gold BBQ Sauce. Make sure the chicken halves are fully covered in the sauce.
6. **Set the sauce:** Return the chicken to the smoker for an additional 10 minutes. This will help to set the sauce and give the chicken that final, mouth-watering, glossy finish.
7. **Serve:** Remove the chicken from the smoker. Let it rest for a few minutes before serving. Serve it with warm cornbread and a side of bread-and-butter pickles for the perfect barbecue meal.

International Barbecue Styles

While the United States has very different opinions on what constitutes “barbecue,” it also begs the question of how does the rest of the world approach barbecue? Here’s a look:

Korean barbecue

Korean barbecue, or gogi-gul, is a process of grilling meat over a charcoal or gas grill built right into the tabletop.

Indian tandoori

Prepared using a clay or metal pot containing a charcoal or wood fire where the meat gets set as close to the flame as possible.

Japanese yakitori

Yakitori is a popular barbecue street food in Japan. It consists of chicken skewered on bamboo or metal and grilled over charcoal. The grill itself is

thin enough to hold the skewers above the coals and long enough to cook plenty at a time.

Brazilian churrasco

Churrascaria cuisine is typically served rodízio style, where roving waiters serve the barbecued meats from large skewers directly onto the seated diners’ plates.

Mongolian barbecue

Mongolian barbecue is a stir-fried meal great for parties. It’s called Meng Gu Kao Rou in Chinese. Each person can choose different types of meats and vegetables, which are then cooked on large solid iron griddles at a very high temperature.

Turkish kebab

The Mediterranean diet is often cited as one of the healthiest on earth, so

it’s no wonder that Mediterranean barbecue culture routinely incorporates vegetables. Turkish shish kebabs, or şiş kebab in the native language, are skewered chunks of meat, commonly lamb, as well as vegetables, simply cooked on an open grill or mangal.

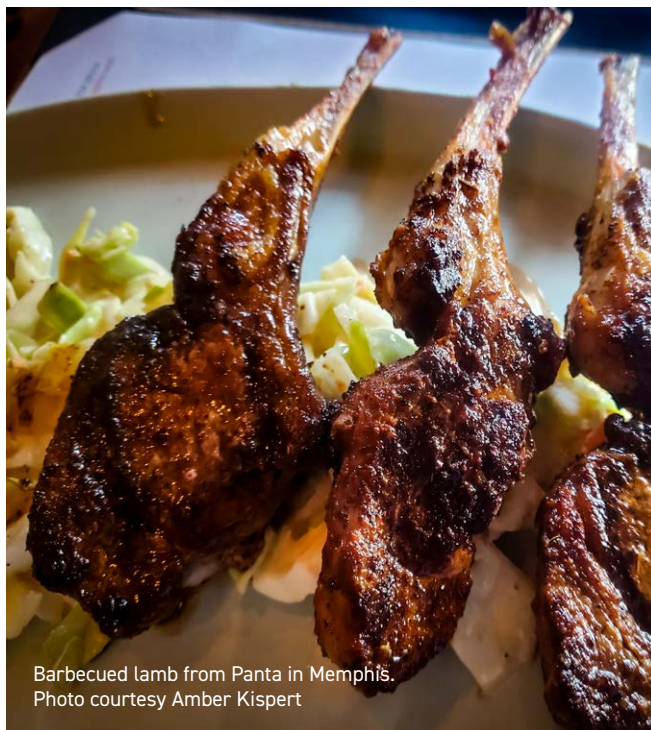
Filipino Lechon

Filipino Lechon follows the process of spit-roasting a whole pig over an open flame. Community plays a part here as well, especially since the process is long and labor-intensive; it begs for a party or special occasion. Hawaiian luau and Tahitian hima’a are similar activities that incorporate a whole-cooked pig into a celebration or ceremony.

Information above courtesy Institute of Culinary Education

Smoked short ribs in a plum sauce served during M(Eat) Carnival. Photo courtesy Bryan Ngo





Barbecued lamb from Pantia in Memphis.
Photo courtesy Amber Kispert

North Carolina

Most known for whole pig on the smoker in a vinegar-based barbecue sauce.

South Carolina

South Carolina is all about pork. The sauces differ by region: in the northern regions of the state you'll find a light tomato; the west is heavy tomato; the south and central is mustard; and the east is a vinegar-pepper sauce.

Kansas City

Kansas City is all about its burnt ends that have been hickory-smoked and smothered in a thick, sweet tomato-based barbecue sauce.

Memphis

Memphis is known for loving pork—ribs, pulled, and shoulder. It may be

rubbed with spices like paprika and garlic in a "dry" fashion. If it's prepared "wet," however, it'll be continuously brushed with a sauce while being smoked. Marinades and bastes usually consist of apple cider vinegar, spices, apple cider, and even Coca-Cola or beer.

St. Louis

St. Louis-style barbecue is faster than other styles because it does not require smoking the meat for hours or applying a dry rub. St. Louis barbecue sauce is tomato-based, sweet, and vinegary. It traditionally contains ketchup, brown sugar, apple cider vinegar, salt, pepper, and other spices.

Alabama

Alabama barbecue is identified by pork,

chopped or sliced, served on a hamburger bun with coleslaw and dill pickles. In the north, you'll find vinegar-based sauces, while all around the state, you'll find a white barbecue sauce of mayo, vinegar, lemon juice, black pepper, and salt smothering all the meat.

Kentucky

Kentucky is most known for mutton that has been sliced thin and topped with dips made of Worcestershire or vinegar and cayenne.

Virginia

Any barbecue spot you go to in Virginia will likely have pork on the menu. But what's more important is the sauce.

Each region has its own type: Northern Virginia is known for sweeter tomato-based sauces sometimes incorporating fruit; Central Virginia has sweet and sour sauces; and in Southern Virginia you'll find tomato- and vinegar-based sauces with mustard. And then you have the Shenandoah Valley, which is famous for barbecue chicken with an apple cider vinegar-based sauce.

The building blocks of barbecue

The first step in creating great barbecue is selecting the right cuts of meat. Some of the most popular are beef brisket, pork butts, tri-



Moroccan Tan Tan Dry Rubbed Smoked Lamb Ribs with white beans, chick peas, lardo melted spring onions, Early Girl tomatoes, flamingo peppers, and coconut milk.
Photo courtesy Deanna Sandoval

PULLED PORK ROTI with Ancho BBQ Over Jicama Slaw with Peach & Pineapple Salsa

Recipe and image courtesy Chef Patrick Wagner, Culinary Institute of the Carolinas at Greenville Tech

INGREDIENTS for Dough (for Roti)

- 12 cups all purpose flour
- 1 cup oil
- 4½ cup water

METHOD

1. Mix the flour oil and water together knead for 10 minutes.
2. Round the dough and let rest
3. Divide the dough into 4 oz pieces.
4. Flatten out the dough and pull out with lightly oiled hands on an oiled surface to make a large thin circle.

INGREDIENTS for Filling (for Roti)

- 2 qt pulled pork
- 2 cups ancho BBQ
- 2 cups onions
- 1 cup bell peppers

METHOD

1. Sweat the onion and bell peppers.
2. Add the pulled pork and Ancho BBQ.
3. Divide the filling and place 3.5 oz of filling in the center of the dough.
4. Fold over the edges like you are wrapping a present.
5. Cook on a griddle or tilt skillet at 350° F, just as if you were making grilled cheese or a quesadilla.

INGREDIENTS for Jicama Slaw

Flavored with Cilantro

- 4 ea. jicama
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup vinegar
- 4 ea. lime juice and zest
- ½ bunch green onion, freshly chopped
- ½ bunch cilantro, freshly chopped
- Salt and pepper, to taste

METHOD

1. Cut, shred, or julienne the jicama.
2. Combine the sugar, vinegar, lime juice, and zest to a boil.
3. Cool it down to room temperature and pour it over the jicama.
4. Add the green onions and cilantro and adjust the seasoning.

INGREDIENTS for Ancho BBQ

- 1 cup ancho pepper
- 2 qt vinegar
- 1 lb onion, diced
- 2 T garlic powder
- 2 cups mustard, prepared
- 2 qt honey

METHOD

1. If using whole peppers, roast the Ancho peppers briefly in the oven to dry.

2. Take the seeds out and combine with the remainder of the ingredients.

NOTE: if using Ancho pepper powder, the steps above can be omitted.

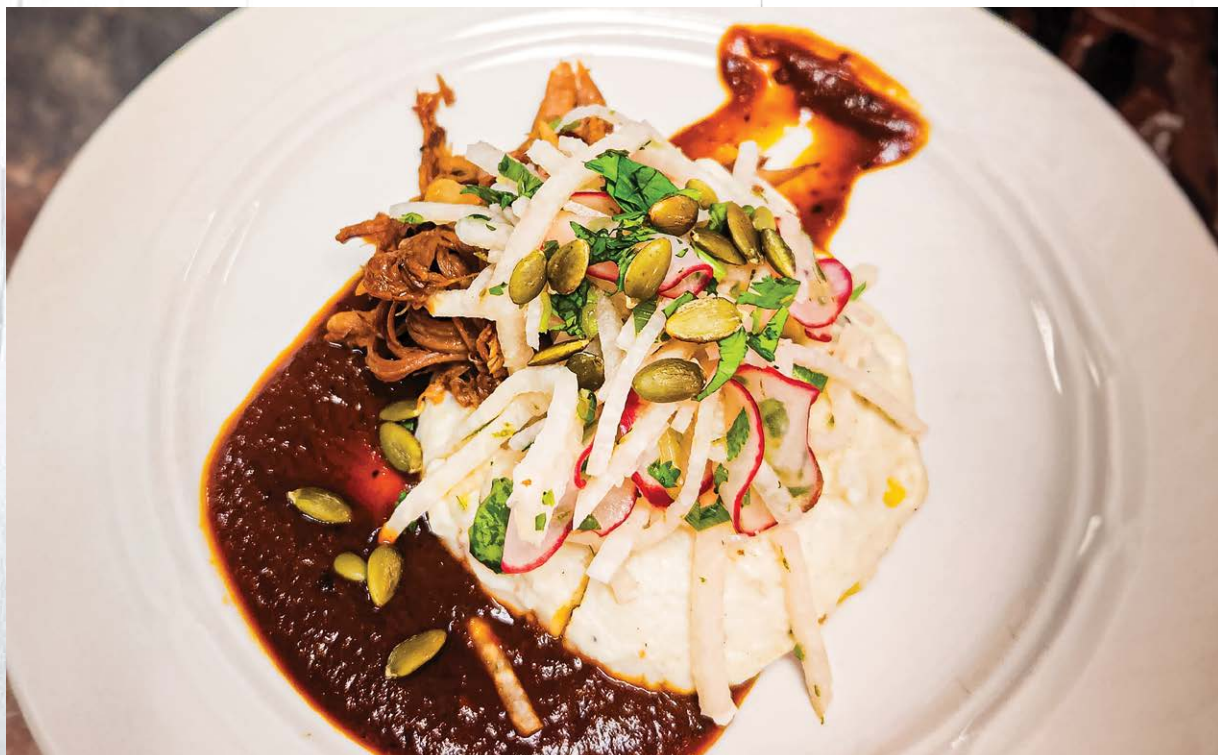
3. Bring to a boil and cook for 30 minutes.
4. Puree and strain.
5. Adjust the seasoning.

INGREDIENTS for Peach and Pineapple Salsa

- 2 cups peaches, chopped
- 2 cups pineapple, chopped
- ½ cup scallion
- ½ cup cilantro
- 2 ea. lime juice and zest
- ½ cup vegetable oil

METHOD

1. Drain and chop the peaches and pineapple.
2. Clean and chop the cilantro.
3. Slice the scallions.
4. Combine all of the ingredients together and adjust the flavoring as needed.





Brined and hickory smoked pork butts.
Photo courtesy Tastebuds Custom Catering

tip, plate-cut beef ribs, pork bone-in shoulder, baby back ribs, St. Louis ribs, and half chicken or chicken pieces.

“The first thing I usually tell people is to start with good meat,” says Raymond. “There is a wide variety of options, but if you start with high quality, you will get something high quality when you are done.”

However, access to high quality meat isn’t necessarily a deal breaker when it comes to barbecue.

“Barbecue allows you to overcome less premium cuts with the slow and low cooking,” says Wagner. “The cuts you choose should reflect your customer’s budget and your intended use.”

The next key ingredient to great barbecue is the rub.

“Many of the best barbecue starts with the king and queen of cooking (salt and pepper),” says Wagner. “This is the foundation of your flavors, and you can build this into any final flavor if you keep it simple.”

However, barbecue rubs also offer an opportunity for experimentation.

“Traditional barbecue is simple and you cannot argue with that. Some of the best barbecue I have ever had was as simple as seasoning the meat with salt, pepper, and smoke,” says Raymond. “Modern barbecue on the other hand has so much room to grow. There are endless combinations.

“I enjoy using traditional techniques and applying different flavor profiles paired with unique presentations.

For an Asian flavor profile, you may want to add ginger or Chinese Five Spice. If you are looking for a Central American flavor, you may want to check out some cumin, coriander, and oregano. This is the wonderful thing about barbecue; you can customize it to what you are looking for.”

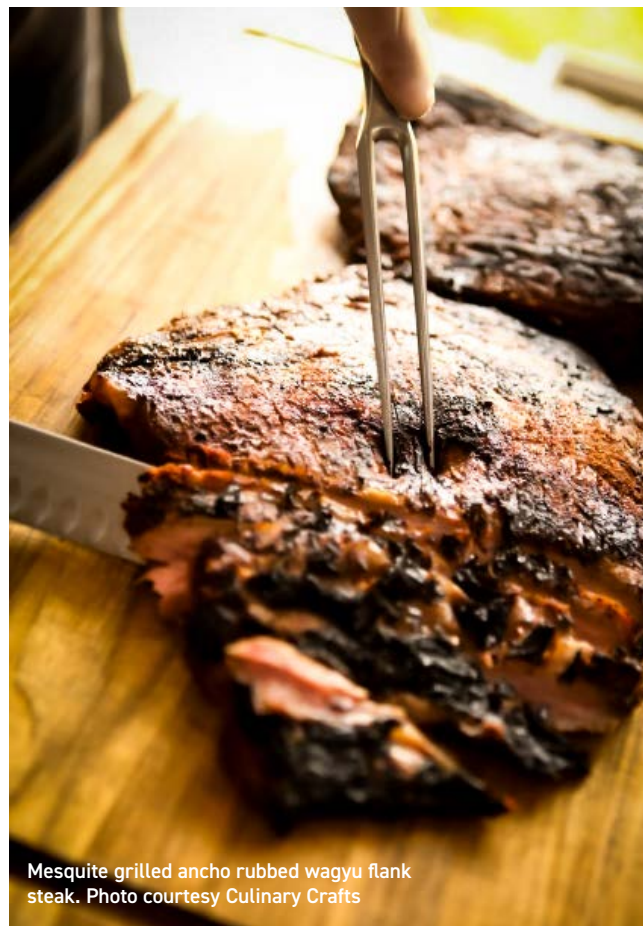
Given the amount of time barbecue requires, it may seem difficult to replicate in a catering environment.

“Take it slow,” says Wagner. “This isn’t something you can micromanage or rush to success.

“Barbecue is actually deceptively simple since it isn’t often improved by intensive hands-on cooking.”

However, there are a few shortcuts that caterers can take to achieve the same effect as the barbecue joints that smoke their meats for days at a time.

“The preparation has to be logistically sound to do large groups,” says Greg Shapiro with Tastebuds Custom Catering (Florida). “The old technique of sitting by the fire or sitting by your smoker and smoking the meat for hours on end from a labor standpoint or logistically is just not feasible in the catering world, so you have to change those preparations and adapt them.”



Mesquite grilled ancho rubbed wagyu flank steak. Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts

What Wood You Do?

One of the most important ingredients to any great barbecue is the wood, and what wood you use will have an impact on the flavor and the finished product.

Obviously personal preference plays a role, but here are some of the most common types of hardwoods and their characteristics.

Applewood

Light, fruity, slightly sweet aroma with a mild and sweet flavor

Best for: pork and poultry

Almond

Burns clean and does not leave a lot of ash

Best for: pizza

Cherrywood

Imparts a fruity and slightly sweet taste

Best for: beef, pork, poultry, and salmon

Oak

Offers a robust and smoky flavor, stronger than apple and cherry but lighter than hickory

Best for: red meats (beef and lamb) and pizza

Pecan

Mild wood that has a sweet flavor, sometimes even described as spicy or nutty

Best for: ribs, fish, beef, and poultry

Hickory

Savory (often closely related to the richness of bacon) with a stronger flavor than oak that adds a dark color to smoked meat

Best for: Beef and pork

Mesquite

A strong and bold flavor

Best for: steaks and briskets

Maple

A light sweet aroma

Best for: "delicate cooks" like vegetables, cheese, and chicken or poultry

Peach

A mild sweet, fruity smoke

Best for: beef, pork, and poultry

Information above courtesy:

• [Texas Monthly](#)

• [Barbecue FAQ](#)

• [MealPro](#)

Below: An outdoor smoking setup from Heirloom Fire (Richmond, MA). Photo courtesy Dear Edith and Lily





Roasted delicata squash is a unique complimentary side dish to barbecue (served during M(Eat) Carnival). Photo courtesy Amber Kispert

One option is to smoke your meat (offsite) and then bring it up to temp on the grill during the event.

"That way you can still bring in that flavor profile," says Keith Lord with Strateje Fourteen (California). "Obviously we would all love to pull a brisket out of a smoker and slice it, but that's not practical in catering."

Another option is to incorporate the use of sous vide, either to reheat a pre-smoked meat (that has been blast chilled and vacuum sealed) onsite or to do a full preparation in the sous vide and simply "kiss" the meat on the grill and/or smoker.

"It is a very practical way of executing," says Shapiro (who will be co-presenting a barbecue session with Lord during Catersource + The

Special Event 2024). "It's extremely popular and logistically it's amazing because you're only bringing a sous vide circulator and a water bathtub and you're not hauling a big smoker or an oven."

The supporting players

While the meat takes center stage with barbecue, a well-rounded barbecue catering menu also includes a variety of mouthwatering sides and delectable sauces. From classic mac and cheese and tangy coleslaw to unique creations like barbecue baked beans and cornbread, these sides add depth and variety to the meal.

However, this is also an opportunity

to elevate barbecue through unconventional accompaniments.

"This is your chance to elevate it with either a sauce or something you already have in your background, something that you already have that you use that's really successful," says Shapiro.

"You have to follow your gut. When it comes down to it, if you've got something that's rich and fatty, then you're going to want to cut it with some acid. Go back to the building blocks of what you would use traditionally—are we talking about citrus or are we talking about vinegar? Are we looking to bolster the smokiness or are we looking to cut the richness?"

Lord agrees.

Seitan Brisket, BBQ "Caviar," and Vegan Rice "Pork Rind," Served with Okra Sprouts

Recipe and image courtesy Chef Patrick Wagner, Culinary Institute of the Carolinas at Greenville Tech

INGREDIENTS for Corn Juice Base (for Melting Corn Spoonbread)

- 10 lbs corn, frozen
- 6 qt milk
- 1½ cups sugar
- 2 oz salt

METHOD

1. Heat and blend all the ingredients together.
2. Strain through chinois.

INGREDIENTS for Pudding Mix (for Melting Corn Spoonbread)

- 2.75 gal corn juice
- 18 oz Methylcellulose (F50)

METHOD

1. Combine the methylcellulose and corn juice together and blend in a blender.
2. Degas in the vacuum machine.
3. Let sit for 1 hour to hydrate.
4. Do a test of this by filling a demitasse cup and steam/bake for 20 min until set. (Ideally this would be a quenelle.)

INGREDIENTS for Vegan Brisket

- 6 lbs vital wheat gluten
- 5 cups nutritional yeast flakes
- ¾ cup garlic powder
- ¾ cup paprika, smoked
- 2 T cumin
- 1½ T black pepper
- 1½ T chipotle pepper
- ¾ cup mushroom powder
- ¾ cup cocoa powder
- 1 gal apple juice
- 40 oz soy sauce
- 6 oz tomato paste
- 6 oz miso

METHOD

1. Combine all of the dry ingredients and seasonings.
2. Combine the liquid.
3. Mix the liquid into the dry and mix for about 5 minutes.
4. Form on oiled hotel pans.
5. Steam for 45 minutes.
6. Remove from the steamer.
7. Rub with a BBQ rub.
8. Hot smoke in the smoker with the "vegan pork rinds."

INGREDIENTS for BBQ "Caviar"

- 2 qts tomato juice
- 1 ea. onion
- ½ cup vinegar
- ½ cup brown sugar
- ½ cup black pepper

- ½ cayenne pepper
- 4 g sodium citrate
- Sodium alginate (use a ratio of 250g juice to 2g alginate)
- Calcium chloride (500g water to 4g calcium chloride (measured x 4 stored in quart containers)

METHOD

1. Blend the tomato, onion, tabasco, sugar, peppers.
2. Strain through coffee urn filter (like consommé).
3. Combine each of the juices with the sodium alginate in a ratio of 250g juice to 2g alginate.
4. De-gas and let the alginate mixtures sit for 30 min prior to specification.
5. Test this before packing.

INGREDIENTS for Okra Sprouts Salad

- 1 lb okra sprouts
- 1 cup canola oil
- 4 ea. red onion, slivered in layers for uniformity
- 1 cup sugar

- 1 cup red wine
- 1 cup red wine vinegar
- ½ cup mustard seed
- 1 T salt

METHOD

1. Combine the sugar, mustard seed, vinegar, wine, salt and oil.
2. Bring to a boil.
3. Add the red onion and cool. This will be used to dress the okra sprouts.

INGREDIENTS for Vegan "Pork Rind"

- 3 lbs thick rice noodles
- ½ cup popcorn salt
- 2 T Spanish paprika
- 1 tsp cayenne pepper
- 1 tsp chipotle

METHOD

1. Break the noodles into pieces so that the finished product will resemble a pork rind.
2. Fry at 470°F to puff.
3. Season with the seasoning mixture.
4. Smoke in the smoker with the brisket to impart flavor.





Brisket & Smoke (pinto beans puree, brisket, and Texas slaw). Photo courtesy American Culinary Federation



Cajun Barbecue Shrimp from the *National Culinary Review*. Photo courtesy American Culinary Federation

"It's really about pairing up," he says. "I think it opens up a new world here."

Plant-based barbecue (such as jackfruit or smoked spaghetti squash) is also trending.

"Plant based is great because it offers the same excitement that meat barbecue fans love," says Wagner.

Barbecue is obviously right at home at a rustic-style wedding or ranch event, but it may seem out of place at a black-tie affair, which is where creativity comes into play.

"Barbecue is delicious and flavorful, but as a main item it doesn't

demand the same money as it would if we use the bold flavors in other items," says Wagner.

For example, barbecue can be a simple replacement for other meats in such elevated dishes as bao buns, tacos, pizza, sliders, or even a smoked brisket congee.

"You can bring it up a notch," Lord says. "Are you going to serve a beef rib on a plate for dinner? No. But you can get that same sort of essence of that flavor and that fat. It still has that same essence, that same smoke flavor, but I have manipulated it to a different palate."

Come & Get It!

Catersource + The Special Event will be talking all things barbecue in Austin, TX (February 12-15) during the following sessions:

- Texas Barbecue - The Strateje Fourteen Way - Sides, Sauces & Sweets
- Barbecue Elevated! Taking Barbecue to the Next Level
- Fanning the Flames: A Culinary Journey into the Art of Fire Cooking

Save your spot now at

<https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/>

Barbecue is also a great option for a carving or action station.

"In catering, you can use the barbecue meat itself as a building block," Shapiro says. "That's what makes it cross over from what people expect, like a pulled pork sandwich wrapped in paper, to a white tablecloth center of plate type dish."

Bon appetit! 

A branch with green leaves and two pears on a white background. The branch is in the top right corner, and the pears are in the middle right. The background is white with a dark grey triangle in the bottom left corner.

25 Positive Predictions for 2024

LET'S START OFF
THE NEW YEAR WITH
SOME POSITIVITY!

We asked several top industry thought leaders to share their perspectives on 2023 as it ends, and what we can look forward to as we round the corner into a shiny new year.

BY AMBER KISPERT

1 Kathryn Albarado, Generational Business and Life Coach

The last few years have been challenging for the event world, especially caterers. The ability to stop the collapsing of the dominos seemed endless. Caterers went from dealing with the cancellation of events due to COVID, to the break in the supply chain, and then the lack of finding and keeping qualified staff. Now the biggest challenge is the unrealistic expectations customers have placed on the service industry.

Catering isn't for the faint of heart. The truth is, we do it because we have a servant's heart. Feeding people not just in body but in soul is where we get our greatest satisfaction. My hope for 2024 is that we see staffing stabilize. The stabilization of labor will help caterers do what they do best—provide memorable meals for memorable events.

2 Todd Annis, Director of Culinary, Cru Catering

The simple pleasure of bread and butter will be something to look for in the future. In addition, breads and butters that meet some of the restrictions (gluten-free, vegan, and carb-friendly) will all help this trend succeed in the future.

Speaking of dietary restrictions, specific dietary and preferential needs are not going away any time soon. Catching up to those needs is pivotal in the future. Labeling signs, labeling menus, having a chef team that can produce specialty items at their

best, creating full vegetarian menus and vegan menus, and putting systems in place to accommodate and excel at these will be a huge difference-maker in the future.

Another new trend is to cut down on the lines at stations and pass the entrées or tapas-style plates. For example, crab cakes with Brussels slaw, pork belly, and a caper remoulade on a small plate passed—this way, guests get to enjoy a fully designed plate without having to get in line. These are great for cocktail receptions or even large parties where servers can get to guests while they are mingling and sharing stories. We see small chef-composed plates that can get anywhere are a future trend in our industry.

3 Alan Berg, Owner, Wedding Business Solutions

The wedding industry is in for a bumpy ride as the wedding gap kicks in. If you haven't heard about the "wedding gap," it's that during the COVID lockdowns people weren't out meeting other people, so relationships that would have naturally formed without being sequestered didn't happen. Therefore, about three years later the engagements that would have happened aren't happening. That will even itself out in a year or two, but for now, expect fewer engagements, so fewer inquiries. But don't fret; you probably already are getting more inquiries than you could fill, so just get better at following up and converting the inquiries you are getting into sales.



Kathryn Albarado



Todd Annis



Alan Berg

25 Positive Predictions for 2024

4 Margaret Brower, Founder & CEO, Rainmaker Sales & Marketing Group

As we stand on the cusp of 2024, I foresee a transformative shift in the world of catering bookings, particularly for weddings. The middle, that familiar 12–14 month booking window we've grown accustomed to, we are poised to see less of.

But here's the twist: it's not just about shorter timelines; it's also about looking further ahead.

On one end of the spectrum, we'll witness a surge of "in the month for the month" bookings. Think of it as the corporate business model making its way into the wedding scene. The instant gratification of the "add to cart" mindset is upon us. These short-term wedding bookings will demand our immediate attention, agility, and intention. We'll need to approach them with the same fervor we reserve for corporate clients.

In essence, 2024 is set to be a year of duality for catering sales. We'll be sprinting for those immediate bookings while also setting our sights on the horizon. It's a delicate balance, but with eagerness, adaptability, and a dash of foresight, we can navigate this evolving landscape with grace and success.

5 Colbért Callen, Director Sales + Marketing, Footers Catering

I foresee the catering industry returning to elegant roots in 2024. The pivots are over, our teams are back to full capacity,

and we are ready to deliver on what attracted us to our unique niche of hospitality to begin with. Next year clients will value style, grace, and attention to detail more than ever before. Caterers are striving to be the best again (not merely just surviving post-COVID), and the ability to deliver perfect touches will be a big competitive advantage. Don't mistake elegance for boring or traditional; innovation and creativity will continue to be crucial to the catering industry, but a unique idea isn't enough. Elegance is achieved when a creative concept is executed perfectly, from the physical details of plating, garnishes, signage, and vessels to the intangible touches of lighting, timing, smiles, and delight—that magic that caterers have the power to create when every detail of the guest experience is seamless. In 2024, clients, guests, and our own team will seek that elegance.

6 Sebastien Centner, Founder and Creative Director, Eatertainment Events & Catering

I see two major positive things happening in 2024. On the culinary side, the rise of quality and variety of special dietary ingredients, like gluten-free and vegan items. Changing how people look at food, no longer having to sacrifice flavor or quality to meet certain dietary needs. In terms of technology, I think AI may pose a massive risk. It will undoubtedly change how we work, especially on the creative front, increasing efficiencies and reducing costs for things like copywriting and graphic design.



Margaret Brower



Colbért Callen



Sebastien Centner

Jamie Chang, Owner and Destination Wedding Planner, Mango Muse Events

I see 2024 as the turning point for the industry (particularly in the U.S.) to take big steps toward sustainability. Those already doing great work will be at the forefront, leading the way, but all event businesses, big and small, will take major steps and changes towards zero waste and sustainable events. At this point, everyone has been affected by climate change in a real and tangible way, whether that's with major weather disasters or just feeling the increased heat. It's time for a major change in our industry, and I think many in the events industry are realizing that.

I see changes happening not only within businesses themselves and how they operate but also in the options presented to the end client. Because we see everything that goes into a one-time event and what happens after, change at the industry level in terms of offerings and ideas will, in turn, trickle down to clients. The more aware and sustainably forward-thinking we as an industry are, the more clients will be, too, so that we can collectively approach events with sustainability in mind.

Francisco Christian, Founder, Taylored Hospitality

2024 will see a huge impact from technology in the catering industry. More companies are finally moving from Excel and Word to fully integrated software platforms. In addition, ChatGPT has been helping not only the sales side of the business, but operations is

benefiting from the wealth of standard operating procedures and processes available like never before. I'm so excited when a client realizes how technology can give them time back to work on the business and it impacts profitability positively. I'm excited to see how AI is learning about the catering industry just by more and more users seeking information. Soon, companies will be able to use the technology to unleash the data that they own to help their creative process.

In addition, our clients are realizing that doing business the way that it has been done needs to change. We are working with companies that are now understanding the short sales cycle and coming up with unique ways to help their sales teams qualify faster and get deposits quicker. As the Amazon buyers try to apply their instant gratification needs to catering and special events, companies that are agile and able to not overcomplicate the sales process will be victorious.

Ryan Corvaia, Founder & Owner, Dish Food & Events

Since we have all been paying more for just about everything in 2023 and into 2024, client expectations at catered events are on the rise. I predict the hospitality landscape will continue to evolve as our clients place a stronger emphasis on an elevated guest experience at special events.

I see this as a fantastic opportunity for caterers and event companies to focus on training their teams to not only deliver top notch service, but to go above and beyond in creating "wow moments" and



Jamie Chang



Francisco Christian



Ryan Corvaia

25 Positive Predictions for 2024

thus providing only the best hospitality. Is it even possible to treat every guest like they are the last guest on earth?

To do this, we must create a company culture where our entire service team feels empowered to go above and beyond for each guest we serve. When you encourage your team to bring their creativity to the guest experience, they will become more willing to work hard to make sure that experience is great.

10 **Taylor Cusick Hollman**, Founder, Enji

If you've been chasing page-one rankings on search engines, 2024 is going to be the year you can make serious moves! Because the thing no one is talking about, but should be talking about, is how AI is impacting how people search for things on the internet.

My prediction is that as more people use ChatGPT as a search engine and as Google makes a shift to a chat-like interface, the rankings slate will be "wiped clean" to a certain extent as businesses don't adapt their SEO strategy—and we all can take advantage of that. Websites and web pages that have historically ranked high will start to slip if the people in charge of them don't have their eyes on this change, so even though this prediction isn't great for some businesses, it is a very positive opportunity for others!

11 **Meghan Ely**, Owner, OFD Consulting

Having a front seat to WIPA's record growth post-pandemic, I'm

confident we'll see event brands continue to prioritize association membership and networking events as part of their visibility strategy.

I'm also seeing the desire to serve as a leader at an all-time high. In fact, we experienced a 30% increase in nomination applications to the WIPA International Board this year. Event pros are ready to give back in droves and help shape what is to become of the hospitality industry for the next generation of clients and companies.

Better yet, associations with a future-forward mindset will thrive, recognizing that the needs of event pros today look different than 10, 15 years ago. Expect reimaged education, innovative attendee experiences, and thoughtful partnerships with leading brands.

12 **Scott Frankel**, President, Animatic Media, LLC

Things for the events industry have never looked brighter. As those of us who survived the greatest test of our industry, I feel like 2023 proved that we are back in a strong way and it's looking like 2024 will break some records. It has been specifically challenging on the production side of things as we lost a lot of talented people during the pandemic for a number of reasons. However, that staffing pool has begun to renew itself with a new generation of upcoming talent. We are looking at some new groundbreaking technology that, combined with creative thinking, will undoubtedly result in some unique and memorable audience experiences.



Taylor Cusick Hollman



Meghan Ely



Scott Frankel



Cristian Hernandez

13 Cristian Hernandez, Director of Business Development, Rosendale Events

When it comes to new food and beverage trends, our culinary director Certified Master Chef Rich Rosendale doesn't miss a beat. From marvelous and artistic dessert presentations to the most unique and sophisticated serving robots, he is looking at what the future may bring. In fact, we recently opened R3 Rosendale Concepts, a restaurant located in the downtown Atlanta area, and took a sustainable and innovative approach by eliminating the use of hoods, grills, and fryers found in traditional restaurants. This demonstrates a new model for opening fine-dining restaurants that lowers costs while still ensuring quality.

With labor shortage still being a predominant issue that caterers are facing, we are also looking to see how we can better utilize our employees. Our main focus is on training and retaining employees to lower the turnover rate. We hold monthly training sessions, offer incentives, and recognize our staff for their efforts and achievements. The future of catering is bright and with the right people, the right mindset, and obtainable goals, you can reach the stars.



Julia Kendrick Conway

14 Julia Kendrick Conway, Owner, Assaggiare Mendocino

We are booking new events at a brisk pace for 2024. Definitely different from this time last year. While overall planning timelines have shortened back to pre-pandemic levels, clients



Sarah Kuhlberg

seem to be more optimistic about forward planning than last year. Most of our events are destination weddings, and overall, headcounts are down but budgets are not. While being conscious of their budgets, clients are willing to spend on items that are significant to them. This allows us more flexibility in planning unique and special menus and service elements tailored to the respective couples and their celebrations. Our clients seem to be more focused on personal details that reflect their values, experiences, and aspirations rather than sticking to the tried-and-true rituals. They want their celebration to be an inclusive and immersive experience for their families and guests, celebrating the things that make them special as a couple. They often want to incorporate special cocktails, appetizers, and snacks that reflect their shared histories and heritages. Since we are full-custom, this fits well within our business model.

15 Sarah Kuhlberg, Creative Marketing Director, Colette's Catering & Events

In the upcoming year, individuals will be redefining their spending preferences to prioritize experiences of special significance. The human yearning for meaningful connections and mindful experiences has never been more pronounced. Special occasions, travel, upscale dinner parties, and curated events are all set to be on the rise in 2024. The event industry is perfectly poised to deliver those coveted moments of connection and mindfulness that we so deeply desire! Whether it's corporations celebrating their achievements,

25 Positive Predictions for 2024

families and friends reuniting in joyous gatherings, or weddings with larger guest counts, there's a resounding shift towards valuing experiences over material possessions.

Also, food and cocktail trends we currently see at innovative, cutting-edge restaurants are increasingly making their way to the catering table and bar. Catering companies that offer curated, chef-driven menus will be in higher demand. This forthcoming year promises to be one where culinary innovation and thoughtful event design converge to create lasting impressions in the hearts and minds of individuals.



Anthony Lambatos

16 Anthony Lambatos, Co-Owner, Footers Catering and MIBE

While hiring has gotten easier over the past year, I think it will still be a challenge moving into 2024, specifically attracting and retaining top talent in the catering and events industry. Employees have more options than ever on where they want to work, how they want to work, who they want to work with, and what work they want to do. I believe this will inspire companies to be more creative than ever when it comes to looking out for the overall well-being of their employees. Creating a place where team members love working and others aspire to work for starts with valuing people for more than the job they do. To demonstrate this, companies are going to look beyond traditional benefits and find unique ways to respond to the mental, physical, relational, and financial well-being of their team members. Leadership

development training, access to mental health resources, childcare support, home buying assistance, flexible work schedules, community involvement, and wellness programs are just a few of the areas that companies will add or enhance to meet the needs of their employees. And the companies that are able to do this well will reduce time spent hiring and training and they are going to see a surge in engagement, collaboration, and innovation.

17 Jennifer Perna, Owner, Fulton Market Consulting

2024 is going to be a great year. I can already see this by looking at how 2024 is shaping up on my regular clients' event calendars. 2024 bookings have already surpassed 2023 numbers at this same time last year. This is especially true for those who've been actively working on 2024's Q1 and Q2 since this summer. Sales teams are in place now. Weddings are steadily back and guest counts are bigger. Most Saturdays at venues are already sold out and wedding couples are looking at alternate weekdays or 2025. The last few years have allowed companies to define their niche and stay focused on how to best use their resources. Minimums and booking rules are also being reevaluated to make sure great opportunities are not being missed. This means that smart selling and educating the sales team on what is good business is imperative as you move forward. 2024 is really feeling good for all right now and I can't wait to see where we are at this time next year!



Jennifer Perna

18 David Porto, Owner, Blue Plate Catering

The next calendar year will continue to bring an emphasis on extravagant, styled weddings, with a desire to show family and friends a wonderful time. Social media has made it possible to broadcast great ideas to a wide audience, and the younger generation of couples has grown up not knowing anything else. Adapting to clients' one-off requests will be the marker of an organization that can customize and go with the flow.

On the corporate side, last-minute requests for large catering orders will continue, and the ability to accept these "Hail Mary passes" will allow you to strengthen bonds with clients. Making them look good is truly what will bring more of their business to you. 2024 will also see an increase in repetitive business as companies try to win over prospective employees (and keep their current talent) by offering meals during the workday. If you are in the drop-off business, get ready for some big orders!

19 Robin Selden, Managing Partner & Executive Chef, Marcia Selden Catering & Events

Love is in the air at Marcia Selden Catering as we are stepping into 2024 with more confirmed weddings than we've had in years past...how great is that?! Our couples are excited to embrace creativity and to allow us to come up with fun and enchanting ways to surprise and delight their guests and they are ready to spend money

to make their dreams become a reality (YAY!). Our couples are embracing the endless possibilities allowing us to craft meticulously unique and super creative culinary experiences that reflect their style and often times their cultural heritage. I believe that the guest experience at weddings, and events, are at the heart of each event, particularly in what we are seeing for 2024.... It's all about the X-factor and experiential moments. Our goal is to leave a lasting (and delicious) impression on the guests so that they reminisce about the event for many years to come. I say it all the time; we are memory makers, so let's all make sure that in 2024 that we are embracing that gift that we are given by our clients to create bespoke, magical, and sometimes over the top opulent events for them and their guests!

20 Nora Sheils, Co-Founder, Rock Paper Coin and Founder, Bridal Bliss

Although 2023 was pretty magical, 2024 is set to be just as gorgeous, with more opulence in the most thoughtful of ways.

We love the color trends—vibrant coral, bold yellow, and electric blue. These colors won't be seen throughout a wedding but instead used as a pop in one part of the event, whether it be the dining tables, attire, or even the cake! The term "maximalism" comes to mind, and if ever there were a year to go big, this would be it!

The mindset of many couples is a focus on sustainability. While that concept may seem disconnected from the others mentioned, they can go hand in hand. Couples ultimately want to be thoughtful



David Porto



Robin Selden



Nora Sheils

25 Positive Predictions for 2024

in all of their decisions. This may include estate jewelry, printing invitations on upcycled materials, working with a local caterer to ensure food is current to the season and grown/harvested locally, charity-based registries, and vendors that give back.

Many event pros are taking the slow season to level up their businesses, incorporating new software, and bettering their processes to provide their clients and teams with the best possible experience. From automation to virtual contracts/invoices, the options to streamline businesses are endless.

21 **Alicia Smith,** Executive Chef, Cru Catering

Gone are the days when you are only allowed to pick a different protein for your event. This gives guests the opportunity to experience the perfect dish of their choice without being limited to only a protein switch. While this requires more servers and more chef staff, it gives each client a “restaurant” quality choice and meal.

Additionally, more and more people are looking for engaging stations with the best possible foods. Not only do guests want something more engaging than just a plate of food; it becomes a team effort to bring the vision to life. No longer will it be just a caterer doing just food, the planner just planning, and the florist just putting out flowers. In the future, it will require much more listening, communication, and planning together—another reason it is so important to get to know each of our vendors and how we interact together cohesively.

Lastly, it's all about the mash ups. With the ability to get so much produce and products from around the world, it is imperative to be able to include them in your menus. As a catering chef, you must be good at knowing all types of ingredients, flavors, and cuisines to accomplish this. It will be future learning of these things that separate different companies.

22 **Meryl Snow,** Owner, SnowStorm Solutions

In the optimistic landscape of 2024, the catering and event industry is poised for a technological revolution, with artificial intelligence (AI) playing a central role in transforming key aspects of operations. Caterers will benefit from AI-driven innovations such as menu planning, where algorithms analyze trends and preferences to design on-trend menus, with recipes and even wine pairing. Event professionals will have the power of predictive analytics, utilizing AI to anticipate attendance, forecast peak activity times, and even predict menu preferences based on historical data. The integration of facial recognition technology ensures seamless and secure check-ins, while AI-driven chatbots provide instant responses to queries, freeing up professionals to focus on strategic planning. The industry will witness a shift towards dynamic pricing models, optimizing costs based on market demand and competitor pricing, while AI-enhanced security systems analyze crowd behavior to identify potential risks.

The positive impact of AI extends to logistics and supply chain management, automating inventory processes, tracking



Alicia Smith



Meryl Snow



Melissa Tibben

perishable goods, and optimizing delivery routes. Tools driven by AI will enable real-time feedback analysis, allowing professionals to gauge attendee satisfaction and address concerns promptly. The industry is on the cusp of a transformative era where AI not only streamlines operations but also enhances the overall guest experience.

23 **Melissa Tibben,** Client Relations Success Manager, Total Party Planner

In 2024, the catering industry is poised for significant transformations. Firstly, we anticipate a surge in startups entering the scene, driven by an increasing demand for unique culinary experiences and specialized services. These newcomers will bring fresh ideas, innovative technologies, and exciting menus to the table, ultimately reshaping the industry landscape.

Simultaneously, established catering companies will be focusing on enhancing their company culture. Recognizing the crucial role culture plays in employee satisfaction and productivity, owners will invest in creating a positive and inclusive work environment. This cultural shift will not only improve staff retention but also enhance service quality.

Furthermore, 2024 will witness a strategic overhaul among industry veterans. Owners will be diligently working on streamlining operations, optimizing cost-efficiency, and devising exit strategies. This may include exploring retirement options and welcoming

managing partners with deep company knowledge. These meticulous details will contribute to increased efficiency and profitability, ensuring these businesses remain competitive in an evolving market.

As the catering industry continues to evolve, adapting to changing customer preferences and market dynamics, 2024 promises to be a year of innovation, culture-building, and strategic refinement, ultimately benefiting both industry professionals and clients alike.

24 **Jacqueline Vizcaino,** Owner, Tinted Events Design and Planning

As we look ahead to future events in 2024, one of the most promising aspects to focus on will be inclusivity. With growing awareness of diversity, inclusivity, and belonging, an emphasis on the representation of people from diverse and underrepresented groups, such as people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and those with disabilities and various cultural backgrounds, will result in a diverse attendee and vendor partner roster leading to a more welcoming environment for all.

2024 looks bright with the conscious incorporation of these values in planning strategies, curating events that not only entertain and educate but also promote a sense of harmony and representation among all attendees. Clients will expect to see diversity in our content, programs, and workshops, creating a safe place for attendees to share their experiences.

Diversity will not stop there: every element will be more



Jacqueline Vizcaino

25 Positive Predictions for 2024

inclusive, with the event staff, food and beverage options that cater to different dietary or non-alcoholic needs, gender-neutral restrooms, and technological advancements that will allow for an inclusive and accessible event experience for our neurodivergent individuals. 2024 will be a coming together to celebrate and learn, creating an enriching experience for everyone involved.

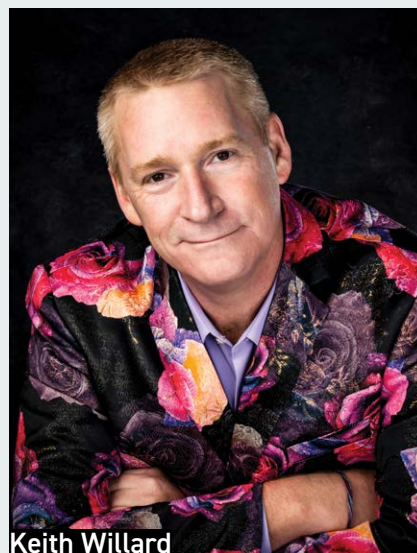
25 **Keith Willard,** Owner, Keith Willard Events

Location, location, location. Americans are traveling at record numbers. Everyone has seen the news reports from all over the world but here in the U.S. as well. Couples are looking outward for their big day. It's not enough to have a local wedding—they want to get out and explore! And so do their guests. We are going to

continue to see the upswing in destination weddings. More and more couples are seeing this as an attainable option, especially since during COVID, it became the norm for certain family members and friends to not be able to attend the wedding, even if it was local. This has freed up the minds and creativity of couples, who are no longer bound by the idea that “everyone” must be invited.

With this new mindset, there will be more freedom in options that the couples are looking for. Beachside, rooftop, unique menus, interesting entertainment, and experiences not only provide a wow effect but a memory their guests will have forever.

This also includes what were set-in-stone traditions. Spirituality is on the rise, and I'm starting to see weddings combined with retreats and ceremonies conducted by shamans that connect people on a deeper level. The world is our oyster! 



Keith Willard

Hear More Perspectives from the Pros

You can get even more insight from these industry professionals when they present during this year's Catersource + The Special Event:

- | | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| ■ Todd Annis | ■ Ryan Corvaia | ■ Julia Kendrick Conway | ■ Robin Selden |
| ■ Alan Berg | ■ Meghan Ely | ■ Anthony Lambatos | ■ Nora Sheils |
| ■ Margaret Brower | ■ Scott Frankel | ■ Jennifer Perna | ■ Meryl Snow |
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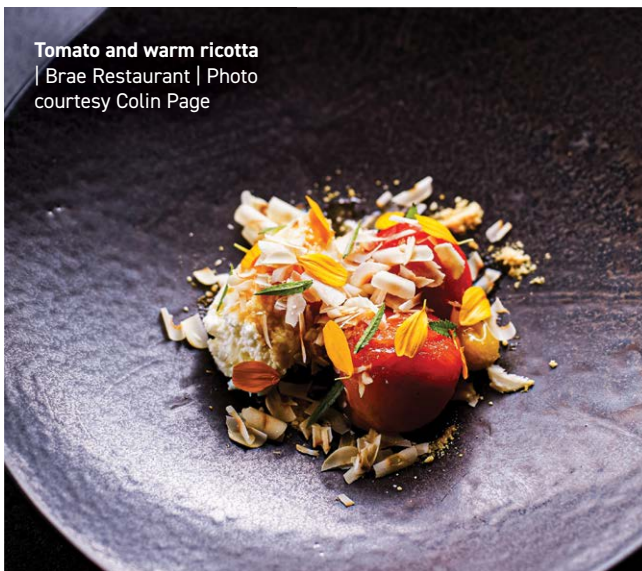
Picture Perfect Plating

BY AMBER KISPERT

IT'S A SIMPLE FACT: we eat with our eyes first. Beautiful presentation allows you to begin anticipating the flavors of a given dish before you take the first bite, heightening anticipation and the overall dining experience—which is where the importance of plating comes into play. It goes beyond mere culinary skill; it's an art form that combines taste, aesthetics, and storytelling.

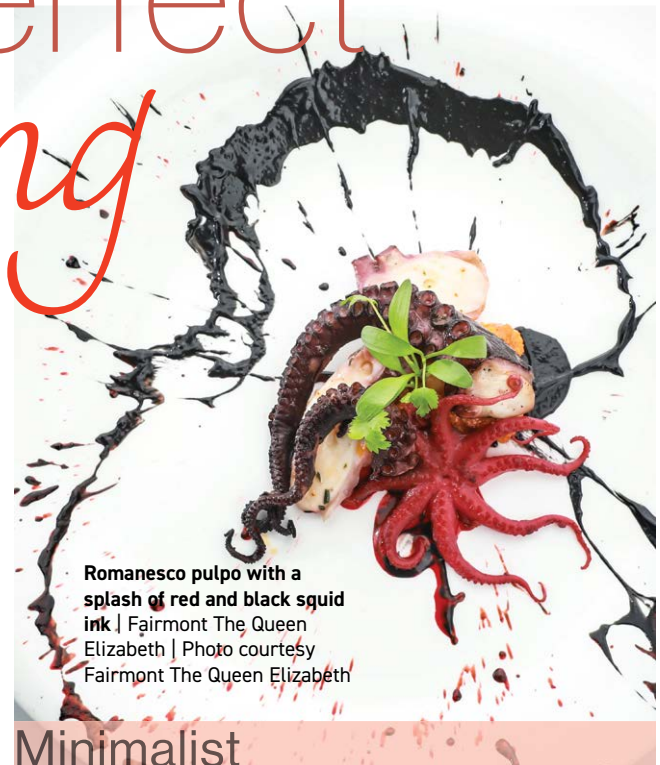
“When plating, you have to let the food speak to you,” Chef Jessie Kordosky (General Mills Foodservice) told *Catersource* during a recent food shoot. “The plate should be surprising and delighting, while enhancing the experience of eating it.”

Plating for service and plating for photography require two different approaches, so let's take a look at each kind.



Tomato and warm ricotta
| Brae Restaurant | Photo
courtesy Colin Page

Garnish-focused



Romanesco pulpo with a
splash of red and black squid
ink | Fairmont The Queen
Elizabeth | Photo courtesy
Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth

Minimalist

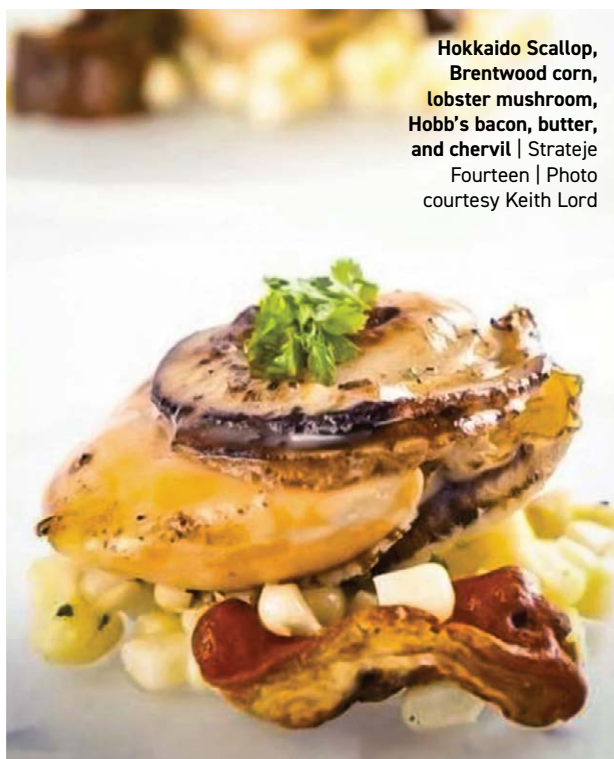
Plating for, service

The way you present your food is what tempts customers to try a dish. We eat with our senses: what we see, smell, and feel.

“Exquisite plating transforms a meal into a multisensory experience. It captivates the eyes before tantalizing taste buds, enhancing overall satisfaction and leaving a lasting impression,” says Sebastien Centner with Eatertainment Catering & Events.

There's so much consideration that must go into every aspect of successfully creating the perfect plate, from the size of the components on the dish to the type of cut to the color and consistency of sauces or toppings.

“Catering is as much about art as it is about food. Professional caterers use plates as their canvas and ingredients as their palette, showcasing their creativity and expertise through meticulously arranged dishes,” Centner says.



Hokkaido Scallop, Brentwood corn, lobster mushroom, Hobb's bacon, butter, and chervil | Strateje Fourteen | Photo courtesy Keith Lord



Beetroot crepes with chevre, local oyster mushroom salad, Thai basil puree, crispy leeks with chili threads | Eatertainment Events & Catering | Photo courtesy Bruce Gibson

Stack

Plating Styles

There are several different approaches to plating. According to Chef George Zappas, these are the plating styles most commonly used by chefs.

Minimalist

This style of plating emphasizes simplicity and minimalism. It typically features one or two main ingredients arranged cleanly and straightforwardly on the plate.

Deconstructed

This plating style breaks down a dish into its components and presents them separately on the plate—allowing diners to

experience each element of the dish individually rather than combining them.

Landscape

This plating style involves arranging food on the plate to resemble a natural landscape or scene. For example, arrange a dish to resemble a garden or a mountain range. This style comes in very handy for dishes that feature a variety of different ingredients.

Stack

This plating style involves stacking ingredients on top of each other to create a visually striking presentation. This

technique is ideal for dishes comprising multiple layers or components.

Color blocking

This plating style involves arranging food on the plate in blocks or stripes of different colors, creating a visually striking presentation pleasing to the eye and enhancing the dish's flavors.

Garnish-focused

This plating style heavily emphasizes using garnishes and other decorative elements to enhance the dish's presentation.

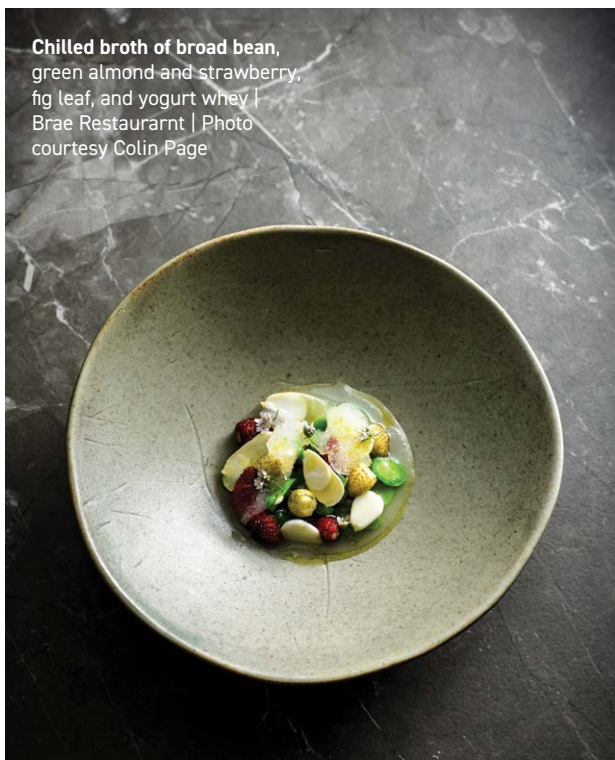
Asymmetrical

This plating style involves arranging food on the plate in an asymmetrical or off-center manner, creating a visually interesting presentation that draws the eye and adds a sense of movement to the dish.

Interactive

This plating style involves presenting the food in a way that encourages interaction from the diner. For example, a dish may be presented with a small hammer and chisel to encourage diners to break open a shellfish, or you can pour sauce over a dish at the table.

Chilled broth of broad bean, green almond and strawberry, fig leaf, and yogurt whey | Brae Restaurant | Photo courtesy Colin Page



Minimalist

Kohlrabi and scampi roe, desert lime, and crustacean butter | Brae Restaurant | Photo courtesy Colin Page



(From top) **Coconut mousse & passionfruit coulis; Double Dark Chocolate Pyramid; Pear & Almond Tartlette** | Eatertainment Events & Catering | Photo courtesy Bruce Gibson



Deconstructed

Prawn and kohlrabi taco | Brae Restaurant | Photo courtesy Colin Page



A few tips for plating, according to [Lightspeed](#), include:

1. Create height on the plate
2. Cut meat horizontally
3. Play with textures
4. Use contrasting colors
5. Choose the right plates
6. Serve smaller portion sizes
7. Use edible garnishes and decorations

Plating for the camera

When it comes to plating techniques for food photography, the approach is slightly different. According to food photographer Leigh Loftus there are several methods that can enhance the overall visual appeal of the dish. Commonly used techniques include:

1. **Layering:** Create depth and visual interest by layering different components of the dish, such as stacking ingredients or placing them in overlapping arrangements.
2. **Garnishes:** Incorporate garnishes like herbs, micro-greens, edible flowers, or sauces to add color, texture, and a touch of freshness.
3. **Negative space:** Utilize negative space by leaving empty areas on the plate to provide breathing room and focus on the main subject.
4. **Contrast:** Play with contrasting colors, textures, and shapes to make the dish visually striking. For example, pairing a vibrant sauce with a neutral-colored protein can create an appealing contrast.
5. **Artful placement:** Position the food thoughtfully on the plate, considering angles, curves, and asymmetry to create visual flow and balance.
6. **Stack and lean:** Stack certain ingredients like pancakes, cookies, or sliced vegetables to give the dish height, and lean them against each other for a dynamic composition.
7. **Use props and utensils:** Incorporate complementary props or utensils related to the dish, such as a cutting board, knife, or spoon, to add context and visual interest.

“Remember, plating techniques can vary depending on the type of cuisine and the desired style or



Plum simmered with onions, honey, and cultured milk |
Brae Restaurant | Photo courtesy Colin Page

Deconstructed



Cast Iron Roasted Rib Eye with patatas bravas, romesco, roasted garlic aioli, cut almonds, tiny cilantro and parsley, sherried onion demi glacé | Strateje Fourteen | Photo courtesy Keith Lord

Landscape

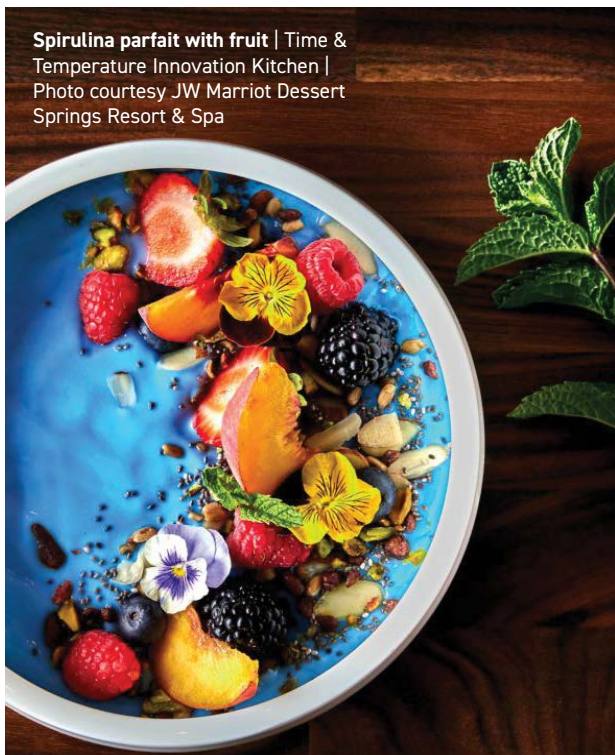
theme,” says Loftus. “It’s essential to experiment, be creative, and find the techniques that work best for highlighting the unique qualities of each dish.”

Check out the accompanying images for some inspiration to help perfect your next plate.

“Perfect plating isn’t just a trend, it’s a fundamental aspect of success in the catering industry,” Centner says. “It’s the bridge between culinary craftsmanship and visual artistry, ensuring that each event becomes a sensory delight that clients and guests will cherish and remember.” 

Continued on page 154

Spirulina parfait with fruit | Time & Temperature Innovation Kitchen | Photo courtesy JW Marriot Dessert Springs Resort & Spa



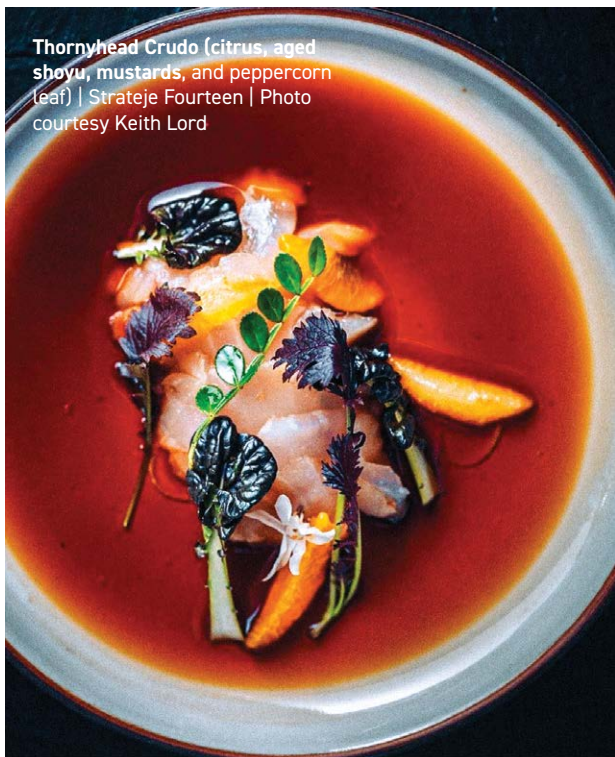
Color blocking

Market salad with shrimp | Time & Temperature Innovation Kitchen | Photo courtesy JW Marriot Dessert Springs Resort & Spa



Color blocking

Thornyhead Crudo (citrus, aged shoyu, mustards, and peppercorn leaf) | Strateje Fourteen | Photo courtesy Keith Lord



Garnish-focused

Plating pasta can be a true art form in itself, whether you choose the "nest" technique or a more casual plating. Experts encourage to keep close attention to the sauce as it should be on the top of the pasta, otherwise the sauce tends to fall to the bottom making the pasta look sloppy | Barilla | Photo courtesy Barilla





Japanese Carrot Cheesecake with candied cherry tomatoes, tomato pardon pepper jam, pardon custard, sweet-dried peels powder, and various crumbles | Strateje Fourteen | Photo courtesy Keith Lord



Harissa Roasted Beet Salad with yogurt cheese, blended Ontario lettuces, spiced praline, and extra virgin sunflower oil | Eatertainment Events & Catering | Photo courtesy Bruce Gibson

Asymmetrical



Fossil Discovery (chocolate "fossils" and edible rocks nestled underneath crushed up Oreo cookies). Guests brushed and "shoveled" away the "dirt" to find the hidden fossil. Photo courtesy Lazaro Llanes



Guests use a mallet to crack into a dish from Pinch Food Design. Photo courtesy Stetten Wilson

Interactive

AS SEEN IN... LOUISVILLE

By Amber Kispert

During the annual International Foodservice Editorial Council gathering in Louisville, KY, conference organizers encouraged attendees to celebrate everything the city had to offer, especially the bourbon and bites! During the conference's premier event, the Chef Showcase, chefs from around the city converged on the Omni Hotel (ushered in by none other than Churchill Downs' famous trumpet player) to show off their culinary prowess through the likes of appetizers and plates. The four-day event also brought the bites and bourbon to several other networking events. Here's a look at the truly appetizing and trend-forward bites that attendees were treated to. 

All photos courtesy Buzz Orr Multimedia, unless otherwise noted



Grazing boards continue to be popular stations during events, even during breakfast. During one breakfast, Emmi Roth set out a breakfast charcuterie board featuring assorted cheeses, breads, fruits, vegetables, spreads, and hard-boiled eggs.



Boozy desserts are one of the food trends that will make a major play in 2024, and chefs have embraced the trend head-on with creative pairings. At the Chef Showcase, chefs like Kellanova's Mango Key Lime Mojito Verrine paired their key lime mojito gelee, mango flour, coconut rum panna cotta, mango, and pineapple compote, and coconut rum.



Nostalgia continues to be on-trend, and Kellanova brought the '90s to the Chef Showcase where they served Mac n' Cheeze-It Bites as well as a Cheeze-It Biscuit with Pulled Pork.



Food and beverage pairings are a key trend where guests can sample a small portion of a complement to a myriad of accompaniments. For example, paired its cheese with a variety of toppings (strawberry, bacon, apple, jams, raspberry, and candied pecans) while Tillamook paired its cheese with different dips (strawberry, raspberry, and candied pecans). Cheese curds with different dips were also featured, with Chili Ranch, Northwest Apple B, and Ranch, while Pillsbury served three different butters (honey corn, sorghum), and Bourbon Barrel (shown) paired with varying accompaniments (greens, cheese, mushrooms, and



ood trends expected to
Reser's Foodservice
th its Pineapple &
(pineapple cremeux,
uid gel, whipped
go and coconut
t snow).



Tillamook embraced the boozy dessert trend with its Kentucky-inspired milkshake, made with vanilla bean ice cream and local bourbon.



The sober drinking movement made its way to bourbon-country when the National Mango Board and the National Watermelon Promotion Board served non-alcoholic cocktails alongside alcoholic drinks: Mango Bourbon Smash (bourbon, mint, cinnamon, mango, and maple); Winner's Circle (turmeric, citrus, green tea, and mango puree); Down Stretch (watermelon, rosemary, winter spice syrup, and bourbon); and Back in the Saddle (shown) with watermelon, blackberry jam, honey syrup, sage, and sparkling water.



e all the rage during events,
all bite to see how it pairs and
imiments. Wisconsin Cheese,
with different bourbons, and
h various accompaniments
, pepperoni, olives, prosciutto,
Tillamook also paired its fried
ing sauces (Spicy Cheddar
BQ, and Extra Sharp Cheddar
its Southern Style Biscuits with
hipotle, Kentucky apple, and
Foods (which attendees visited
various barrel-aged soy sauces
companiments (bacon, micro
d cucumbers).



Innovations in plant-based foods are expected to be trending throughout 2024. Throughout the week, IFEC members were served various plant-based offerings including vegetable samosas (Indian chutney, potatoes, soy sauce, and rice wine vinegar), plant-based brioche buns from La Brea Bakery (shown) with their Hot Brown Burger (turkey patty, mornay, smoky bacon, pecorino, tomatoes, arugula, and aioli), and Motif FoodWorks served their plant-based grounds in the form of a kofta kebab on pita bread with a Tzatziki sauce.



Bringing regionality and authenticity into your dishes is always a crowd pleaser during events because it helps guests connect to a place. Kentucky-based Chef Sara Bradley (who previously competed on *Top Chef*) prepared a duo of deviled eggs, which celebrated two of Kentucky's famed dishes: The Hot Brown (tomato jam, parmesan, bacon, and chicken) and the Benedictine (cream cheese, dill, pickled cucumber salad, and brioche).



Sensory and immersive dining encourages guests to literally play with their food, and Barilla (above) got in on this trend with their Al Bronzo Sensory Experience. Attendees were encouraged to play with Barilla's durum semolina before getting a close-up look at the Al Bronzo premium bronze die pasta (which is made using Barilla's trademarked Lavarazione grezza process). The experience culminated with guests enjoying a simple pasta preparation in tomato sauce. Kikkoman (top) also encouraged guests to play with their food to identify the mystery ingredient in its new "un-soy" sauce, which has all the flavor and umami of soy sauce without the soy.



What a way to welcome guests to dinner! Churchill Downs' famous trumpet player ushered attendees into the Chef Showcase.



Beautiful plating always brings... During one of the lunches Gene... served up brownies with salted... elevated with garnishes and dr...



Idaho potato pavé with steak tartare



food up a notch.
ral Mills Foodservice
bourbon caramel
izzles.



Bourbon Barrel Foods served a unique spin on a margarita at their distillery where a few drops of their smoked barrel-aged soy sauce are added to the drink. Photo courtesy Amber Kispert



care.



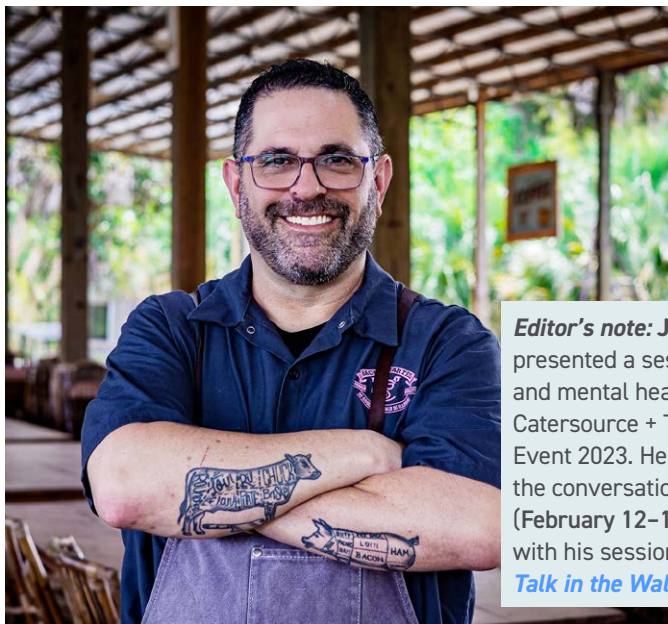
Beef brisket with pumpkin spice barbecue, pecans, and mini mashers.



"Fancy ice" was all the rage throughout 2023—ice with flowers, ice with logos, colored ice, etc.—and attendees to this year's IFEC conference got a first-hand account of how one form of fancy ice—a perfect sphere—is created when they made a stop at the Monogram Experience where they saw the Monogram Forge Ice Press in action. Photo courtesy Kelly Richardson



By Jeffrey Schlissel



Editor's note: Jeffrey Schlissel presented a session on chefs and mental health during Catersource + The Special Event 2023. He will continue the conversation in 2024 (February 12–15 in Austin, TX) with his session [Let's Have a Talk in the Walk-in](#).

Mental Health and ROI

Growing up, my parents always told me there were two things we should never talk about: religion and politics. The funny thing is these two topics were still brought up a lot.

The one thing we never mentioned or spoke about, however, was Mental Health. Now, please note: we usually do not capitalize those two words, but I think we should start.

Let's take a trip back to 2018, specifically June 8, 2018. If you do not remember that date, that is the day Chef Anthony Bourdain committed suicide. Later that same year, the American Culinary Federation was having their convention, and they turned the spotlight on Mental Health. That day the conversation started.

During that convention, a chef that I had just met broke down across the table from me. At first, I thought it was about Bourdain. He then made it very clear why he was so bereft. He looked directly into my eyes and said, "I tried to kill myself, and this wonderful woman beside me, my wife, saved my life!" If that doesn't grab your attention, I have no idea what will. I grabbed the microphone and said it is about time we turned a spotlight on the pink elephant in the room.

My name is Jeffrey Schlissel, and at 18 years old, I tried to kill myself. From that moment on, I have not stopped talking about it, nor will I ever.

I have done several presentations on Mental Health, and they generally focus on telling stories. I feel that storytelling is a way to let others know they are not alone, like how alone I felt at 18. My presentations have morphed into this storytelling, while touching on a specific "why." That "why" is why you should care—and it is not just about being human; it's more than that. It's also about ROI for your business.

What is one of the biggest headaches in our industry right now? If you said COGS (cost of goods sold), you are probably correct, but not for this story.

This is a people story. Right now, we cannot find people to work, yes or no? You tried everything to hire a great candidate or a "body." What if you asked your staff, "How is your Mental Health today?" Can you talk about that subject? How would they feel?

How many of you put the Federal Labor Posters up in your kitchen? (All of you, I hope.) Why not also post places or resources online regarding Mental Health? If you are not talking about Mental Health, you are missing out on huge ROI.

Think about the impact that you can have on your team. They see that you care about them, and they will buy in. It is the simplest form of paying it forward. We can't afford insurance for all our staff members, but what about collaborating with a therapist to do group therapy or talk sessions? What about offering to pay for one-on-one sessions for your staff? There are other resources online that can help as well.

The bottom line is that *your* bottom line is affected by churn. Highly stressed team members lose their passion and drive. If you are open seven days a week, maybe consider looking into closing one day. Think about giving your staff a consistent Mental Health day. We have that old saying, "happy wife, happy life." Happy employees perform better and will also treat your investment like their own. Think about how word might get out about how you manage and lead your team with empathy. You may just have too many job applicants with no openings. How magical would that be? 

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EXCLUSIVE: Get Ready for CS+TSE (p. 10)

27 Positive Predictions to Start Your Year Right (p. 100)

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An elegant tent lights up the night in "Green Envy," the 2023 Gala Award for Best Wedding recipient Jaclyn Watson Events. Turn to page 34 for this year's nominees. Photo courtesy Kelsey Regan Photography

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EDITOR'S PAGE

Pushing the Boundaries of Customer Experience

Over the past decade, I've become an "okay" cook. My friends marvel over my knife skills (which my chef friends would still cringe at), and I've become fairly creative with the "this and that" in my refrigerator, though I'm more content with cheese, crackers, and a whiskey sour for dinner than much else.

A few days ago, however, I received a small holiday-decorated box from some good friends in the New York/Connecticut area. Inside were three 50ml bottles of Scotch paired with three accompanying recipes, a bag of Arborio rice, an apron, a logoed wooden spoon, and a recipe with a QR code. I had been sent an experience.

Amanda Ma had it right in her "positive prediction" via our feature beginning on page 100—transformational experiences will leave attendees (or in this case, gift recipients) not only entertained but also changed in some meaningful way. Brands will join forces to create synergy and cross-promote their products. I cooked along with Marcia Selden Catering & Events via the QR code and produced a meal that was so delicious, I'm planning to put it on regular rotation. This gift didn't just find a place on my shelf—it entertained me, made me feel capable, and transformed the way I approached my kitchen for one night—with care and supreme attention. I infused simple syrup, I bought the mascarpone, and I completed my mise en place hours prior to cooking so that everything went as smooth as the unsalted butter melting in my sauté pan.

As for the brand positioning, Compass Box Scotch is now on my shopping list—the cocktail recipes provided were divine.

As Jeniffer Bello states (also in our *Positive Predictions* feature), "It's not just about conveying information, but creating immersive, personalized experiences that linger long after the event concludes."

This is also what we are hoping for you at Catersource + The Special Event this year in Austin, TX: to provide you with a transformational experience that will change you in some meaningful way and linger as long as that recipe will in my kitchen file. We hope you take home insight into how to operate your business more efficiently and effectively, and new ideas and products to execute events that will delight your clients for years to come. Brands will join forces with us to create synergy, too, and of course—as with every good event—delicious and trending food ideas will be available.

As we move into 2024, it is my great hope that we see you in February in Austin, TX but for now, from all of us at *Special Events* magazine, we wish you the happiest of the holiday season.

Kathleen

Kathleen Stoehr
Director of Community & Content Strategy

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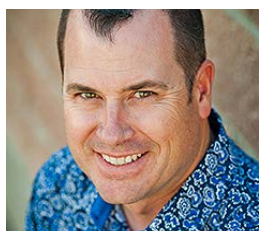
CONTRIBUTORS



Marketing expert
Christie Osborne
discusses balancing
self-care at a
conference



Tech professional
Nora Sheils talks
auditing for future-
proofing your business



Event pro **Kevin Dennis**
looks ahead to success
in the new year



Wedding PR expert
Meghan Ely reflects
on the lessons she's
learned as Immediate
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Director of Community & Content Strategy Kathleen Stoehr, kathleen.stoehr@informa.com
Content Editor Amanda Nicklaus, amanda.nicklaus@informa.com
Senior Content Producer Amber Kispert, amber.kispert@informa.com
Art Director Sharon Carlson, sharon.carlson@informa.com
Managing Director Melissa Fromento, melissa.fromento@informa.com
Sales Account Executive Kevin Hacke, kevin.hacke@informa.com
Sales Account Executive Bonnie Rayfield-Warg, bonnie.rayfield-warg@informa.com
Managing Director, Informa Connect, New York Aharon Shamash, aharon.shamash@informa.com
Group Show Director Tara Melingonis, tara.melingonis@informa.com
Show Manager Jesse Parziale, jesse.parziale@informa.com
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Photo Credit: Catering Creations



Weddings

At its collective portfolio of some of the most desirable wedding venues in the United States and Canada, the LCA caters many thousands of weddings annually.

Most LCA members have dedicated wedding specialists on staff to ensure this most important day is executed flawlessly, no matter the level of complexity.

Photo Credit: Bonura Hospitality Group



Social

Bar and bat mitzvahs, First Communions, quinceañeras, retirements and graduations, and even funerals are all important life cycle events. Superb food and service are crucial to making these events special and memorable, and the LCA is a perfect resource for those products.

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Galas and fundraisers are key to the success of most charitable ventures - including both financial and membership. The LCA is highly attuned to the needs of most charities, and is a great resource for all the necessary components to make these gala events successful.

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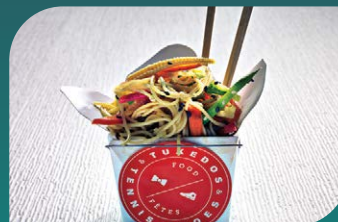
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SOUTH

Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas

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WEST

Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington

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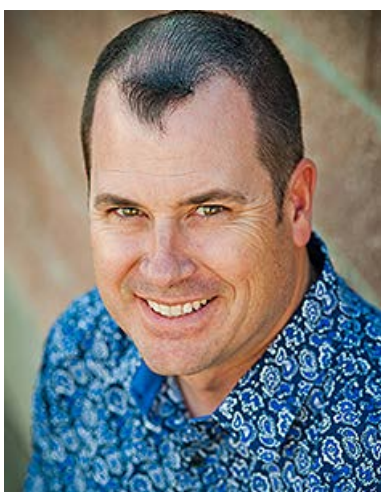
EAST

Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia

Photo Credit: The Classic Catering People

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Everything You Need to Make 2024 Your Best Year in Business Yet



By Kevin Dennis

As wedding and event professionals, we understand that each year brings with it a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The industry is ever-evolving, and staying at the forefront of trends is essential to thrive in our industry. As 2024 approaches, it's a great time to reflect on our past successes, learn from our experiences, and set ambitious goals for the future.

Whether you're a seasoned pro or just starting, here are six steps to take your business to new heights and make 2024 your most fulfilling year yet.

TAKE A LOOK BACK

Before jumping into your 2024 agenda, it's important to reflect on 2023 by considering each event's triumphs and setbacks. Ask yourself these questions:

1. What went well for me this year?
2. What could I update in the coming year?
3. What do I want to leave in 2023?
4. What do I want to take with me into 2024?

Talk to your team to pinpoint the highs and lows of the past year so you can determine how to make 2024 even better.

SET NEW (AND REALISTIC) GOALS

It's common to set goals for the new year, but there's a big difference between setting intentional and strategic goals versus setting goals you

feel pressured to achieve. Take some time to contemplate what you want to change in 2024, whether it means more or less of something.

You might want to boost your social media following, or perhaps you're hoping to reduce your operational expenses. Reflect on how you can enhance your business in the coming year while keeping your ideal outcomes specific and reasonable. It's good to challenge yourself, but setting goals that are too far-fetched can set you up for disappointment.

Good examples include:

- Hire a new assistant by June 2024
- Increase revenue from B2B clients by 5%
- Work with 1+ new corporate event client(s) each quarter
- Create a new survey to ask for client feedback in January 2024

CREATE A PLAN

Now that you've laid out your goals, it's time to create a plan! Start by breaking down your goals into smaller milestones over the year. Remember: Consistency is key. Splitting larger goals into a handful of more manageable tasks will make success feel less daunting.

For example, if your goal is to grow your social media following, your plan might include experimenting with social media ads in Q1 and hiring a content marketer in Q2. Just be sure to tailor your approach to your specific audience.

Take some time to contemplate what you want to change in 2024, whether it means more or less of something.



CONDUCT A TECH AUDIT

Success in the special events industry requires a blend of creativity, organization, and efficiency. One of the best ways to stay on top of these elements? Using the right technology.

As you head into 2024, conduct a tech audit of your current systems (turn to page 54 for a thorough walkthrough of how to conduct a tech audit). See if there are any subscriptions or tools that aren't making a positive impact on your workflows, then work on replacing them. Here are a few of my favorite tech tools for event pros:

1. FocusList (time management)
2. Notability (detailed note-taking)
3. Canva (graphic design)
4. Voxer (client communication)
5. Asana (project management)
6. Acuity (appointment scheduling)

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

If you want to meet your goals in 2024, client feedback is invaluable. Your clients' opinions offer insights that can transform your services and elevate your business. Don't hesitate to ask for feedback; instead, embrace it as a valuable resource.

By seeking input from your clients, you demonstrate your commitment to excellence and uncover opportunities for growth. Create a new survey that you can share with your clients after their event wraps up, and set a reminder for when to send it (or use software to automate it!).

START CONVERSATIONS

Beyond setting goals and making plans, a new year is the perfect time to expand your network and meet new event

professionals. Creative partners can help you actively work toward your goals, widen your skillset, and generate new referrals.

Set aside time for a coffee meeting or reach out via social media to rekindle connections with colleagues. And don't forget to keep things mutual—if there's a way you can help someone in your industry, reach out and let them know!

Armed with these tips, you have the steps you need to take in order to make 2024 your best year yet. Keep an open mind, refresh your goals, and you're sure to succeed! ●

Kevin Dennis is the editor of *WeddingIQ* and the owner of *Fantasy Sound Event Services*, a full-service event company based in Livermore, California. Dennis is the immediate past president for *WIPA* and is Director-at-Large on the *ILEA NCC* board.

Kevin Dennis @ The Special Event!

See Kevin Dennis LIVE at Catersource + The Special Event in Austin, TX this February! Kevin will be teaching *Taking Advantage of Tech: Downloading the Update Your Event Company Needs*. [Click here](#) for more information on his informative session.

The Great Industry Gathering, *Texas-Style*

Catersource + The
head to Austin



e Special Event February 12–15

Register Now!

Catersource + The Special Event is the best place to expand your network, learn from industry veterans, and get inspired about your career. This year we head to the Live Music Capitol of the World: Austin, TX. Get ready for some great entertainment, legendary barbecue, and a week of fun!

Don't miss a moment! Arrive early Monday 2/12, depart Friday morning 2/16

Arriving early? On Monday, kick off your week by attending our **Taste of Austin Venue Tour**, followed by a pub crawl for Connect Social at 7:30 p.m. End your week by joining us at the **Closing Night Celebration** at Superstition night club. In between, you won't want to miss a thing. ***Here's a look at all that will be offered during this unforgettable week!***

**REGISTER
NOW**

catersource® + **THE
SPECIAL
EVENT®**

FEBRUARY 12-15, 2024

AUSTIN CONVENTION CENTER • AUSTIN, TX
CATERSOURCE-TSE.COM

AUSTIN



See Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ LIVE

At the Closing General Session on the Keynote Stage, Michael Cerbelli will bring back his ever-beloved Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ on **Thursday, February 15th, at 8:00 a.m.** after a two-year hiatus.

Celebrating its 21st year of production, Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ takes the most cutting-edge event and entertainment ideas and places them on the forefront of the event industry. Combining his quick wit, natural charisma, and decades of event production experience, Cerbelli makes The Hot List™ presentation an exclusive experience to be enjoyed by planners and industry partners alike. As a 90-minute non-stop presentation, The Hot List™ is equally entertaining as it is educational: it allows event professionals to gain priceless insight into the new and upcoming trends. Don't miss this popular inspirational session!



See Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ live

Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ will wrap up the 2024 Catersource + The Special Event conference and tradeshow on Thursday morning, February 15th at 8:00 a.m. This is your chance to elevate your events and uncover top vendors and performers first-hand, preparing you for unforgettable events in 2024 and beyond. The Closing General Session is included in the purchase of any pass, from All Access to tradeshow only.

Get ready to be struck with creative ideas for 2024 and beyond. This year's lineup features classes that will spark creativity in all aspects of your business. With topics focusing on sustainability, trends, event tech, marketing, DEI, and weddings (and much, much more) you'll leave Catersource + The Special Event full of ideas and ready to innovate!



David Merrell's popular (and room-filling) annual trend session will return in 2024. Don't miss **David Merrell & Susie Perelman Present: Current Trends in the Event Industry**. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

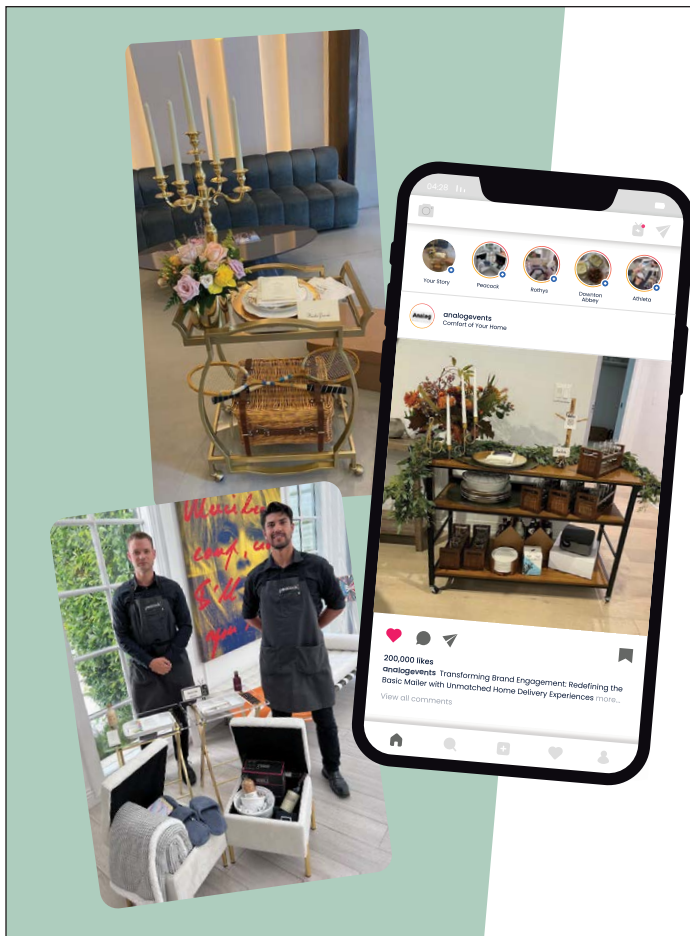


The room was packed for David Merrell's annual trend session in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Register Now!



CS+TSE gathers industry leaders for inspiring panel discussions, like [Marketing Masters](#), where marketing pros like (from left) Clint Upchurch, Laura Cardo, Christie Osborne and Jamie Lee Quickert share insights and strategies for success. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Turn basic mailers into unparalleled brand experiences, delivered right to the doorsteps of clients, influencers, and talent.

Featuring bespoke, high-end products and custom partnerships with esteemed local restaurants and florists, our service is elevated with a white-glove touch.

Analog EVENTS & MARKETING

www.AnalogEvents.com

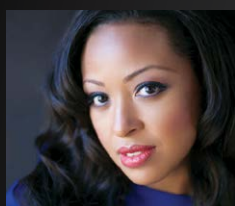
Featured Sessions



Adrienna McDermott, Owner,
Ava And The Bee

"The Blogging Blueprint for Wedding Vendors"

8:30 a.m. Tuesday, February 13



AJ Williams,
President & Executive Producer, AJ Events

"Inside the World of Charitable Events"

1:00 p.m. Wednesday, February 14



Alyson Zildjian,
Owner, Zildjian Catering and Consulting

"Fast Chat: How to Have Fun Creating Green Events & Sustainable Business Practices"

12:00 p.m. Thursday, February 15



Armando Seledon,
CSEP, CTA, Associate Director of Member Engagement, Visit San Antonio



Randi Steinhart,
CSEP, Owner & Event Producer, RS Event Productions



Stacey Hoyt, CMP,
CSEP, Director of Events, KMFA Classical

"Fast Chat: Boost Your Marketability with the CSEP Certification"

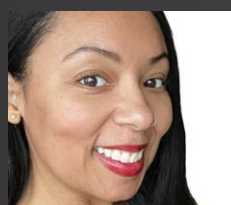
11:15 a.m. Wednesday, February 14



Brit Bertino, Owner,
BRIT BERTINO EVENT EXCELLENCE

"Embracing Diversity & Inclusion in Wedding Planning: Creating Unforgettable Moments that Honor Love in all its Forms"

11:15 a.m. Tuesday, February 13



Cazoshay Marie,
Speaker, Divine Intervention Design

"Beyond Barriers: Unleashing the Power of Inclusive Events"

3:00 p.m. Tuesday, February 13



Cristian Hernandez,
Director of Business Development, Rosendale Events



Carlos Madrigal,
Director of Operations, Rosendale Events



Kimberly McKnight,
Event Coordinator, Rosendale Events

"The Art of a Room Flip"

4:15 p.m. Tuesday, February 13



David Adler, CEO,
BizBash

"Trends in Setting the Stage for Serendipity"

11:15 a.m. Tuesday, February 13



David Egan,
Consultant, DavidEgan.com

**Help! Handling
Medical
Emergencies at
Events, for Event
Professionals"**

**8:30 p.m.
Wednesday,
February 14**



David Merrell, CEO,
OO Events



Susie Perelman,
Owner, Mosaic

**David Merrell
Susie Perelman
Present: Current
Trends in the
Event Industry"**

**10:00 a.m.
Wednesday,
February 13**



Anna Liston,
President,
Hambert Events

**"Micro Weddings:
How to Make
Them Profitable!"**

**8:30 a.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Emily Malaya,
CEO, The TapRoot
Hospitality Collective

**"Hospitality &
Health"**

**1:00 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Gary Bordman,
CSEP, Chief Creative
Officer, AE&ES
JustCallGary



Bobby Bradley,
President, Texas
Entertainment Group



Kelly Smink,
President,
Amusement Masters

**"Working Post
Pandemic with
Cooperation not
Competition"**

**3:00 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



JC York, President
& COO, Classic
Entertainment / Wise
Guys InterACTIVE



Aaron Price,
National Director
of Creative,
Access Destination
Management



Art Menchaca,
Director of Business
Development,
Rosemary's Catering,



India Rhodes, CSEP,
Partner & Creative
Director, Wilkinson
Rhodes

**"Design Roulette:
Spinning Client
Visions into
Captivating Event
Experiences"**

**8:30 a.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Jen Sulak, Wedding
Photographer, Artist
and Inspirational
Speaker, Pink Light
Images/Weirdo
Weddings

**"Fast Chat:
Awkward
Networking
- Making
Relationships
Count!"**

**10:30 a.m.
Wednesday,
February 14**



Joel Olandesca,
CEO & Co-Founder,
SOS Charging
Solutions & SimpliAR



Sébastien David,
President, Sénik The
Event Agency



Jonathan Jow,
Director of Strategy,
BoothEasy Photo
Booth Company



Cindy Lo, CEO
& Chief Event
Strategist, RED
VELVET

**"Talking Tech:
Guest Experience,
Trends, and AI"**

**10:30 a.m.
Thursday,
February 15**

Register Now!

Featured Sessions



Keri Miller, Partner
& Chief Creative
Strategist, e=mc²
events

**“Pink Poodle
Theory 3.0:
Harnessing The
Power of Your
Creative Brain”**

**1:00 p.m.
Wednesday,
February 14**



Mary Delia Allen,
Author/ Speaker,
Mary Delia Events

**“Transportation
& Hospitality:
Five Tips for
High Touch Event
Transportation”**

**1:00 p.m. Thursday,
February 15**



Meagan Culkin,
Owner, Magnolia
Collective

**“Ensuring
Inclusive Events
for All”**

**1:45 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Meggie Hess,
Director of People
Services, Veterans
United Home Loans

**“Beyond the
Party: Creating
Meaningful
Moments and
Connections
through Events”**

**2:00 p.m.
Thursday, February
15**



Randi Bushell,
Owner, Merri

**“An Insider’s
Look into Today’s
Intentional
Consumer”**

**4:15 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Renée Sabo, Owner
& Lead Wedding
Consultant, Urban
Soirée

**“A Guide to
Creating A
Process-Driven
Approach
to Wedding
Planning”**

**1:00 p.m. Thursday,
February 15**



Rob Barber, Vice
President, Modular
Systems + R&D,
ATOMIC

**“From Napkin
Sketch to Show
Day: What
14 Years, 12
Product Lines,
110 Products &
28,802 Shows Have
Taught Me”**

**2:30 p.m.
Wednesday,
February 14**

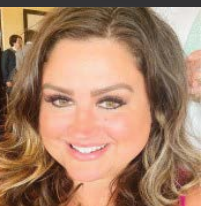


Robin Selden,
Executive Chef &
Managing Partner,
Marcia Selden
Catering



Jeffrey Selden,
Managing Partner,
Marcia Selden
Catering

Register Now!



Elizabeth Meyer, Former
Head of Events
Programming
Bridgewater
Associates, EAM
Experience Solutions,
C



Tara Melvin,
Founder, President
& CEO, National
Society of Black
Wedding and Event
Professionals
(NSBWEP)



Jonathan Jow,
Director of Strategy,
BoothEasy Photo
Booth Company



Troy Peters, CTS,
Chief Experience
Officer, SEAS
Productions



Michael Cerbelli,
President, Cerbelli
Creative



Andre Howell,
Vice President
of Operations,
Multicultural
Foodservice and
Hospitality Alliance
(MFHA)



Lucas Mendieta,
President & Co-
Founder, Cutting
Edge Elite

**“Show Calling and
Stage Management
for Live Events”**

**1:00 p.m.
Wednesday,
February 14**

**Feasts & Fetes:
Savvy Guide
Mastering
Corporate
Event Planning
Catering
Collaborations”**

**10:30 a.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Jen Bertolino,
Director of Sales,
Destination
Management,
Czerlonka
Productions



Teri Jakob,
Associate Director,
Special Events,
UPMC Pinnacle
Foundation

**“Unleash
Your Creative
Superpowers: The
Art of Theme-
ology!”**

**3:00 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Vanessa Joy,
Photographer,
Vanessa Joy
Photography

**“The Newest
Ways to Maximize
Marketing with
Photographer
Vanessa Joy”**

**4:15 p.m. Tuesday,
February 13**



Ron Ben-Israel,
Owner, Ron Ben-
Israel Cakes

**Candid
Conversation with
Ron Ben-Israel”**

**10:30 a.m.
Thursday,
February 15**

Competitive cooking

Who doesn't love a good culinary competition? Watch DICED on Wednesday, **February 14 at 11:00 a.m.** to see chefs create the latest food trends right before your eyes

(while they compete for a cash prize!). Impress clients with the "I saw it first" pitch you'll be able to give after watching the best in the industry whip up inspired dishes.



Industry leaders judge the competition. Last year's judges (from left to right): Chef Nettie Frank, Mike Biococchi with Elegant Affairs Caterers (and the 2022 DICED champion), and Chef Cristian Hernandez with Rosendale Events. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Certified Catering Consultants

Need a quick consultation about the catering aspects of your events? We have you covered—the Certified Catering Consultants (CCC) are experts in many applicable areas. They will offer free half-hour appointments on site to address your hospitality-related challenges, identify your highest value opportunities, and/or help you improve your

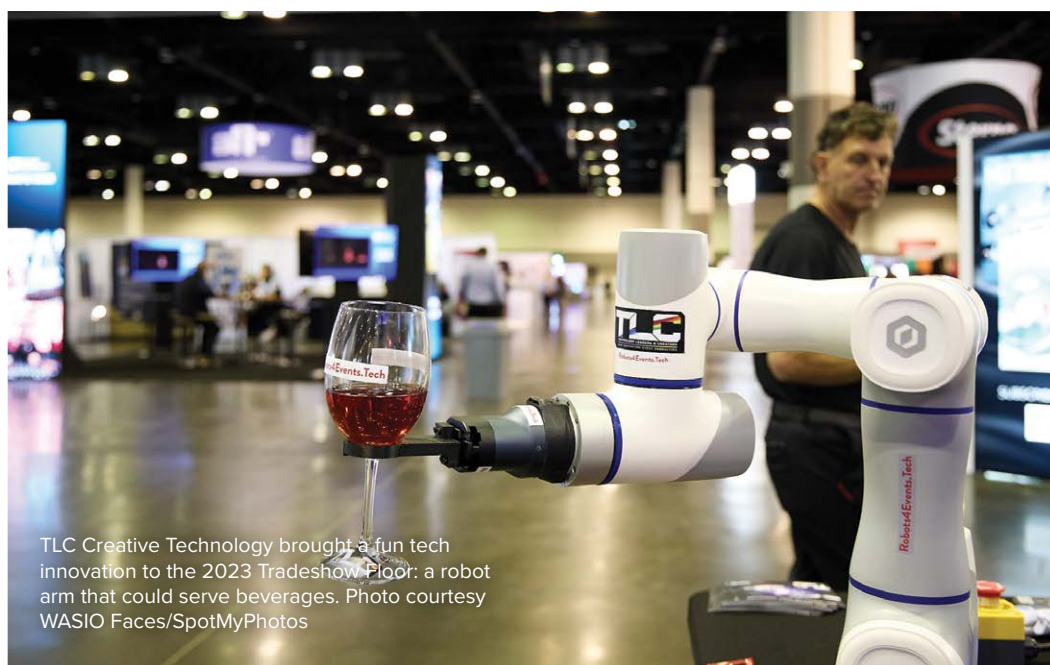
business and ROI. Head to Room 11A/B to sign up for a free consultation during show hours Tuesday through Thursday.

Discover new ideas on the tradeshow floor

What better way to get inspired than on the Tradeshow Floor? Catch up with old friends, partake in the festivities, and get down to business.



Head to the Tradeshow Floor for Happy Hour! Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



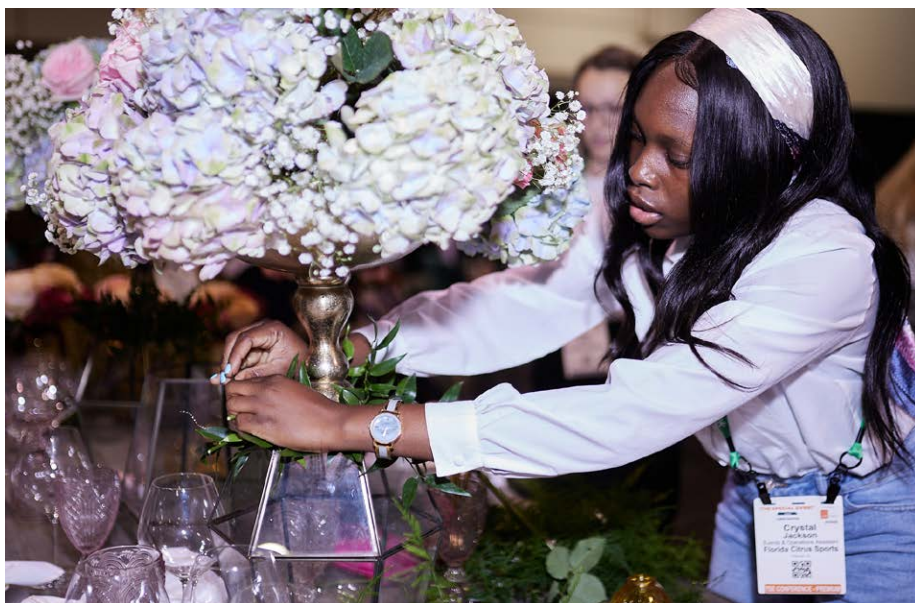
TLC Creative Technology brought a fun tech innovation to the 2023 Tradeshow Floor: a robot arm that could serve beverages. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Discover New Ideas

Attendees chat with Pzazz Productions' living table at Catersource + The Special Event 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Participants of last year's Tablescape Competition were challenged to work in teams and create eye-catching designs for imaginary clients and events. Photos here and next page courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos





If you want to see the trends, chat with the who's who in the market, and forge new partnerships, we've got you covered.

Eat, drink, and be amazed at all that takes place on the Tradeshow Floor! You'll be able to browse, learn, taste samples, and buy from a plethora of trendsetting and relevant exhibitors, who are here to help you grow your business and recognize potential. With a lively **Happy Hour** on Wednesday afternoon at 4:00 p.m., **Booth Awards** at 10:30 a.m. Thursday morning, and **Fast Chat sessions** on the Ignite stages, the Tradeshow Floor will be packed with activity, from networking to education to trendspotting.

And don't forget about the annual **Tablescape Competition!**

Want to know how to build a beautiful tablescape incorporating lush florals? You'll want to be on the tradeshow floor at 11:00 a.m. on Thursday. Join our talented Tablescape Competition Chairs Michelle Howard, Matthew Crowe, and Colton Staver for a fun and interactive way to express your creativity. Four to six teams of four participants each will be tasked to create a fabulous tablescape with all the trimmings. In the fashion of a TV reality series, each team will be assigned a table and an overall client request. They will then have timed phases to design, choose products, and produce a tablescape. Tables will be available for photography afterward!

New this year! Fast Chats

We're offering quick-hitting 30-minute chats this year where attendees can discuss targeted topics with industry experts. Topics range from technology to sustainability to marketing to operations. Held on the tradeshow floor Ignite stages, these are up-close-and-personal conversations encouraging discourse between presenter and attendee. If you have 30 minutes between an appointment on the tradeshow floor, or want to learn something quick before moving on, this is the place to go!

Lunch & Learn is back

Since its last appearance in 2020, Lunch & Learn returns to Catersource + The Special Event this February. Join Scott Frankel, your host, as he welcomes catering and event professionals to his session *I Can Top That! Event Mishap Stories & What We Can Learn from Them*, spinning their brutal truths of near misses, mishaps, and amazing recoveries during their events. Enjoy a delicious three-course themed lunch as you also hear how they have overcome their trials and walked away with advice that they will share with the audience. A checklist of dos and don'ts (and a full belly) will be your parting takeaway!

After a satisfying day of learning and networking, get ready to spend your evenings having fun! Every evening features a different event theme and venue, all curated to bring you the latest trends in a setting that also grants you the time and space to connect with friends, peers, and colleagues.



Evening events are a great place to meet new faces and celebrate with peers and friends! Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



The Closing Night Celebration in Orlando last year gave attendees a taste of food around the globe. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Monday February 12 • Speakeasy

Chair: Lauren Kelly, Hello! TX

Kick off your week right by connecting with friends and colleagues at our opening welcome reception **Connect Social** from **7:30 p.m.–10:30 p.m.**, which brings attendees of Art of Catering Food together with Catersource + The Special Event.

Tuesday February 13 • Brazos Hall

Chairs: Lindsey Ganther, Contigo Catering and Sarah Surprise, Whim Hospitality

It's time to celebrate with colleagues from near and far during the **Opening Night Party** from 7:00 p.m.–10:00 p.m.

Saddle up for an electrifying night at the Neon Cowboy Extravaganza, a dazzling event taking place during our Opening Night Party at Catersource + The Special Event!

Get ready to step into a vibrant world where neon meets the Wild West, as Brazos Hall transforms into a haven for event enthusiasts. The Neon Cowboy theme promises a fusion of modern flair with a classic Texas twist, creating an atmosphere that's both edgy and full of southern charm.

Wednesday February 14 • Skybox on 6th

The can't-miss networking celebration to raise funds for our industry is back! Join the SEARCH Foundation for their **Annual Signature Event** and mingle with top industry professionals all while supporting friends and colleagues in crisis. For those not attending the SEARCH event, this is an evening to hit the town with your teams and peers and enjoy a taste of Austin. Here are some restaurants we recommend checking out:

1. **Con Todo:** This popular taco truck by Chef Joseph Gomez highlights cuisine of the Rio Grande Valley (but is adamantly not Tex-Mex). Be sure to order your tacos "con todo"—with everything.
2. **Justine's Brasserie:** Justine's is a late-night dining spot known for its vibey nightlife and French cuisine favorites. A perfect spot to end the night.
3. **Odd Duck:** Chef-partner Bryce Gilmore provides a New American take on classic Texas

Evening events are always photo-worthy spectacles!
Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

There are plenty of opportunities for photo shoots at evening events. Shown here: a retro postcard photo op at the Opening Night Party 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Entertainment is key at evening events. Last year, BlueLaLa wowed the crowd with a lively burlesque show. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Agenda at a Glance

Monday

Registration

8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Taste of Austin Venue Tour

1:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Connect Social

7:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Tuesday

Registration

7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Conference Sessions

8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Opening Night Party

7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Wednesday

Registration

8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Opening General Session

9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Expo Hall Open

10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

DICED Competition

11:00 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

Conference Sessions

10:30 a.m. to 4:00pm (tradeshow floor)

1:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. (conference area)

Hall Happy Hour

4:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

SEARCH Event

8:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.

Thursday

Registration

8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™

8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Expo Hall Open

10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Brunch & Bubbly

10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Booth Awards

10:30 a.m.

Tablescape Competition

11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Conference Sessions

10:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. (tradeshow floor)

1:00 p.m. to 2:45 p.m. (conference area)

Awards Ceremony

5:30 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Closing Night Celebration

7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.

* Preliminary agenda subject to change





What's an event without activities? From face bedazzling to mural painting, evening events are filled with fun things to do. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

The SEARCH Foundation Annual Signature Event is the place to be—and it's for a good cause! Photo courtesy Christie's Photographic Solutions

fare, sourcing ingredients from local farms.
4. **Koriente**: Close to the Austin Convention Center, Koriente is a favorite Austin restaurant that serves a variety of pan-Asian dishes in a chill environment.

For more on Austin's food scene, check out page 84.

Thursday February 15 • Superstition

Chairs: Kristi DePew, Eclipse Event Co. and Leslie LaSorsa, Crave Catering

Celebrate with colleagues amidst an entertainment-filled experience as we wrap up a great week for our industry at the **Closing Night Celebration** from 7:30 p.m.–10:30 p.m. Superstition is an elite multi-room nightclub in Austin, Texas. Channeling the energy of the 1970s, Superstition combines world class entertainment including DJs and live performances with over 12,000 square feet of elevated space. Superstition also hosts the Gold Room, a cocktail lounge and patio featuring reimagined classic cocktails for a more intimate experience.

Associations & Groups

Associations and groups will be present at Catersource + The Special Event, many of which will also have booths on the Tradeshow Floor and/or in the conference area. Take the time to seek these people out and learn more! We are all in this together and hope to learn from each other. Here's who to look for this year (as of publication):

- **The Academic Event Professional (AEP)**
- **Association for Wedding Professionals International (AFWPI)**
- **Certified Catering Consultants (CCC)**
- **International Caterers Association (ICA)**
- **International Caterers Association Educational Foundation (ICAEF)**
- **International Live Events Association (ILEA)**
- **Leading Caterers of America (LCA)**
- **National Association for Catering and Events (NACE)**
- **SEARCH Foundation**
- **Wedding International Professionals Association (WIPA)**

Register Now!

Industry accolades: award recipients

Each year, we at Catersource + The Special Event honor industry leaders who we feel have made a significant and positive impact on our industries.

Join us in celebrating recipients **Rob Barber** (*Special Events* Gala Lifetime Achievement award, turn to page 92 for our feature on Barber) and **Mary Crafts** (Michael Roman Lifetime Achievement award, turn to page 14 in the back of this issue for *Catersource* magazine's feature on Crafts) at our annual **Awards Ceremony on Thursday, February 15th** on the Keynote Stage.

An **awards nominee reception** will precede the ceremony, beginning at **4:30 p.m.** This is a great opportunity for networking and supporting some of the industry's movers and shakers.

Catersource + The Special Event 2024 is also the time for our annual **ACE, GALA, and ICA CATIE Awards** (turn to page 34 to see this year's Gala Award nominees).

We'll also be honoring **World Central Kitchen**, the charitable organization launched by Chef Jose Andrés, with the **Richard Carbotti Volunteerism Award**. Accepting the award will be Jason Collis, Chief Relief Officer.

Founded in 2010 by Andrés, WCK is a nonprofit organization that is first to the frontlines providing fresh meals in response to crises.



Jason Collis,
WCK

Register Now!

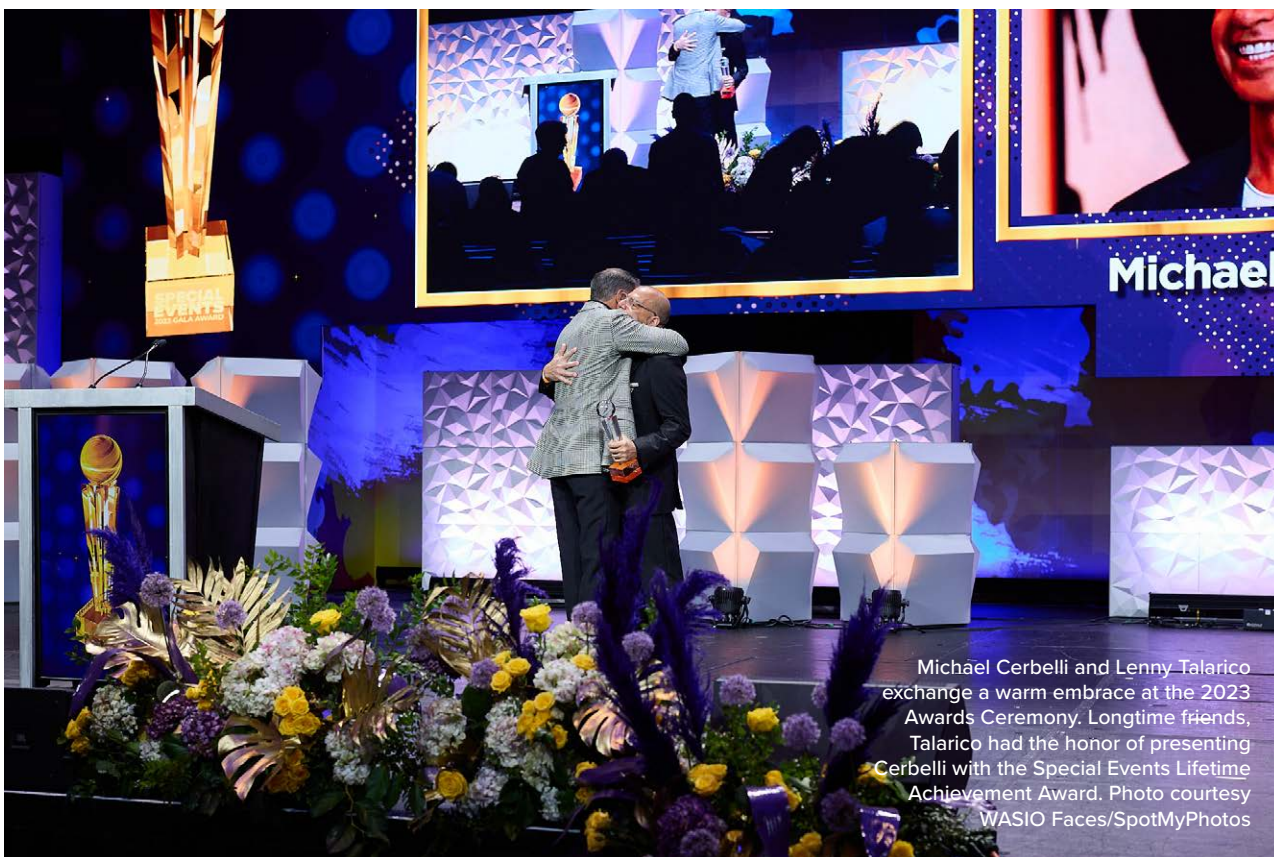
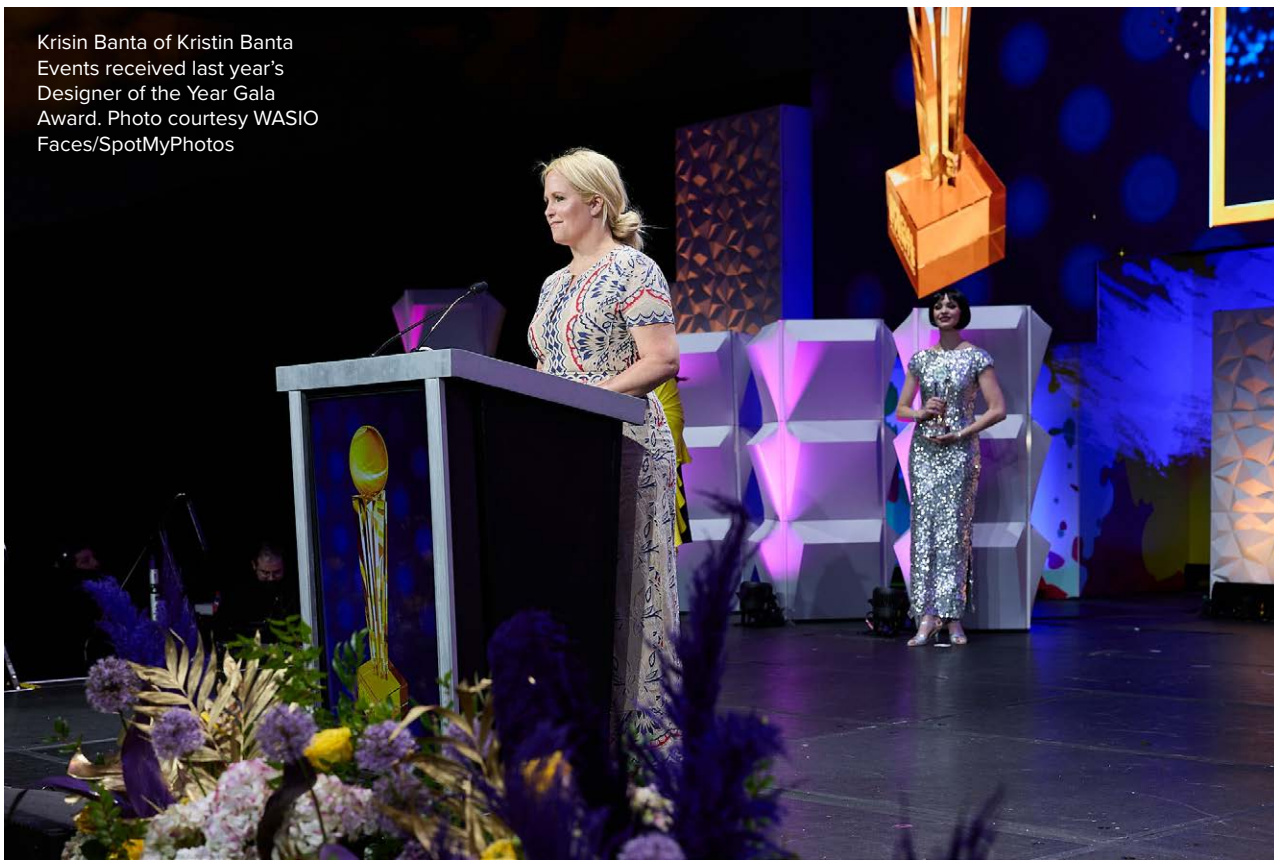


Mary Crafts



Rob Barber

Krisin Banta of Kristin Banta Events received last year's Designer of the Year Gala Award. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



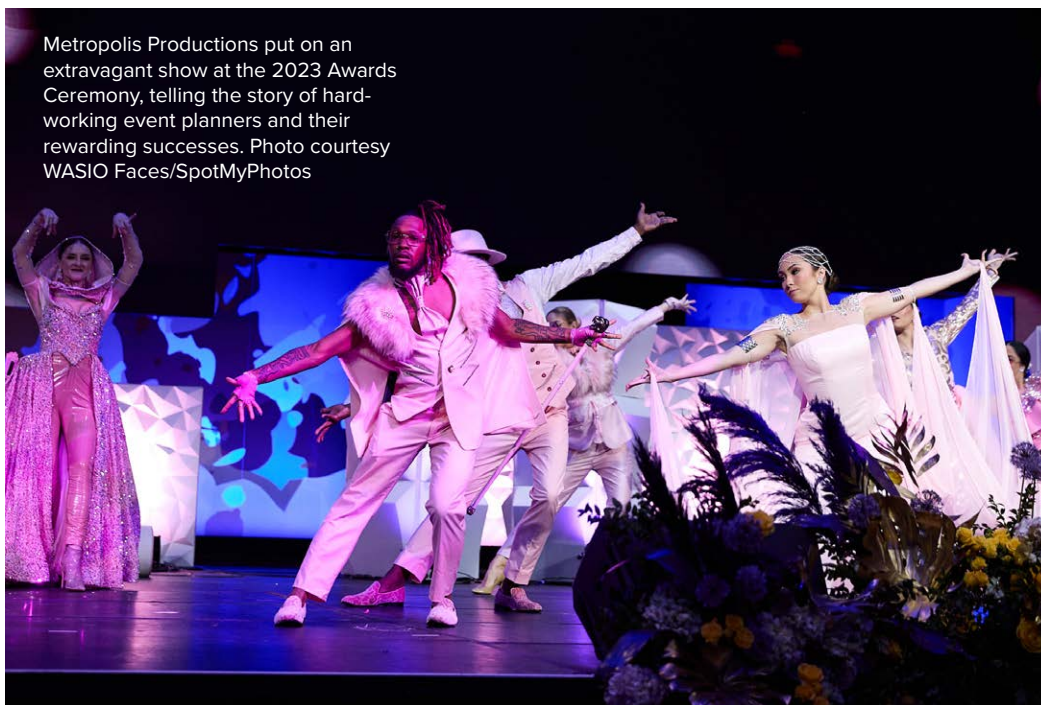
Michael Cerbelli and Lenny Talarico exchange a warm embrace at the 2023 Awards Ceremony. Longtime friends, Talarico had the honor of presenting Cerbelli with the Special Events Lifetime Achievement Award. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Applying their model of quick action, leveraging local resources, and adapting in real time, WCK has served more than 300 million nourishing meals around the world. When disaster strikes, WCK's Relief Team mobilizes with the urgency of now to start cooking and serving meals to people in need. By partnering with organizations on the ground and activating a network of local restaurants, food trucks, or emergency kitchens,

WCK serves comforting meals to survivors of disasters quickly and effectively. To support regional economies, WCK prioritizes purchasing local ingredients to cook with or distribute directly to families in need.

Finally, join us for the surprise reveal of the Steve Kemble Award at the annual Awards Ceremony, which will be presented **Thursday evening from 5:30 p.m.–7:00 p.m.**

Metropolis Productions put on an extravagant show at the 2023 Awards Ceremony, telling the story of hard-working event planners and their rewarding successes. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Wellness Lounge

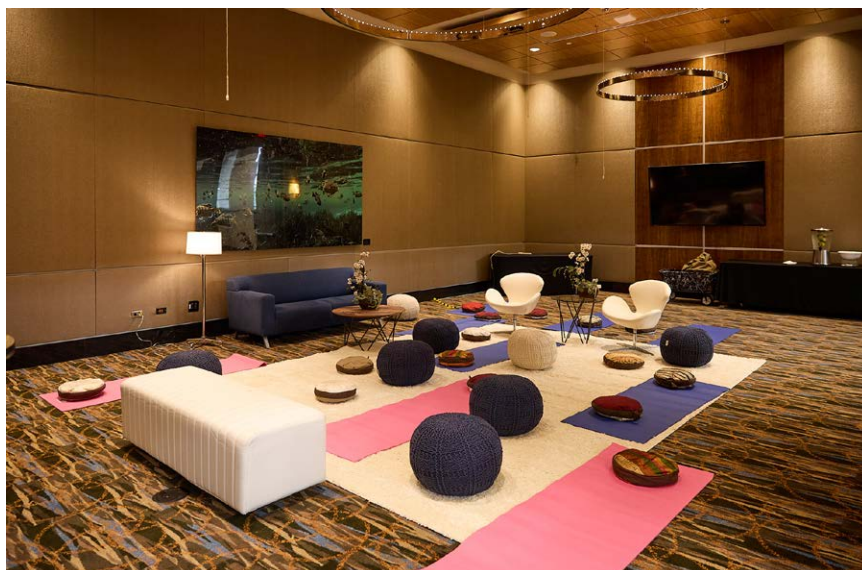
Open Tuesday through Thursday
during regular show hours in
Room 13A/B

We all know how easy it is to pack your schedule full and then wish there was time to recharge. Fear not! Head to the Wellness Lounge, where soothing music, essential oil mixing stations, crystal consultations, and comfortable seating awaits. This room is dedicated to silence and relaxation, and it will also be the site for morning yoga, as well as several wellness sessions, including ***Snatching Wellness from the Jaws of Wellness Culture*** (Tuesday), ***Let's Have a Talk in the Walk-in*** (Wednesday), and Charessa Sawyer's ***Event Therapy Lounge: Meditation & Self Care Strategies*** (Wednesday). Come recharge, catch your breath, and recentre yourself before rejoining sessions and stepping onto the exhibit hall floor! ●

(From top) Charessa Sawyer (SC Visionary Planning and Production/Event Therapy Network) leads a meditation in the Wellness Lounge in 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Last year, attendees received stress balls and learned meditations for grounding themselves throughout the week. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

The Wellness Lounge is the perfect stress-free escape with meditation, relaxation, and a place to pause. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



Balancing Act: Maximizing Conference Value While Minimizing Stress



Balancing your professional goals with your personal needs ensures that you continue to **grow and thrive in your career without sacrificing your health.**

By Christie Osborne

Attending industry conferences like [Catersource + The Special Event](#) can be exciting and professionally rewarding. However, the whirlwind of events, networking, and educational sessions packed into a handful of days can easily lead to exhaustion and burnout by the time you return home.

The key to getting the most out of a big conference is uncompromising self-care. After all, attending a conference should be a marathon, not a sprint.

Here are the strategies I use as a neuro-divergent speaker for staying energized, getting the most out of every experience, and handling follow-up without exhaustion and overwhelm.

Prioritize self-care

Self-care varies from person to person. While some indulge in mani-pedis and bubble baths, I've found my self-care groove when gearing up for conferences looks a bit different.

For me, it starts with packing my trusty water bottle and stocking up on my favorite Trader Joe's snacks. These items aren't just for taste; they keep me nourished and hydrated, and this I have found to be key.

Then, there's my secret weapon in the conference toolkit—the midday nap. It might sound unconventional, but I schedule these short breaks to preserve my energy and clarity. If someone invites me to chat during nap time, I suggest an alternative time or a virtual meeting.

The point is to embrace self-care that's purposeful for you. Whether it's snacks and hydration or a quiet dinner alone at a fancy restaurant to relax and recharge, building self-care into your conference routine can help you to show up at your best and benefit the most from the experience.

Take breaks

When I first started attending conferences, I would take a break by going out into a corridor and checking my email. This is not a break, my friend. Revenge screentime is not a break, it's an energy drain.

Now I find a few mindful breaks outside are the most helpful. I set a timer for five or 10 minutes on my phone, set it down, and take in the scenery. I look for birds, flowers, and trees that are different from what I typically see. I breathe deeply and slowly. I enjoy the sunlight on my skin after being in windowless conference rooms. I allow my brain and body to relax. Sometimes I'll close my eyes and meditate briefly, focusing on the steady cadence of my breath.

Two or three short breaks between sessions each day help me maintain energy levels and stay engaged. Try it, even if it's just one mindful break each day.

Quality networking

Prioritizing quality networking from a self-care perspective means approaching interactions with intention and mindfulness.

Start by setting **clear networking goals** before the conference. Identify the individuals or organizations that align with your professional objectives and personal values. While historically personal values had little place in professional environments, I find that focusing on values makes connecting with others easier and more purposeful.

Don't be afraid to engage in longer, more meaningful one-on-one conversations. When you take the time to foster deeper connections you can get more personal and professional value from your interactions. For me, deeper, more meaningful exchanges also energize me.

Get the most from speakers and sessions

It is so easy to leave a conference with a bunch of information that, in hindsight, seems overwhelming at best and confusing at worst.

To make the most of speaker sessions, adopt a "less is more" mindset, focusing on quality over quantity.

Select sessions that align closely with your professional goals and interests, allowing you to concentrate your attention more effectively.

During sessions, refrain from frantic note-taking and instead jot down concise, key points that truly resonate with you. Stay engaged by asking thoughtful questions during Q&A sessions or engaging in post-presentation discussions with other attendees.

This streamlined approach not only maintains your focus but also aids in retaining valuable information, ensuring a more enriching conference experience.

Navigating parties and events

While **conference-related parties** and events can be enjoyable, they can also be energy-draining if not approached with a self-care plan. To make the most of these occasions, consider the following tips:

- **Be selective:** Rather than attempting to attend every event, choose them selectively based on your professional goals and personal interests. For example, a dine-around may be more in line with your professional goals and allow you to network better than a big party with loud music. Or perhaps the big party will help you connect with people socially on the dance floor, making you more approachable later.
- **Set time limits:** Pretend you're Cinderella and establish a personal "pumpkin time." With this predetermined exit time, you can leave when you feel comfortable and avoid overexerting yourself.
- **Moderate alcohol consumption:** Be mindful of alcohol consumption at these events. Limit your alcohol intake to maintain a clear mind and avoid hangovers that can negatively affect the rest of your conference experience.

Effective follow-up

Approaching follow-up from a self-care perspective involves balancing the need to nurture professional connections while also taking care of your well-being. Here's a self-care-oriented approach:

- **Schedule gradually:** To avoid feeling overwhelmed, don't attempt to follow up with everyone immediately after the conference. I know this sounds counterintuitive, but creating a follow-up schedule that spans several weeks can allow you to maintain meaningful connections without overloading your schedule.
- **Send personalized messages:** Rather than sending generic follow-up messages, take the time to craft personalized emails or messages. Reference specific conversations or topics discussed during the conference to show that you value the connection and are genuinely interested in continuing the dialogue.

- **Reflect and adjust:** As you're following up, reflect on how it makes you feel. Does it drain your energy or invigorate it? Does it feel like a chore or an exciting new opportunity? If you find that certain strategies are causing stress or burnout, be open to adjusting your approach and experimenting with different approaches that will work well for you personally.

Key takeaway

By approaching conferences with self-care in mind, you can maintain valuable professional connections without compromising your mental and physical well-being. Balancing your professional goals with your personal needs ensures that you continue to grow and thrive in your career without sacrificing your health. ●

Christie Osborne @ Catersource + Special Event

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And the **NOMINEES ARE...**

**Let's give a round of applause to this year's
Gala Award nominees!**

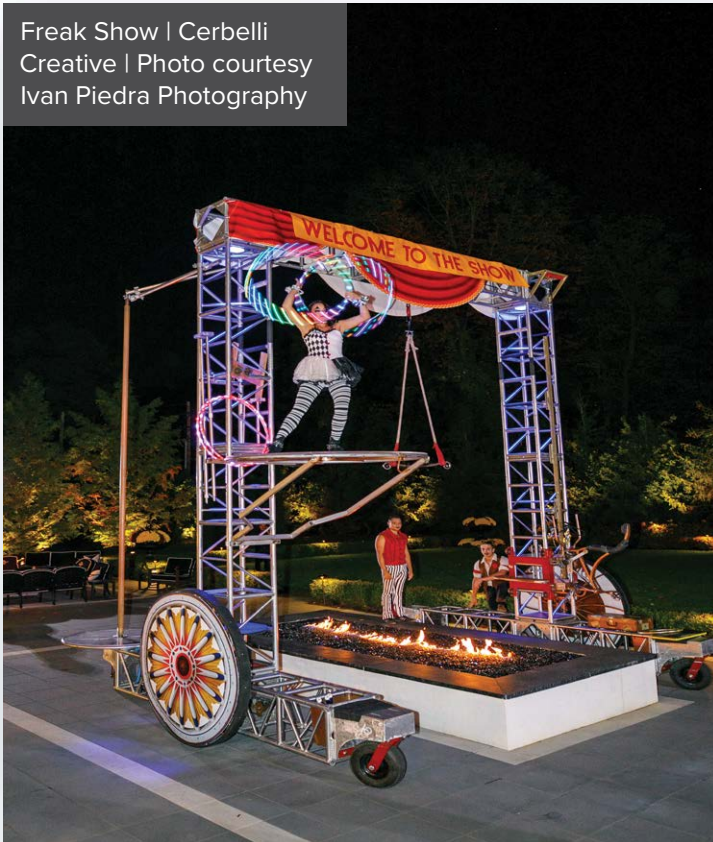
by Amber Kispert

Special Events magazine is delighted to announce the nominees for the 2024 Gala Awards, which will be bestowed during Catersource + The Special Event on February 15th in Austin, TX. *Catersource* magazine will also be handing out its ACE Awards. Turn to page 52 in the back of the magazine for this year's nominees.

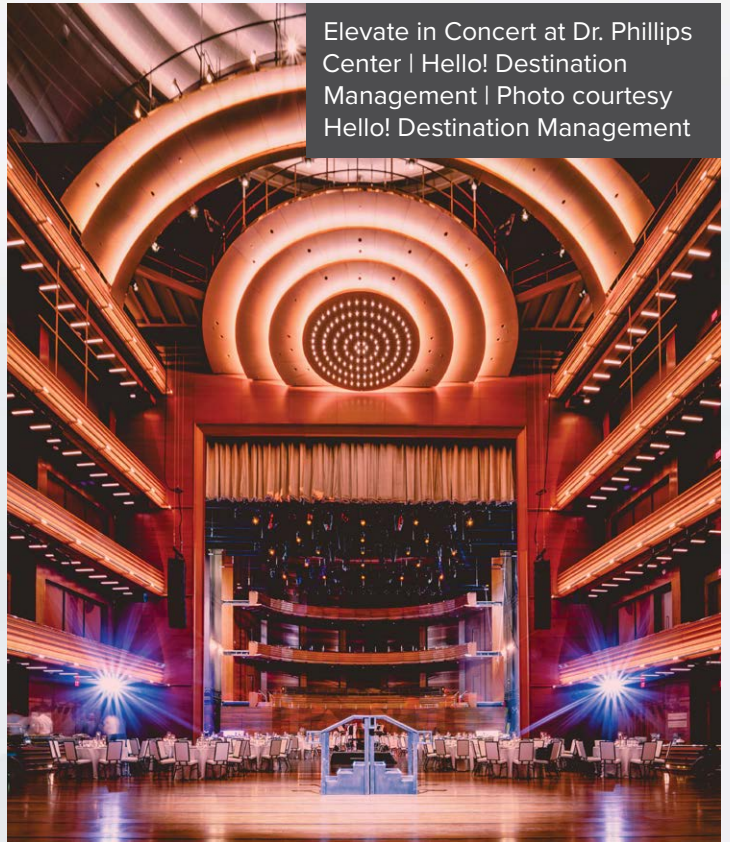
**Without any further ado, please congratulate your 2024
Gala Awards nominees!**

BEST ENTERTAINMENT

Freak Show | Cerbelli Creative | Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography



Elevate in Concert at Dr. Phillips Center | Hello! Destination Management | Photo courtesy Hello! Destination Management



The Royal 100th Anniversary Gala | hala inc. | Photo courtesy The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair

BEST EVENT FOR A PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL

The Coronation of King Charles III.1 | High Rise Events | Photo courtesy Curtis Dahl Photography



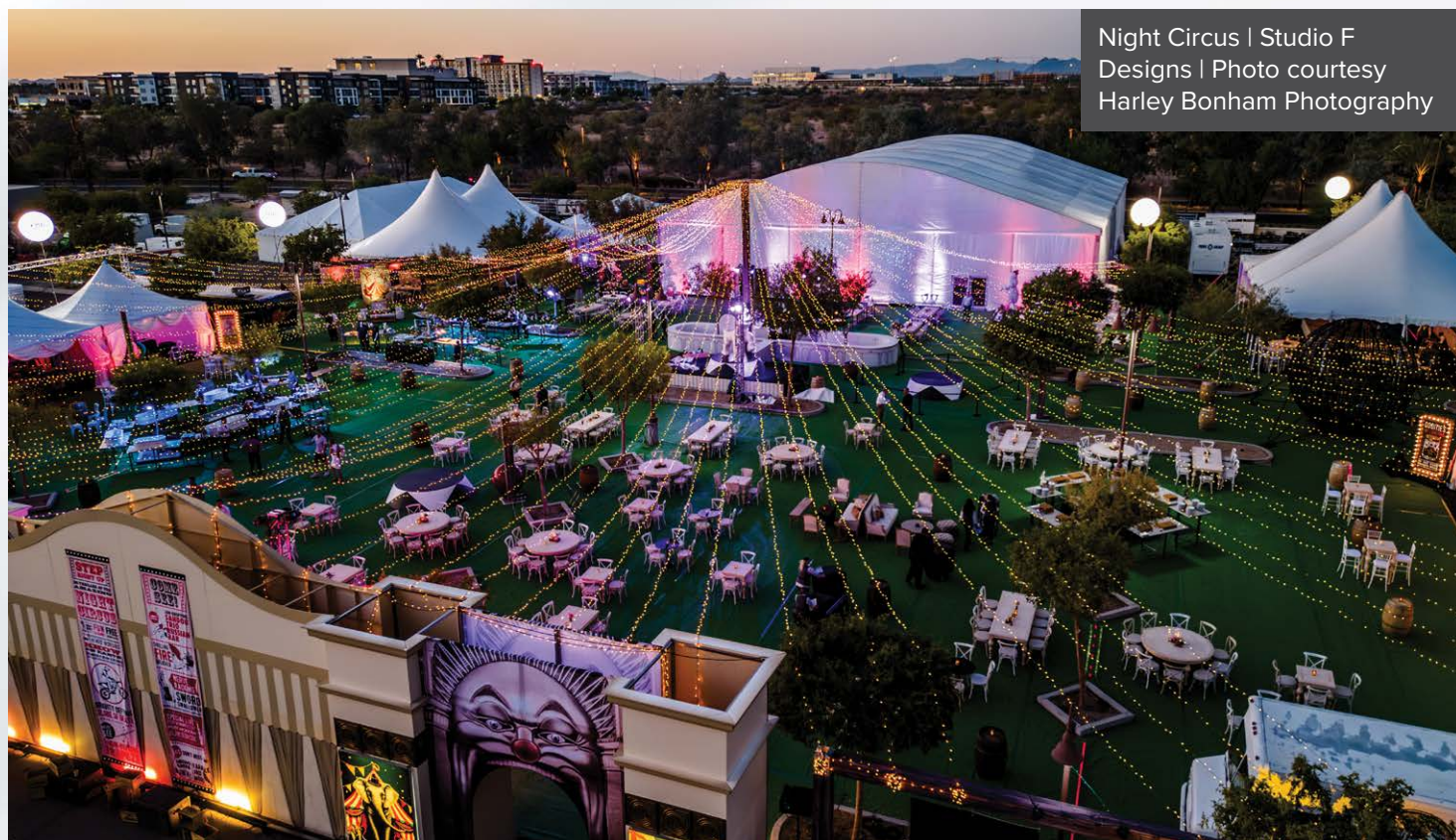
KKPalooza | Anna Lucia Events | Photo courtesy FotoBohemia



Soirée Papillon | MB Events | Photo courtesy Cortez Design Visuals/ PBL Photography



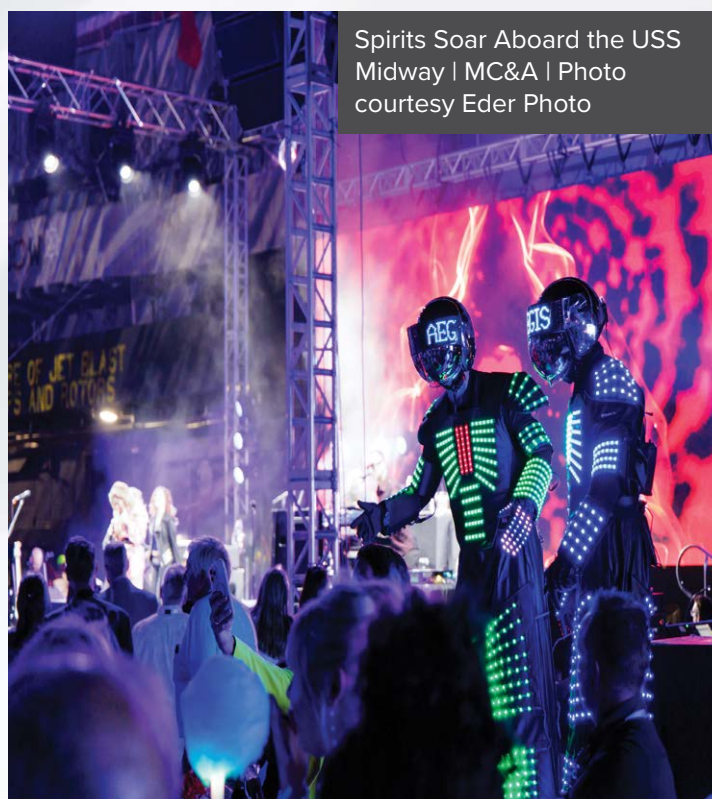
BEST EVENT PRODUCED FOR A CORPORATION OR ASSOCIATION: OVERALL BUDGET OVER \$500,000



Night Circus | Studio F
Designs | Photo courtesy
Harley Bonham Photography



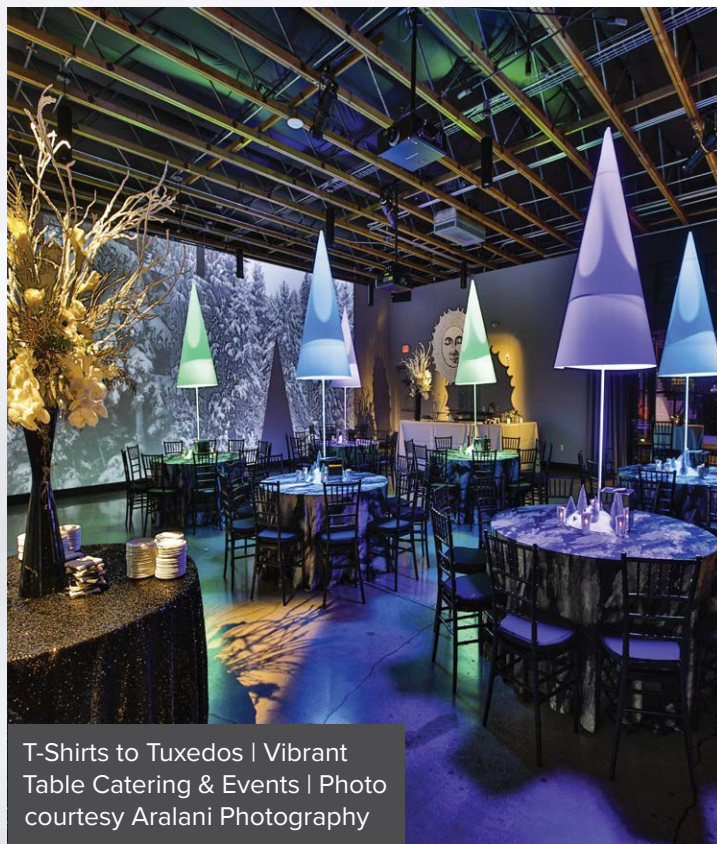
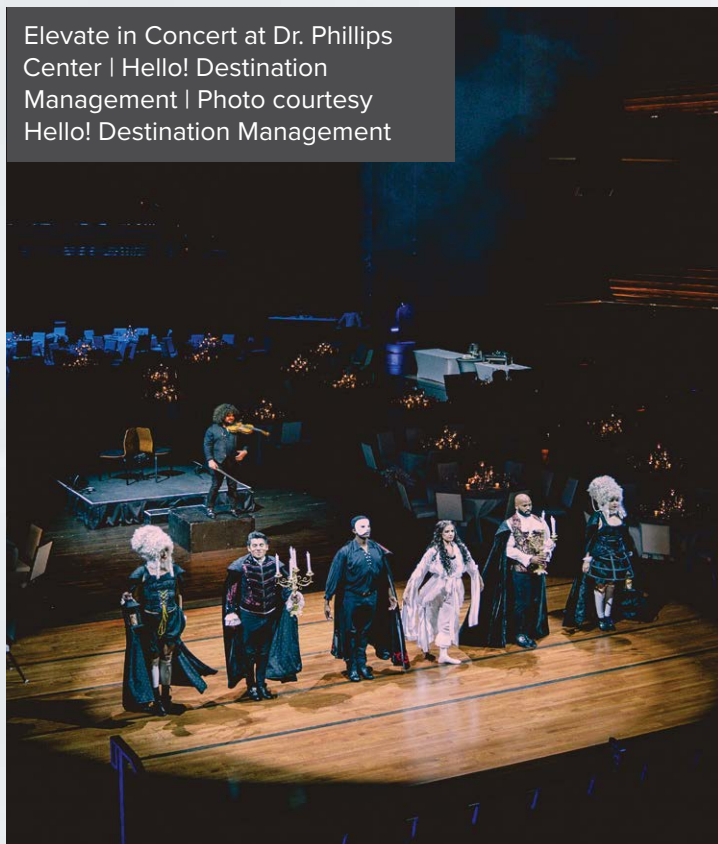
Freak Show | Cerbelli
Creative | Photo courtesy
Ivan Piedra Photography



Spirits Soar Aboard the USS
Midway | MC&A | Photo
courtesy Eder Photo

BEST EVENT PRODUCED FOR A CORPORATION OR ASSOCIATION: OVERALL BUDGET UNDER \$500,000

Elevate in Concert at Dr. Phillips Center | Hello! Destination Management | Photo courtesy Hello! Destination Management



T-Shirts to Tuxedos | Vibrant Table Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Aralani Photography

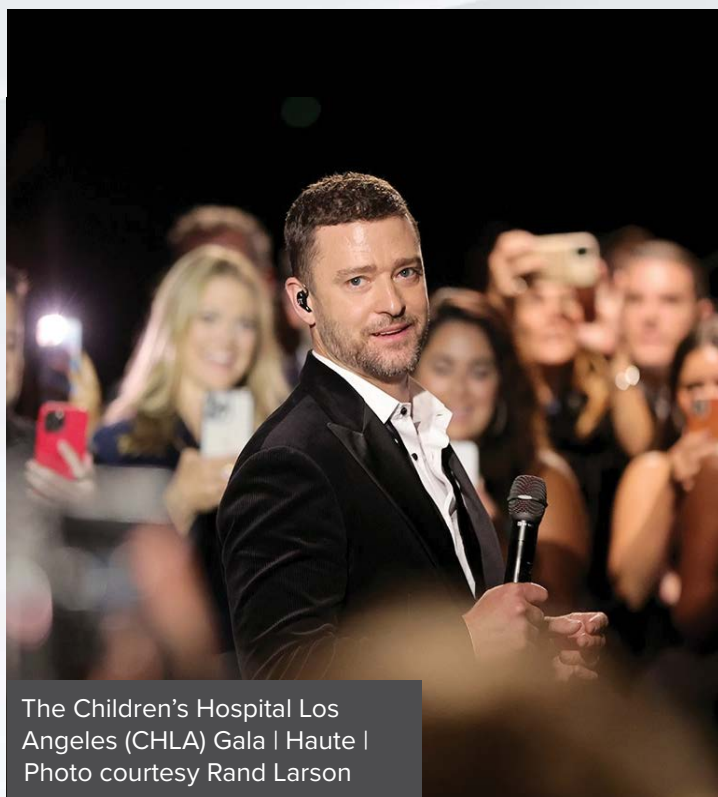
Block Party Nashville | CSI DMC | Photo courtesy Courtney Davidson Photography



BEST FUNDRAISING OR NONPROFIT EVENT



Alice, Curiouser and Curiouser | Peace Arch Hospital Foundation | Photo courtesy Brian Dennehy Photography

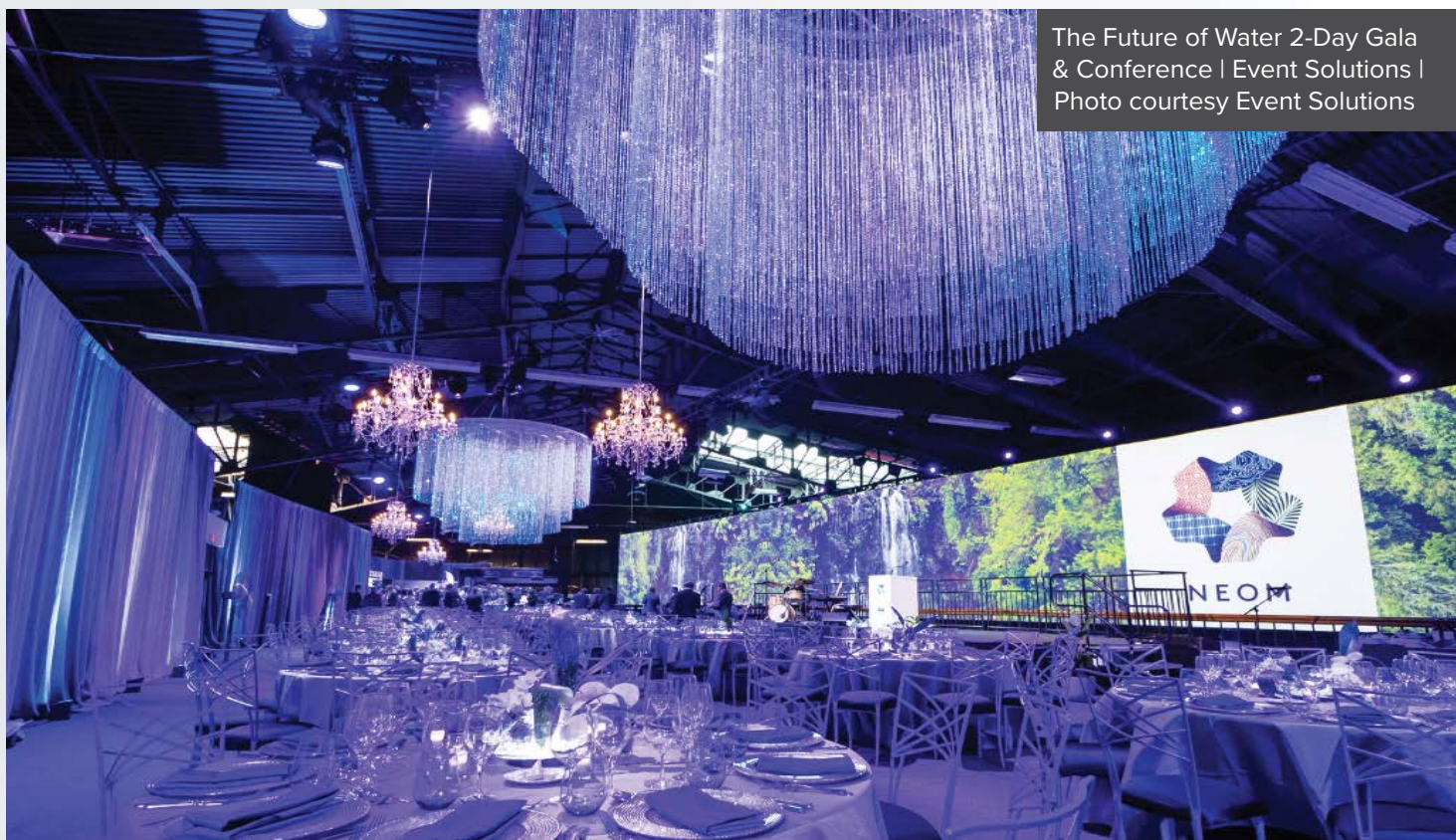


The Children's Hospital Los Angeles (CHLA) Gala | Haute | Photo courtesy Rand Larson



The Royal 100th Anniversary Gala | hala inc. | Photo courtesy The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair

BEST MULTIPLE-DAY EVENT PROGRAM FOR A CORPORATION OR ASSOCIATION



The Future of Water 2-Day Gala & Conference | Event Solutions | Photo courtesy Event Solutions



Keyera Corp. 25th Anniversary | e=mc² events | Photo courtesy Soulbox Photography



Walmart Associates Week 2023 | LEO Events | Photo courtesy LEO Events

BEST WEDDING

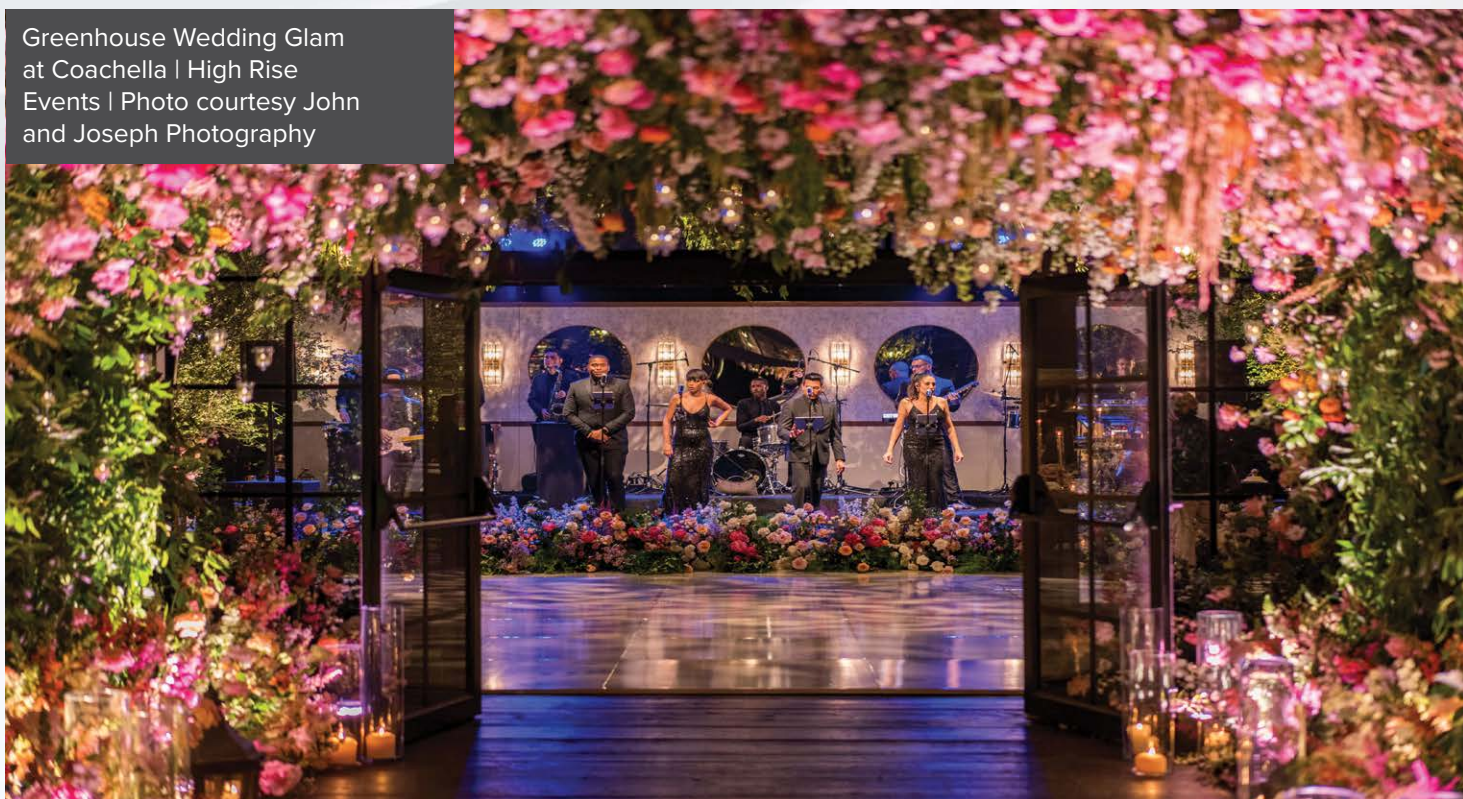


A Dance in the Clouds | Lynn Fletcher Weddings | Photo courtesy Andras Schram Photography

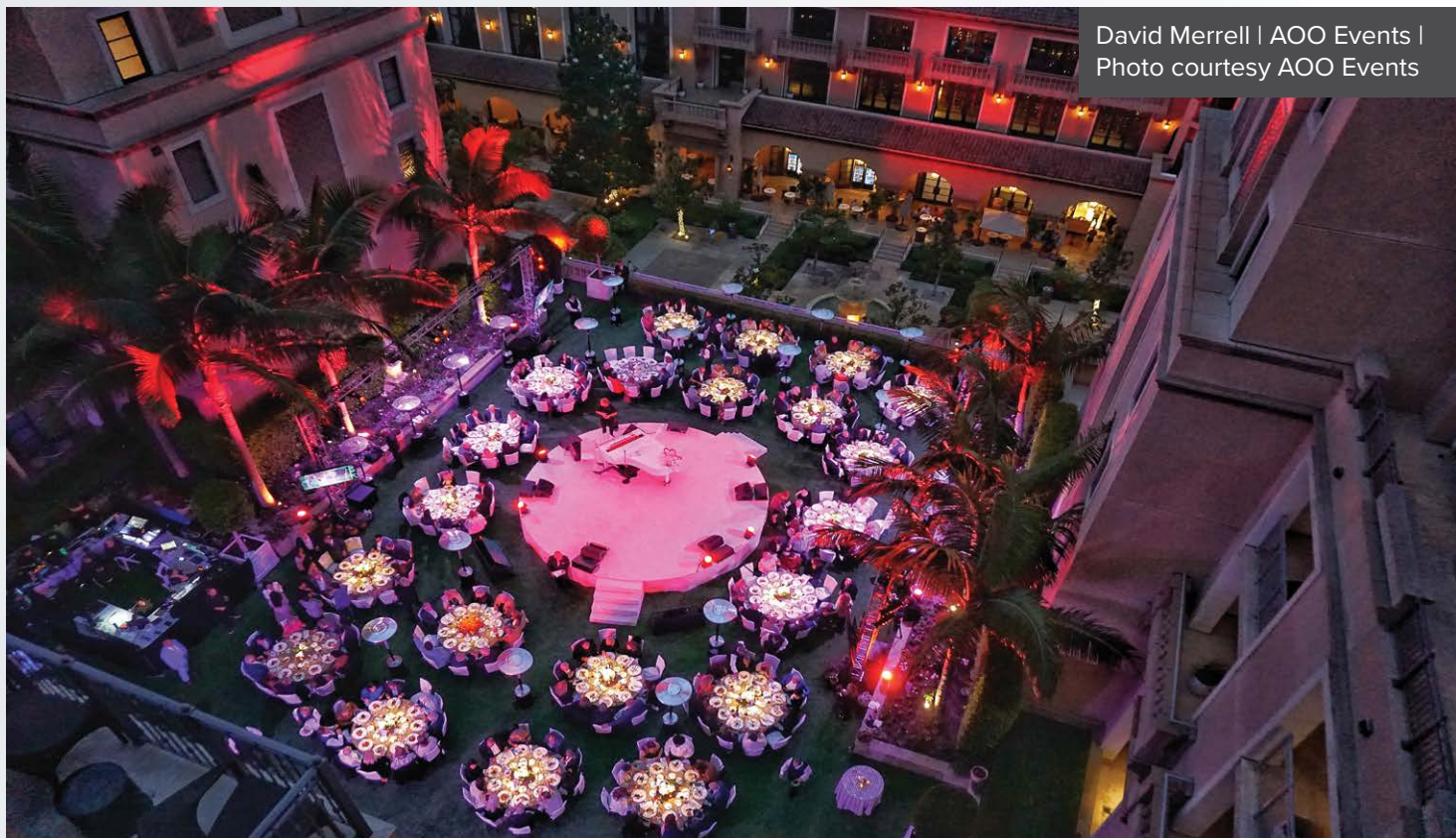


An Intimate Wedding for 40 | Jaclyn Watson Events | Photo courtesy Jackie Fox

Greenhouse Wedding Glam at Coachella | High Rise Events | Photo courtesy John and Joseph Photography



DESIGNER OF THE YEAR



David Merrell | AOO Events |
Photo courtesy AOO Events



Wei Zhang | Beijing Chaoran
Yingfeng Consulting Co., Ltd |
Photo courtesy NZ Production



Jaclyn Watson | Jaclyn
Watson Events | Photo
courtesy Kate Seymour

SUSTAINABILITY IN EVENTS

Innovate Canada | Parléview
| Photo courtesy Destination
Canada/Parléview/Johnson Studios



Sustainable Sensory
Retreat | CSI DMC | Photo
courtesy JBJ Pictures

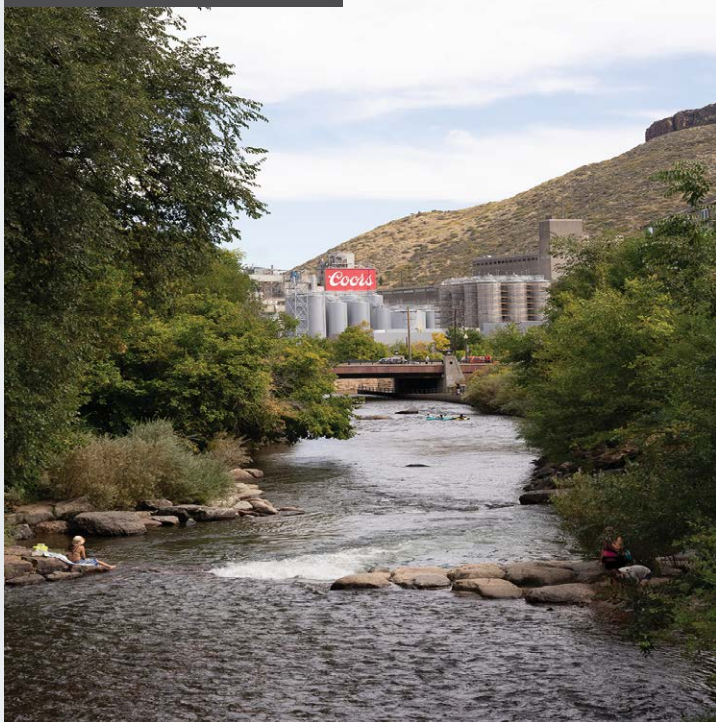


The Greater Poland Chef of
the Year Culinary Competition
& Festival | Joanna Ochniak |
Photo courtesy Piotr Piosik



MOST OUTSTANDING SPECTACLE, FAIR, OR FESTIVAL

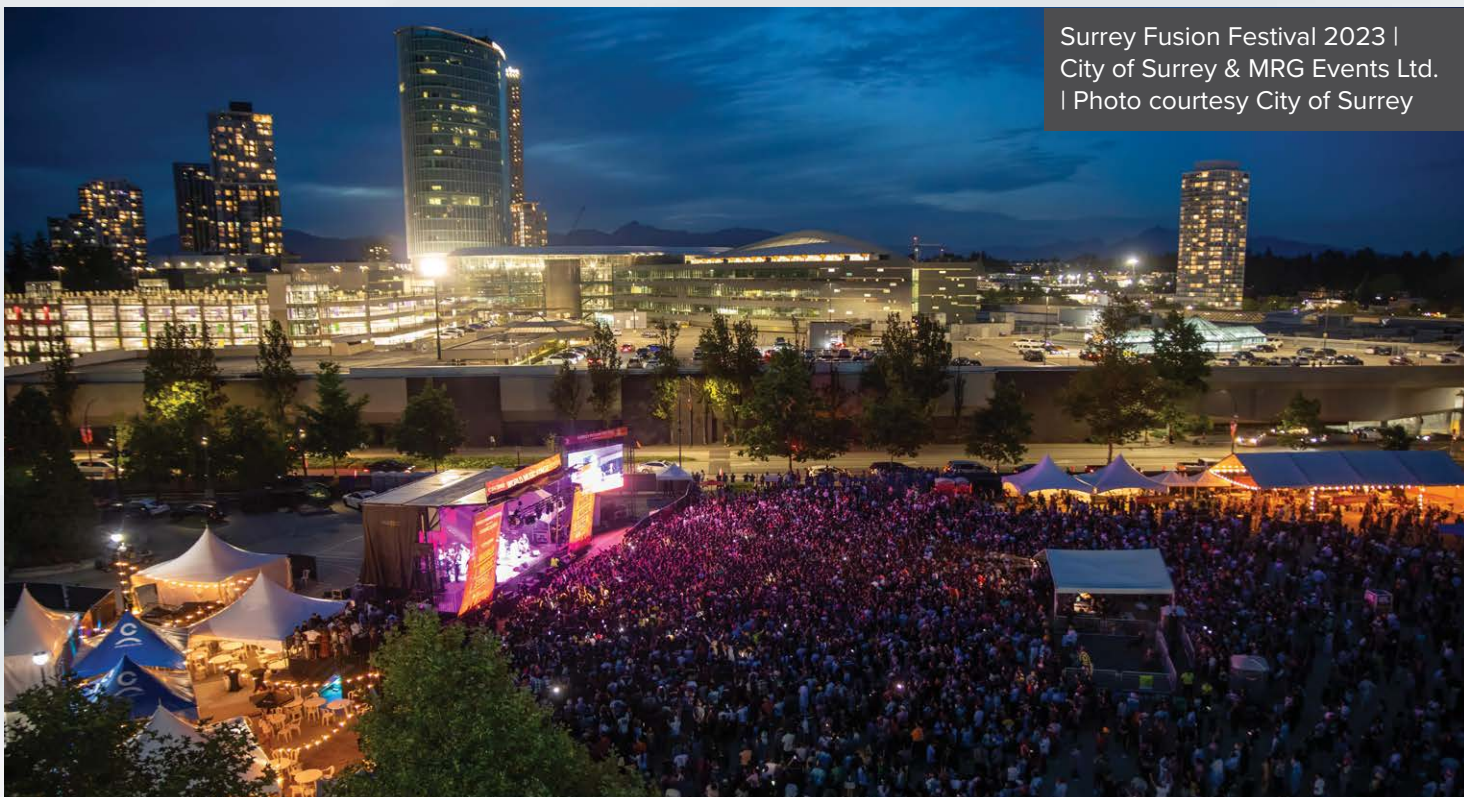
Coors 150th | Imprint
Events Group | Photo
courtesy Sydney Brewer



Surrey Tree Lighting Festival 2022
| City of Surrey & MRG Events Ltd.
| Photo courtesy City of Surrey



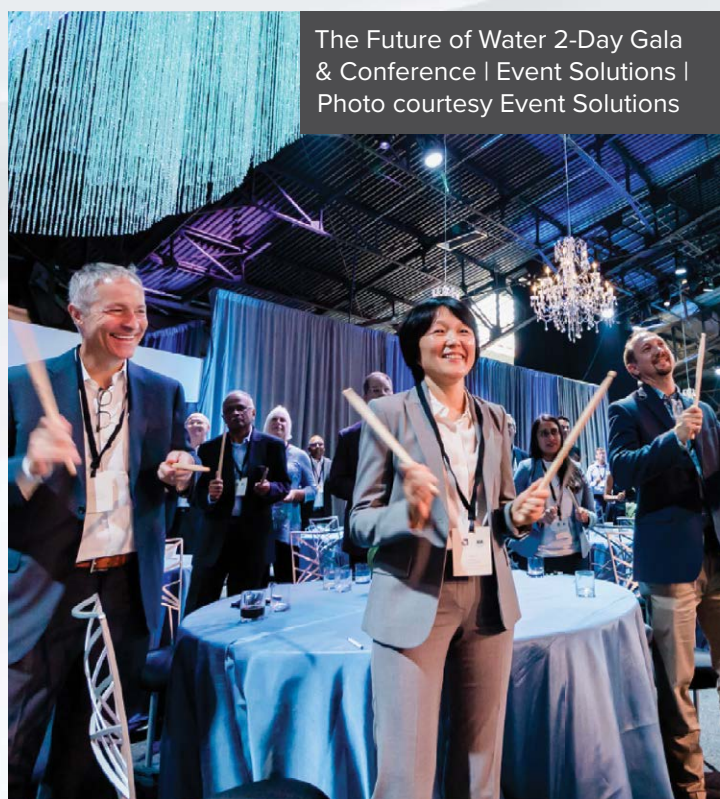
Surrey Fusion Festival 2023 |
City of Surrey & MRG Events Ltd.
| Photo courtesy City of Surrey



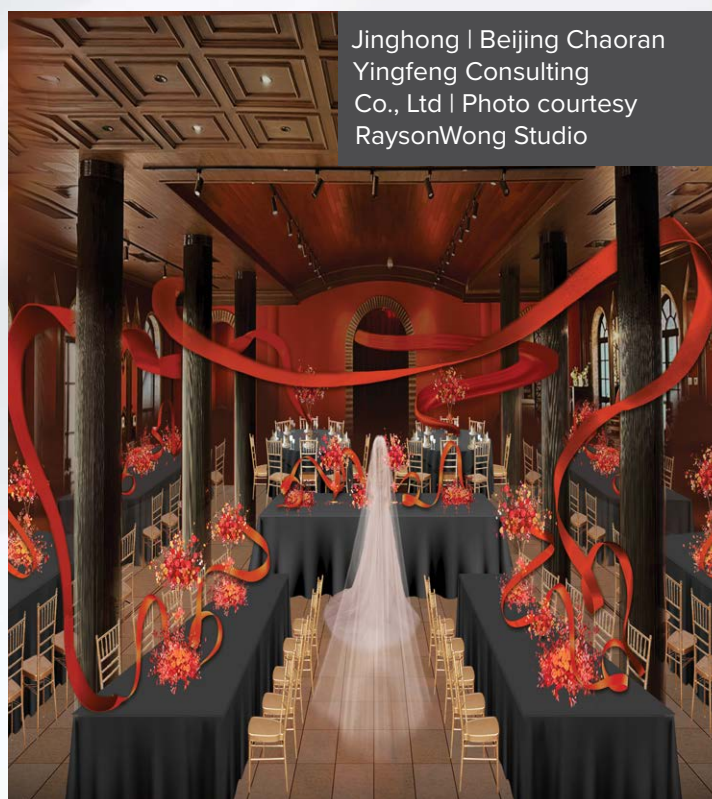
TOTAL DÉCOR



Alice, Curiouser and Curiouser | Peace Arch Hospital Foundation | Photo courtesy Brian Dennehy Photography



The Future of Water 2-Day Gala & Conference | Event Solutions | Photo courtesy Event Solutions



Jinghong | Beijing Chaoran Yingfeng Consulting Co., Ltd | Photo courtesy RaysonWong Studio



ON TREND

2024

Wedding Trends





What couples want in the coming year

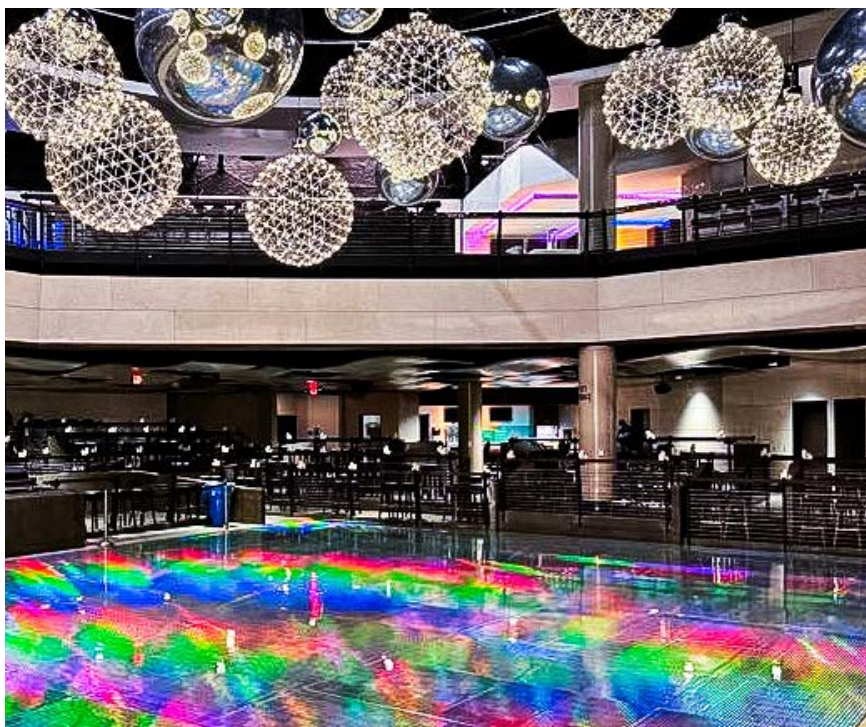
By Sebastien Centner

As we step into the promising year of 2024, the world of weddings is poised for a transformation. This evolution is shaped by various factors, including cultural shifts, technological advancements, and the ever-changing preferences of couples. While predicting the future is never an exact science, I believe that by drawing insights from the evolving trajectory of weddings in recent years, we can gain a glimpse into what the wedding trends of 2024 might look like. In this article, I'll delve into some of the wedding trends that I anticipate will either continue to flourish or emerge as defining features of weddings in the coming year.

(Left) Unique wedding attire is gaining popularity, like this couple in flannel and rich hues set in a gorgeous woodland ceremony. Photo courtesy @freepic.diller



ON TREND



(Top) Get ready to incorporate technology into every type of event. Shown here: an immersive reception at the Toronto Design Exchange. Photo courtesy Eatertainment

(Above) Holographic floor wraps light up the dance floor in a unique way. Photo courtesy Holo-Walls LLC

Tech-enhanced experiences

One of the most exciting trends I'm looking forward to in 2024 is the increasing integration of technology to enhance the wedding experience. I've noticed that weddings are no longer confined to physical spaces; they're evolving into immersive journeys.

Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) are poised to play pivotal roles in creating unforgettable moments. Just imagine your guests donning VR headsets to be transported to exotic destinations, virtually experiencing other guests and journeying together. Or imagine their reactions as they step into a whole new world with the help of advancements in projection mapping tech. It's exciting to see that Toronto's Design Exchange has already embraced these immersive capabilities for events, setting the stage for other venues to follow suit.

These tech-enhanced experiences also extend to décor, adding an extra layer of excitement. I can hardly wait to witness holographic projections, interactive light shows, and digitally enhanced floral arrangements that can change colors at the touch of a button.

Unique personalization

Personalization has been a significant trend in weddings for some time now. In 2024, I expect to see couples taking personalization to new heights by infusing their weddings with unique and niche touches. Our goal is to ensure that our client's special day is a true reflection of their personalities and love story.

One trend I'm particularly excited about is the use of custom temporary (or, like we've been seeing lately, real) tattoo stations where couples and guests alike take home a very memorable keepsake. These tattoos not only serve as fun favors but also create a sense of



(Clockwise from upper left) Tattoo stations are a whole new level of personalization at events. Photo courtesy George Pimentel

This wedding by Kristin Banta Events printed photos onto cocktails for an extra personalized touch. Photo courtesy John & Joseph Photography

Both food trucks and beverage trucks provide a casual and eclectic dining experience. Photo courtesy Wildly Connected Photography

The Opening Night Party at Catersource + The Special Event 2022 featured a nitrogen ice cream station by Supercool Creamery. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces



ON TREND

unity among our guests. Additionally, I'm keen on exploring unconventional cake toppers and individually tailored wedding favors. Personalized candles, artisanal chocolates, or even customized mini succulent plants are all delightful options to add a personal touch to the celebration.

Food & beverage experiences

Culinary experiences have always been a focal point of weddings, and in 2024, they're expected to take center stage once again. We are eager to surprise and delight our clients through food and beverage choices.

We're also embracing the farm-to-table dining trend, as it aligns with our desire to support local businesses and offer our clients fresh, seasonal ingredients. Food trucks have also caught our attention, as they can provide a casual and eclectic dining experience. Themed cocktail bars, with mixologists crafting unique drinks, are another idea we're excited about. We're open to exploring fusion cuisine to offer our clients a memorable culinary journey that reflects our diverse capabilities.

Interactive food experiences are piquing interest as well. Nitrogen ice cream stations, where guests can watch their ice cream being made in a cloud of nitrogen, promise to add an element of surprise and entertainment to any dining experience. Flamboyant dessert presentations, [complete with fire](#) and dramatic plating (examples of picture-perfect plating can be found in our sister magazine *Catersource* at the end of



(Top) Pulpo a la Gallega from The Amway Grand Plaza's MDRD rooftop restaurant (Grand Rapids, MI). The gorgeously plated dish features Galician-style grilled octopus, fingerling potato, dehydrated olive, pimentón oil, and squid ink vinaigrette. Photo courtesy Quinn PR

(Above) Presentation is the key word for food and beverage in 2024, as illustrated by this Magic Mushroom Forest Salad from Eatertainment. Photo courtesy Eatertainment

While the wedding landscape continues to evolve, what truly makes a wedding special is the love shared between two people. These trends are simply avenues for couples to express that love and commitment in their own distinct way.



Expect to see the element of fire at food and beverage stations. Photo courtesy Cru Catering



The Veuve Clicquot at the Amway Grand Plaza in Grand Rapids, MI serves a theateric dessert: Cherry Rain Forest, a chocolate sponge with cherry compote, Chantilly, and chocolate mousse in the shape of a cloud, topped with a helium-induced cherry foam, which was set to rest atop a metal stand above the dessert, where it would slowly sink down over the stand to eventually adorn the cherry cloud. Photo courtesy Special Events staff



this issue, page 150) are sure to capture the attention of guests and make for memorable Instagram-worthy moments.

Wedding Fashion

Regarding wedding attire in 2024, we see couples eager to break away from tradition and embrace options that allow them to express their individuality. Bridal jumpsuits, unconventional dresses in vibrant colors, and mix-and-match separates are becoming more “normal” choices. We believe that a couple’s fashion choices should reflect their true selves and create a wedding that feels authentic.

It’s more than just experimenting with attire; couples are also encouraging their guests to do the same. Unique dress codes are likely to become more common, promoting creativity and self-expression among attendees. Picture a wedding with a “vintage glam” dress code or one that encourages guests to wear their favorite decade’s fashion. This trend adds an extra layer of fun and excitement to the celebration.

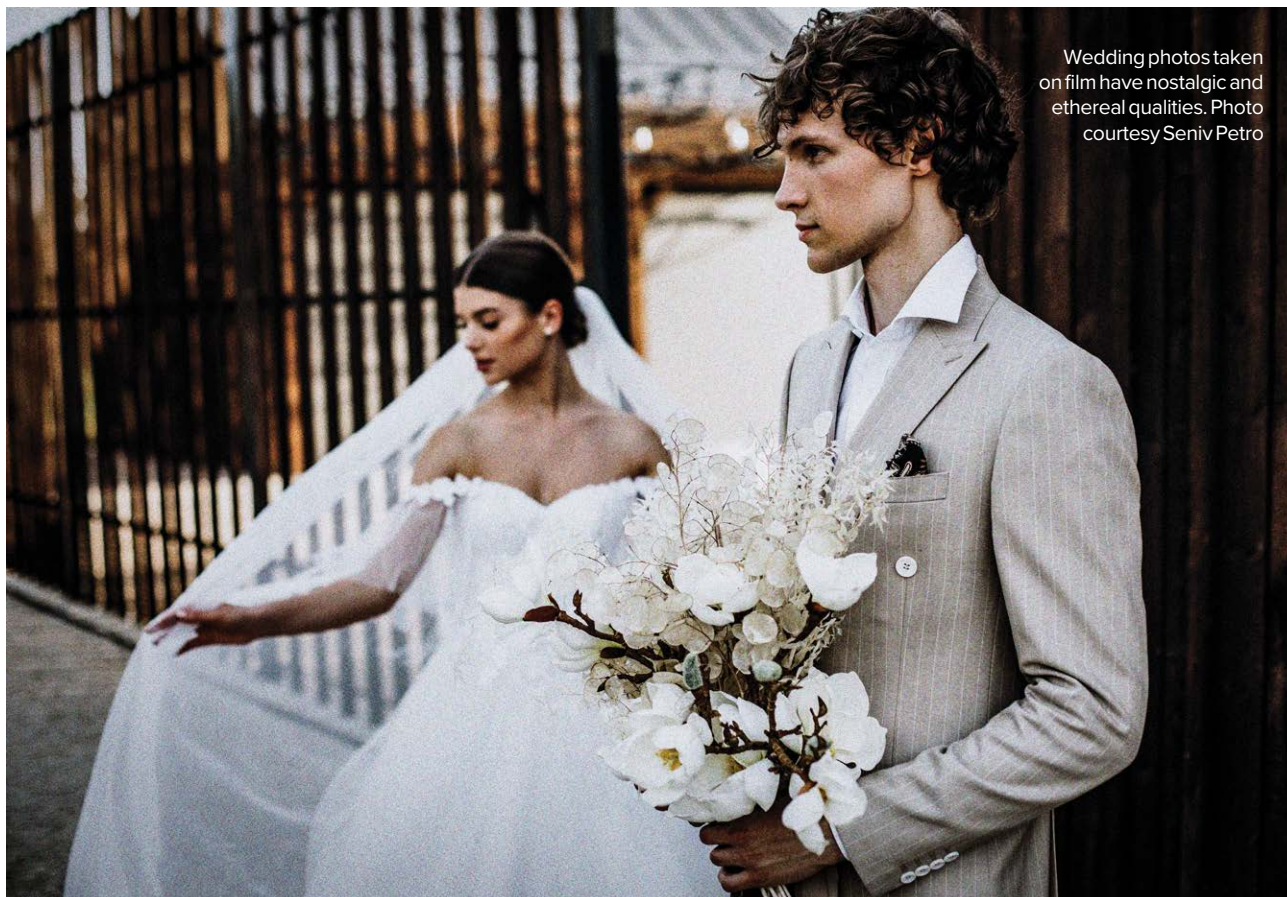
Film photography and video

While digital photography remains a staple in wedding documentation, we see a shift toward the timeless allure of film photography. Couples appreciate the nostalgic and ethereal qualities of film images, especially for capturing candid moments and the energy of the dance floor. In 2024, I think many couples will be considering incorporating film photography into their wedding, alongside digital

2024 promises to be a year of couples breaking away from tradition and embracing wedding attire options that allow them to express their individuality, with bridal jumpsuits (like the one shown here), unconventional dresses in vibrant colors, and mix-and-match separates. Photo courtesy Wildly Connected Photography



ON TREND



Wedding photos taken on film have nostalgic and ethereal qualities. Photo courtesy Seniv Petro

coverage, to create a diverse visual narrative of their special day.

This film photography trend extends to wedding videography as well. I'm excited to see the resurgence of grainy cinematography reminiscent of old home movies and the use of Super 8 mm film to capture the romantic essence. These vintage-inspired videography styles add a touch of

authenticity and charm to wedding documentation, and I love that it seems to be a trend that even the younger generation is gravitating toward.

While the wedding landscape continues to evolve, what truly makes a wedding special is the love shared between two people. These trends are simply avenues for couples to express that love and commitment in their own

distinct way. Next year promises to be an exciting one, filled with innovation and creativity in the world of weddings.

As we prepare for the 2024 wedding season, we envision a delightful fusion of technology-driven experiences, highly personalized touches, culinary adventures, unconventional fashion choices, and a rekindled love for the nostalgic allure of film photography and videography. These trends offer us exciting tools to help clients tell their unique love stories in a memorable and meaningful way. ●

See Sebastien Centner LIVE at Catersource + The Special Event!

With an All Access Pass, you can see **Sebastien Centner** present at Catersource + The Special Event, to be held in Austin, TX this February 2024. Sebastien will also be signing copies of his book *Eatertainment: Recipes and Ideas for Effortless Entertaining*, available to all.



Sebastien Centner is the Founder and Creative Director of Eatertainment, one of the country's top event-planning and catering companies. Recognized as an "Entertaining Expert" and an industry trendsetter, Sebastien's concepts, recipes, and lavish events have been featured on TV, in print, and online, solidifying him as a household name for inspiring at-home entertaining.

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Tech Audit 2024: The Future-Proofing Guide



A comprehensive tech audit helps future-proof event companies by keeping internal and external systems ahead of the curve.

By Nora Sheils

As the digital landscape rapidly evolves across the industry, event professionals must be more mindful of their tech than ever before. With new business software and event solutions emerging regularly, there's no room for companies that fall below market expectations.

A comprehensive tech audit helps future-proof event companies by keeping internal and external systems ahead of the curve. If your business could use a refresher, now is the perfect time to get your tech in shape to hit the ground running in the new year.

THE NEED FOR A TECH AUDIT

Outdated technology has no place in a modern business. With today's consumers expecting a seamless digital experience, performing regular audits is vital to ensure your business measures up. Something as seemingly trivial as an overlooked update on your CRM can allow competitors to close the gap and stand out in a crowded marketplace.

Letting your tech go stale can also lead to a loss of efficiency, as you and your team work extra hard to complete tasks that could otherwise be streamlined or automated. In uncertain times, you can't afford to fall behind industry standards.

A tech audit provides an opportunity to focus on your systems, identify areas for improvement, and ensure you have a solid foundation to continue growing your business.

FIVE STEPS OF A TECH AUDIT

When you're ready to do a tech audit, set aside a block of uninterrupted time to avoid distractions. Two to three hours is ideal; you don't want to rush through this process. Then, follow these steps to evaluate your digital environment and create a plan to future-proof your tech.

1. Assess your current tech stack.

Start your tech audit by outlining your current digital infrastructure. Create a list of all paid and free programs you use, even if you don't access them frequently. This can include your CRM, invoicing software, social media scheduler, project management tool, website host, etc.

Once you've created an exhaustive list, evaluate the importance of each. What is essential to your business? Are there apps that cause more trouble than they're worth? Are you aware of the features of each subscription, and are you maximizing them to the full extent?

It can help to sort your tech tools into three categories: must have, nice to have, and don't need. Cancel or remove any unneeded programs from your tech stack immediately. Less is more!

2. Test compatibility between tools.

Automation has become essential to business efficiency, with plenty of tasks you no longer need to do manually. With so much software at your disposal, it's critical to consider how well your systems "talk" to each other.

Many programs can connect to each other natively, so start there. For example, can you automate a workflow between your email marketing platform

and CRM? Or can you connect your invoicing software with your bookkeeping portal? Dig into your tech programs to figure out how to link them together.

Alternatively, Zapier is an excellent solution for integrating web applications that don't offer built-in connections. For instance, you can link your contract-signing program to your cloud storage drive to automate file-saving for new clients.

3. Evaluate your cybersecurity protection.

Cybercrime continues to rise in the digital landscape, threatening businesses of all sizes. Now is the time to implement preventive measures to increase security and protect your business's interests.

Hiring a cybersecurity expert to safeguard your tech is ideal, but if you're new to the game, here is some low-hanging fruit to up your digital safety right away:

- Set up a secured password vault.
- Stay up-to-date with the most common phishing scams.
- Upgrade to a safer cloud storage system and schedule regular backups (we like Backblaze).
- Confirm that you're using a trustworthy payment processor.
- Develop a risk management plan to address potential data breaches.

4. Collect and review user feedback.

You're not the only one using your company's tech, so make sure to ask for input from other users. For internal systems, ask your team for insight. Do they notice any opportunities to enhance productivity? Are there redundancies that you've overlooked?

Likewise, connect with your clients to discuss the end-user experience of your client-facing software. Is your CRM easy to use? Are there

unnecessary steps in your invoicing process? Look for ways to improve the client experience based on their feedback.

5. Consider future needs.

Take a step back and set your sights on the future. What are your goals for 2024, and what do you need to do to meet them? For instance, if you want to break into the luxury market, you may need to enhance your automated workflows to provide a sleek, high-end client experience.

Consider how well your current tech environment can scale with your business. Are you confident your digital infrastructure can handle it if you double your client load next year? Can you launch new offerings without needing to overhaul your entire setup? If you plan to hire, is it easy to train employees to use your systems as they stand?

In addition to your business goals, determine whether you need to upgrade your tech to align with industry trends. Tune into the market to learn what's on the horizon for the event industry and make a plan to implement accordingly.

NEXT STEPS

After wrapping up your audit, you should have a list of action steps to optimize your tech. But before diving in too deep, take a moment to develop a phased implementation plan that slowly

introduces updates. Changing too much at once can lead to overwhelm, and a measured approach will ensure minimal disruption during the transition.

To achieve long-term success, you must embrace change—it is inevitable in business and life. Regular tech audits future-proof your business by signaling you to efficiency gaps before they become problems, boosting productivity and profitability. When you approach technology proactively, you'll stay ahead of the competition and meet market expectations. Follow the steps outlined here to perform your own tech audit as you prep your business for a successful 2024! ●

Nora Sheils is the founder of award-winning planning firm *Bridal Bliss* and co-founder of *Rock Paper Coin*, a client management platform that offers a streamlined approach to contract, invoicing, and payment processing for the wedding and event industry. Nora is a well-known and sought-after speaker on national stages. Recognized as one of the Top 500 Event Professionals by BizBash, Nora has also been heralded as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the Event Industry by Eventex. More recently, *Rock Paper Coin* was celebrated by the Stewie Awards as the Best Startup in Technology Services.

Nora Sheils @ The Special Event

See Nora Sheils LIVE at Catersource + The Special Event in Austin, TX this February!

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A FORCE CALLED TERRICA

A LOOK AT A BELOVED INDUSTRY

LEADER & CS+TSE SPEAKER

BY AMANDA NICKLAUS

Captivating. Funny. Hustler. Badass. These are just a few of the words that come to mind when one thinks of Terrica.

A wedding planner and speaker/educator extraordinaire, Terrica is a beloved figure in the events industry, and it's easy to see why: she's both charming and honest, a leader, and one of the people. And in superstar fashion, she goes by one name: "It's just Terrica," she once told event pro Jamie Lee Quickert (Mills James). "Like Beyoncé or Madonna or Cher."

Terrica has made a name for herself in the industry with her speaking gigs (she's a favorite at [Catersource + The Special Event](#)), her coaching business, and her wedding planning company, Cocktails & Details®. She's a go-getter and self-proclaimed hustler, outgoing and seemingly everywhere all at once. She's been in the industry for around two decades, has earned many awards and recognition for her event and education work (which has been featured in *The Knot*, *Reader's Digest*, *Martha Stewart Weddings*, and many others), and has created resources for those planners getting started in the industry.

"What do I admire about Terrica? So many things," Fausto Pifferrer (Blue Elephant Catering & Events) told *Special Events (SE)*. "She always makes time for people who approach her after her sessions and during her down time at

conferences. She remembers names and faces, and makes people feel heard and special. She ignites the stage when she speaks."

DOING IT ALL

If she seems like she has endless energy and is capable of doing everything, it's because she has such good boundaries and knows herself well.

"I have an outgoing personality... but I am such an introvert, and so many people are shocked to know that, like when we go to Catersource + The Special Event, I need a minute to come down, and to just decompress for a little bit, or I just hang out with my very small circle."

Those in her circle know just how much she values all the roles in her life. "She is an amazing mom, friend, industry leader, and all-around badass!" says friend and industry pro Brian Green (By BrianGreen).

Terrica does wear many hats: business owner, speaker, planner, educator, designer, single mother, only daughter. "I am pulled in so many different directions where it's just like, I need a minute to just drain my sponge so that I can be the best that I can be later." For her, "draining the sponge," as she puts it, looks like soaking in the bathtub, going to the gym, or even a night alone with Netflix. Anything that gives her a chance to "get back to me after I feel like I've given and absorbed so many people throughout the day."

And while she uses a calendar to block out every hour of her days, she keeps a certain mindset about spending her energy as well.

"The older I got I realized how important it is to spend your energy wisely," she told *SE*. "I always teach this to my coaching students and in some of my sessions: If I gave you 20





Jamie Lee Quickert, Renee Dalo, Terrica, CeCe Todd, and Aleya Harris at Catersource + The Special Event in Miami, July 2021. Photo courtesy Jamie Lee Quickert

‘yeses’ to spend this week, where would you spend them? That would mean you’d have to say ‘no’ to a lot of things, and people don’t think of their energy and effort as dollars.”

This scheduling and careful expenditure of energy isn’t flawless, however. “Sometimes it’s a seesaw, there really isn’t any balance to some things.” But prioritizing her time and energy keeps the seesaw moving.

A HIGH ACHIEVER

Surprise number one: Terrica, an award-winning wedding planner, has never had a true wedding of her own.

Surprise number two: before starting her own wedding planning business, Terrica went to school for pre-med and criminal law.

Before the wedding industry was on her radar, Terrica was on track to become a criminal attorney. She married at 19 but never had an actual wedding—though not for a lack of trying. As she planned her own wedding, which kept getting thwarted, she gained compliments from vendors, telling her she was a natural. Meanwhile, toting her baby daughter to classes, she studied her way through law school. It was after talking with her mentor she realized that her current path was leading to a life where raising a family would be nearly impossible, where clients would dictate her life. Eventually, she decided to take a sharp turn and build her own wedding planning business.

Entirely on her own, through trial and error, she built up her company,

Cocktails & Details® (“we always like to say cocktails and details are the essentials of every fabulous party”). The company does boutique destination weddings, drawing in couples from all over and bringing them to the Golden Isles in Georgia. Her “amazing” team allows her to choose the weddings they do—about 10 to 15 per year—and work on design and production.

“Having a really good team is just as important as having a great vendor team,” says Terrica. “You want people who get your vision, who get your company culture, who get, you know, why you do these things and why it’s important. It’s very important to me that people feel safe with their event team, that they feel excited about working with their event team.”

Quickert says of the company’s success: “Terrica is an amazing event planner because she knows how to see past the Pinterest boards in the fairytale dreams to what is at the heart of a client. She sees what they value. She sees what they want to walk away with and then she makes it happen. She’s also smart enough to know that she will succeed by surrounding herself with good people, and her team is seriously unmatched.”

When asked about the signature touch of Cocktails & Details® weddings, Terrica jokingly told *SE*, “We’re always dancing.” But there’s more to the company’s success than having a good time. Terrica is protective of her couples, and as a romantic, she focuses on reminding her couples of why they’re getting married. Any problem solving is taken care of behind the scenes so couples can enjoy their day.

She’s learned a lot about being herself and following her instincts throughout her career. One of the biggest lessons she’s learned is to not work with clients she knows in her soul she shouldn’t work with. “Not all money is good money.”

But it’s the lessons she’s learned and being herself that has made her a successful wedding planner. She’s proud of how far she’s come, and even though she’s been in the business a long time,



Brian Green, Fausto Pifferrer, Meryl Snow, Terrica, Tamara Gibson, and Eddie Reyes pose together at Catersource + The Special Event in 2023. Photo courtesy SpotMyPhotos

she's proud that she's "still here...that I still find new reasons to get excited, new reasons to fall in love with my clients, to want to create something amazing for my clients, and I'm not bored. I'm not over it just yet."

BEING WHAT SHE NEEDED

When it comes to educating and speaking in the industry, Terrica looks back to her early days as a planner.

Coming from virtually nothing in the industry, Terrica has built an empire that has generated close to \$19M of wedding and event revenue in her area. And she wants you to know that if she can do it, so can you.

"There are always elevations in life, and I've elevated even further by becoming a

speaker and an educator. I want to be who I needed when I got started."

She started her business 600 miles away from home, with zero experience. The industry has changed in the past 20 years, but back in the day, people were more protective of resources and knowledge than now, making it difficult to learn the business. Instead of going along with the norm, Terrica created an online community, sharing what she learned so other wedding professionals could succeed. It grew to be the largest across the globe.

In 2018, she began recording her thoughts—what she calls "five-minute hustle tips"—in her phone voice memos while waiting to pick up her kids from school. She began sharing those thoughts in the form of a podcast, "She Doesn't Even Go Here: Unsolicited

Musings on Life & Business," with episodes like "Clap For Your Damn Self" and "How to Build Your Own WuTang Clan." Though she hasn't released any episodes since late 2020, she hopes to bring it back by the end of this year.

Her podcast is by no means the only place she shares her wisdom. Her speaking engagements (which, besides Catersource + The Special Event have been at such gatherings as IADWP, Wedding MBA, NACE National, and The Coterie Retreat) cover topics like sales, client experience, event production, DEI, the hustle mindset, balance, and self-care, to name a few. She's launched her own wedding industry education system, Hustle Sold Separately, and through her coaching, Terrica offers

contact sheets, templates, and other guides, as well as coaching sessions and intensives.

"I was first introduced to Terrica as she presented at the Be Sage Conference in 2017," remembers wedding PR pro Meghan Ely (OFD Consulting). "Like many before me, I found myself simultaneously nodding with every word while taking notes, trying to capture all of the gems she was sharing. It was clear she was a powerhouse from the start—someone who really knew what she was talking about and had the unique skill of engaging the audience every moment she was in their presence."

Michelle Loretta (Be Sage Consulting) told *SE* of Terrica's speaking style: "As a speaker, Terrica is magnetic and captivating. But, more importantly, she offers deep content and a wealth of knowledge."

Chef Chris Taylor (Chris Evans Events + Catering), an industry friend who claims he's Terrica's favorite chef, says that "she gives so much of herself

If I can make you laugh, then I can make you relax. And if I can make you relax, I can make you learn. — Terrica

on stage and in her mentoring groups it is both inspiring and motivating to all in proximity. She has a canny ability to give back to those who are 'hungry' in this industry and looking to 'boss up.' Her drive and what inspires her is a true testament of who she is; in life and on stage she holds nothing back and leaves no crumbs. Her natural ability to transcend a crowd all while equipping, changing mindsets, and empowering them to tackle this grueling industry is second to none."

EXCELLENT REVIEWS

Industry pros and peers alike can't say enough good things about Terrica.

"Without question, Terrica is the most amazing pro I know in our industry," says Green, "and not only that, she is one of my absolute favorite people on the planet. What you see on stage when she is speaking and pouring herself into an audience is what you get in real life. She is always 100% authentic and that is a rare gift."

Quickert adds, "Terrica is a good teacher because she can make you laugh at yourself and make you reevaluate your priorities in the same breath. She is captivating on stage. Even after years of friendship, and hearing her teach similar classes over and over again, I can't take my eyes off her when she speaks. I fill up pages of my notebook with her advice and insight. I always leave her classes feeling empowered and positive, and also ready to work and make change."

When *SE* asked why she thinks people respond to her so well, Terrica answered, "Because I'm everybody else. That's it. I don't get up there and talk at people, I talk to people, and I speak their languages." She admitted with a laugh that she knows a lot of five-dollar words from her education, but she speaks in a way that people understand, starting sessions with funny stories and memes. "If I can make you laugh, then I can make you relax. And if I can make you relax, I can make you learn." She doesn't sugarcoat failures either—she's transparent, and it's that transparency that makes her great at breaking things down so that people can easily understand them.

LOOKING FORWARD

For Terrica, event planning is a passion, one that she will hang onto as long as she can.



Terrica at Catersource +
The Special Event
2023. Photo courtesy
WASIO Faces

A FORCE CALLED TERRICA

"I hope I never get tired of that, and the second I get tired of it...I still get so nervous before every wedding," she says. "The second I stop getting the butterflies I gotta wrap it up because then I'm just going through the motions."

When asked about what the future holds, she says she'll hang onto her wedding planning business as long as she's passionate, and whenever she's ready, she'll find someone else passionate to pick up where she'll leave off.

"I want someone else to take my butterflies, I want somebody else's wings to spread." It's easy to see Terrica's love of the event industry; she plans on coaching and educating basically forever, and teaching someone new to take over her business when she's done.

Terrica has a lot of wisdom, but it all boils down to a simple phrase: Be you.

"Be you and the world will adjust," she told *SE*, and it's easy to see how she's embodied this concept. While she says it's taken her time to step into that sense of self, she's there now, and it's the key to her success in the industry.

"The reason why I am so loved—on the stage, on the podcast, on Instagram—is because I am myself. And it took almost 15 years to get to that point, to be myself. And people ate it up."

It's true—her Terrica-ness has made people loyal to her. "If Terrica ran for president, I would be her campaign manager and her biggest cheerleader,"



Terrica, Fausto Pifferrer, Jamie Lee Quickert at Catersource + The Special Event in Miami, July 2021. Photo courtesy Jamie Lee Quickert

says Quickert. "Because her word matters. Because she does what she says she's going to do. Because she never lets anything get in her way." She adds, "And because she is funny as hell. Her press conferences would be everything."

Terrica wants planners to step into themselves fully, the way she has. "Don't try to be anybody else, don't be a watered-down version of yourself, don't hide what you're great at. I hate false modesty. I think that it's ridiculous. It's the same thing as lying."

If you think being yourself will put you at risk for losing clients, think again. "There are enough weddings out here for everyone," encourages Terrica. "The world needs what you have."

"It is not often in our industry that there is someone who is genuinely rooting for everyone to succeed," says Green. "There is truly no ego involved in her process—what you see is someone confident in their skin and who knows their abilities to help others shine. I am glad I get to call her one of my BFFs!"

"She is our industry jewel that is cherished by all," says Taylor.

Terrica knows how to elevate herself and those around her. "The events industry is made richer by everything Terrica puts out into the world. In addition to the top-caliber events that she produces as a planner, as an educator she elevates the way event pros think, act, and do," says Loretta. "Terrica is a force to be reckoned with!" ●

Catch Terrica live and in person during her sessions at this year's Catersource + The Special Event!

- Short Stories and Tall Tales: How Story Selling Gets You Booked
- The Art of Wedding Coordination
- How to Design for the Senses

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Let the best of the best in all things events be your guide.



Corporate

LCA specializes in corporate events of all types - marketing, celebratory, client related, employee morale, and others. Whether held in the host's facility, or in an off-premise location, LCA members are able to deliver a high value corporate event experience.

Photo Credit: Catering Creations



Weddings

At its collective portfolio of some of the most desirable wedding venues in the United States and Canada, the LCA caters many thousands of weddings annually.

Most LCA members have dedicated wedding specialists on staff to ensure this most important day is executed flawlessly, no matter the level of complexity.

Photo Credit: Bonura Hospitality Group



Social

Bar and bat mitzvahs, First Communions, quinceañeras, retirements and graduations, and even funerals are all important life cycle events. Superb food and service are crucial to making these events special and memorable, and the LCA is a perfect resource for those products.

Photo Credit: Catering by Michael's



Nonprofits

Galas and fundraisers are key to the success of most charitable ventures - including both financial and membership. The LCA is highly attuned to the needs of most charities, and is a great resource for all the necessary components to make these gala events successful.

Photo Credit: G Catering

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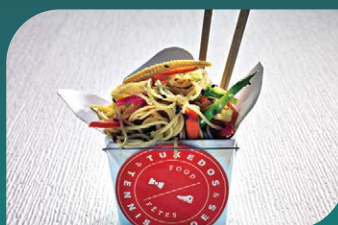
Photo Credit: Zilli Hospitality Group



SOUTH

Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas

Photo Credit: Bill Hansen Catering



WEST

Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington

Photo Credit: DSquared Hospitality Company



EAST

Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia

Photo Credit: The Classic Catering People

Learn more at LeadingCaterers.com

Special Events *State of the Industry* 2023

A year of
progress and
resilience gives
event pros hope
for the future

BY AMANDA NICKLAUS



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Survey Says...

Earlier in the third quarter, *Special Events* released a survey to our readership. Surveys are always a good place to start an end of the year report. While we're still seeing the residual effects of COVID-19 in the industry, we've also seen significant bounce back, with numbers remaining level and even increasing throughout this year. More than that, we're seeing a sense of hope about the future.

Let's first look at a few of the simple questions we asked, and some of the interesting responses we received, and then we will move onto the main event: our annual SOI (as we call it in house), the *Special Events State of the Industry 2023*.

Who responded to our survey?

A small majority of survey respondents reside in California (15%), while 13% reside in Florida and 12% are outside of the U.S.

42% identified as the CEO/founder of their company, while 21% identified as Production Manager/Event Producer/Event Designer, and 18% as Director/VP.

Interestingly, many industry veterans made up the whole of our respondents. 63% have been in the industry for over 20 years; 18% have been in it for 15–20 years, 11% for 10–14 years, and 5% for 5–9 years. 76% reported that their company has been in business for 20 years or more.

Resilience in the face of challenge

As for the staffing shortage, our industry seems to be hanging on: 47% reported that their employee numbers have remained the same since last year, while 16% reported a 1-25% increase in employees. About 12% reported a decrease in numbers, meaning while the majority are coping with this struggle, staffing remained a challenge in 2023. In fact, 55% of respondents predict that the labor shortage/lack of skilled labor will be the greatest professional challenge of 2024.

“We’re seeing a sense of hope about the future.”



An opulent gala by Atlas Event Rentals. Photo courtesy Capeheart Photography

Greatest professional challenges event pros are facing in 2024:



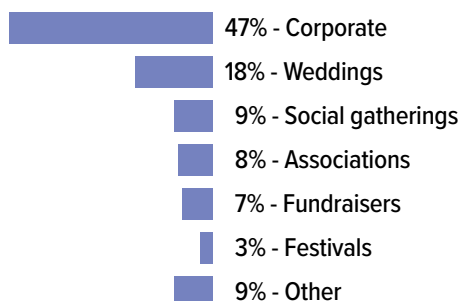
Above information from Special Events' 2023 SOI Survey.

In 2023, event pros were concerned with similar issues: 46% of respondents with the cost of goods and services; 28% with client budget constraints, and 22% with staffing live events appropriately in all areas. About 4% reported their greatest concern this past year was the supply chain issue.

Thankfully, we're seeing continuous growth in the aftermath of the pandemic, though not across the board: 50% reported an increase in events produced since 2022; while 26% reported a decrease.

The future remains hopeful: 32% of respondents had events booked into Q2 of 2024 at the time of this survey, and 29% in Q4, with 13% booked into Q1 of 2025. 53% predict they will stage more events in 2024 than 2023.

Which business sector have you garnered the most business from thus far in 2023?



Above information from Special Events' 2023 SOI Survey.

Event types

Corporate

Here are some fast stats about corporate events this year:

71% of respondents stage corporate events

54% stage less than 25 corporate events annually

42% expect revenue from corporate events to stay the same in 2024, while **39%** expect them to increase

44% of respondents held more corporate events in 2023 than in 2022; **37%** held the same number; and 20% held fewer than in 2022.

The majority (**26%**) of respondents' client corporate event budget stayed constant in 2023. An equal number of respondents' client corporate event budgets increased **6–10% (16%)** or **1–5% (16%)**.

35% expect their client corporate event budgets to stay the same in 2024, while **16%** expect it to increase **1–5%**, and **15%** expect it to increase **6–10%**.

Social

Here are some fast stats about social events this year:

42% of respondents stage social events

44% booked less than 25 social events in 2023; **20%** booked more than 200

45% expect social event revenue to increase in 2024; **43%** expect revenue to stay the same

41% of respondents have weddings booked into Q4 2024; **13%** have weddings booked into Q1 of 2025

Average wedding budget: less than **\$25K (38%)**; between **\$25K–50K (35%)**; between **\$50K–100K (20%)**; over **\$100K (8%)**

72% of weddings had **100–499** attendees; **15%** had **50–99** attendees

Above information from Special Events' 2023 SOI Survey.

What do you want to know?

Here are the topics respondents said they are interested in learning more about:



Above information from Special Events' 2023 SOI Survey.

A changing tide in weddings

Fall weddings are officially in, eclipsing spring as the most popular season to get married. Back in 2022, *The Knot* found that September 23, 2023 had the most weddings booked.

While destination weddings remain popular, we saw the rise of **small-scale weddings** with micro-weddings gaining traction and pop-up weddings and elopements increasing. And regardless of size, across the board we've seen multi-day festivities, with pre-ceremony welcome night parties and farewell brunches being common and more adventurous and opulent activities like snorkeling, liquor tastings, even cruises filling the luxury scene.

See Ian Ramirez live and in-person at Catersource + The Special Event in Austin, TX February 12–15, 2024.

• **Scripted: A Wedding Venue's Playbook to Winning Tours**

As couples prolong festivities, they're including friends for more of the celebration, too: a recent article from *People* magazine noted that "honeymoons aren't just for two anymore. More and more newlyweds are celebrating post wedding by inviting friends and family to continue to post wedding festivities." *People* chatted with event superstar Marcy Blum, who is "seeing group honeymoons more often and adds that one of her clients who recently married in Marbella opted to have her mother, sisters, and friends join for the first leg of the honeymoon and then ended the trip with a few days alone together. 'It's basically an extension of the party but with everyone paying their own way and no real schedule to adhere to,' she says."

Timeless traditions are on the way out, or at least on pause, as the younger generation steps onto the scene. "Say goodbye to the bouquet and garter toss, and possibly a few other long-held wedding traditions," says Ian Ramirez (Madera Estates). "For the better, I predict this new generation will continue to adapt their weddings to focus less on tradition and put more emphasis on having fun and personalizing their guests' experience."

In the place of these traditions are new activities that will either be passing fads or new traditions—only time will tell. 2023 was the year for stepping into pre- and post- ceremony vibes—we're seeing more wedding party members having separate ensembles for the ceremony and the reception. There's even a growing trend of party members **cutting their hair post-ceremony**, what some call a "second look."

The Knot 2023 Global Wedding Report found that "couples across all countries are relying heavily on vendors, hiring an average of 10 pros," with photographers being a top vendor (85% of couples across the globe hired a photographer to capture their day). No doubt this is due to the effects of sharing scenes from the special day on social media.

And if capturing these spectacles wasn't enough, the *New York Times* published an article about Join My Wedding, a platform that allows tourists to buy tickets to observe and even be a guest at extravagant Indian weddings. We'll be interested to see how this takes hold in 2024.

For more on wedding trends, turn to page 46 to see what's on the horizon for 2024.

Rental industry poised for steady growth in 2024

The event rental industry is leveling out. There isn't a clear consensus that business is booming—or that business is struggling. The American Rental Association (ARA) 2023 Q2 Economic Impact Survey shows 54% of members expected an increase in revenue in Q3, while 46% expected a decrease. Based on these numbers, it seems the state of the industry is more dependent on location than it has been in the past few years. There are certain factors that remain constant throughout the country, though. The high cost of doing business, the high cost



The pandemic brought outdoor events to the forefront, and they've remained popular over the last few years. Whatever look is desired, an event rental business can create it from the ground up, no matter the season. Planning & Design by Bellwether Events. Photo courtesy Ken Pak Photography



While destination weddings remain popular, we saw the rise of small-scale weddings with micro-weddings gaining traction and pop-up weddings and elopements increasing. Photo courtesy Cactus Collective Weddings



Entertainment is back to its full grandeur post-pandemic. Event by and photo courtesy 360 Destination Group

of labor, and the challenges that plague the supply chain are still very present.

So, what do you need to know about the industry as a special event professional? Costs are increasing everywhere, and rental is no exception to that. You might see rental companies raising prices to compensate for their costs going up. That might mean you start raising prices on your end, start communicating to customers that a price increase may be coming, or wait to see what happens. If you choose the latter, your rental partner can work with you to provide as much notice as possible. Communication is the key to a great working relationship, so rental companies are happy to dive into these important conversations.

Increased focus on relationships

Relationships and communication are important when it comes to timing as well. As we head into 2024, obstacles still remain with rental items getting delayed in shipping. Supply chain speed and tightening budgets will require open communication between event planners and event rental partners. So, if you think you need 150 chairs, but that number might change, communicate that. If there's a chance that you'll need more than 150 chairs, it's much easier for the rental store to order a higher number up front rather than scrambling to secure extra later. Instead of risking a fiasco and creating a difficult situation, make it a point to communicate these details up front.

Cultivating a relationship with a preferred rental store can also reap business benefits. A close relationship might also mean collaborating with the rental store to order new items. Maybe you now have a consistent need for outdoor lounge furniture, umbrellas, tent heaters, or something else entirely. The point is this—if you'll rent it, your rental partner will probably stock it. You just have to ask. This is particularly true as trends come and go and event planning professionals are at the forefront of trends.

What's trending

The pandemic brought outdoor events to the forefront, and they've remained popular over the last few years. Whatever look is desired in a venue, an event rental business can create it from the ground up using a tent, flooring, climate control, lighting, and more—no matter the season.

It's an exciting shift as clients are looking for one-of-a-kind experiences. Creativity is encouraged and clients are more apt to infuse fun, take risks with décor, favor unique flair, and more. Rental businesses are following the trends that include incorporating technology and leveling up décor for a maximalist feel.

Event rental is all about being on top of the trends to meet demand and event rental businesses are very open to hearing about what's popular. They may also have ideas to help planning professionals meet client requests, whether it's a theme, specific hue, or unique flair that is in demand.

Prioritizing sustainability

The importance of sustainable practices is on the rise in every aspect of our lives, and that includes events. Fortunately, the rental industry itself is inherently sustainable. Sharing the same resources with others, instead of each person buying those resources individually, reduces overall consumption. If a client is resolute in regard to sustainability, renting is a major benefit.

For corporate events, rental companies are finding they oftentimes have sustainability goals or standards. Sustainable practices can be brought into any event to meet the client's specific wants and needs. That might translate to replacing items with more sustainable rental options such as bamboo flooring in place of carpet. Other options could include open-air tents to reduce energy costs and the use of more efficient LED lighting. The selection of sustainable options depends on the level and specificity of the client's sustainability goals.

Looking ahead to 2024

The rental industry is steady, regardless of the ongoing challenges many companies are facing today. The ARA expects a favorable year ahead for the industry as a whole, especially when rental companies can strengthen and perfect their partnerships with event professionals. —*Elizabeth Vigotty, American Rental Association*

DMC forecast

In our Spring Issue's [*18th Annual DMC Spotlight*](#), we asked DMCs to tell us what trends they forecasted for the year. There were some obvious themes, and as we look back at 2023, here are those that were spot on:

Technology

"The most important trend for DMCs is technology which streamlines operations and enhances the attendee experience," said ACCENT New Orleans, Inc., a DMC Network Company. And as with the rest of the event industry, AI was a hot topic, with registration and data management predicted to be useful applications.

Wellness

2023 saw more wellness activities. 360 Destination Group saw "the inclusion of wellness and mindfulness into corporate meetings and events. Group yoga classes, meditation rooms, guided breathing sessions—these are all perfect ways to show attendees that their wellbeing and health is just as important as the success of the program." Other DMCs have seen more nature and mindfulness breaks incorporated into events.



Attendee experience was a big theme in 2023, meaning more personalization and creativity in every aspect of events. Event by and photo courtesy 360 Destination Group

Special Events State of the Industry 2023



Bleisure is trending, meaning exploring the local culture is a big part of destination events these days. Photo courtesy Terramar, A DMC Network Company



Destinations were increasingly the focus of events this year. Shown here: San Francisco, a great event destination. Photo courtesy Terramar, A DMC Network Company

Sustainability

Unanimously across our *DMC Spotlight*, sustainability was a hot topic. “Sustainability is not a trend; carbon offsets, responsible choices, and waste reduction initiatives are now bottom-line objectives for many organizations,” said CSI DMC.

Ovation Global DMC added, “In the past year, destinations focused on sustainable tourism and programs that actively promoted local culture and preserved natural surroundings. Planners are seeking out ways to make events more sustainable; from eco-friendly venues to waste-free catering.”

The destination

Destinations were increasingly the focus of events this year. “Attendees want enough free time to enjoy the destination,” mentioned Destination South, who suggests “not packing the agenda so tightly that there’s no time to explore the area, as well as giving back through activations and local event experiences.”

Exploring local culture, balancing work and personal time, and even bringing family members on work trips are all trends that became solidified this year. Check out our [Fall 2023 Issue](#) for more on bleisure.

Food & Beverage trends

Regarding the state of catering, themes such as tech, globalism, sustainability, and experience are prevalent. Over the past year, we’ve seen caterers take strides in utilizing cutting-edge

technology, practicing sourcing that is better for the planet, and creating wow-factor immersive dining experiences. Today’s eater wants a memorable, responsible meal: they want their food to stimulate all their senses, to contribute to ecological health, and to be something they’ve never experienced before, even if that means a new take on something old.

F&B tech

If you were at [Catersource + The Special Event](#) this past March, you probably heard a lot of talk about culinary robots, or even witnessed them on the tradeshow floor. From servers to chefs to bartenders, you can find robots entering the catering workforce, easing staffing issues, and increasing efficiency. An article from [Catersource magazine](#) titled *The Robot Uprising* put it this way: “When it comes to the catering industry, the future means a symbiotic relationship between robots and humans. The integration of robotics into the catering industry is not about replacing human chefs; it’s about enhancing their skills and improving overall efficiency.” And like any new tech, there’s a bit of hesitancy mixed with excitement, but as we head into 2024, we expect to see this relationship between robots and catering pros get worked out as more companies tread this new territory.

Globalism

In a global society, it makes sense that flavors influence one another. Cuisines across all cultures are finding their way into the spotlight. There were sessions at CS+TSE exploring Indian

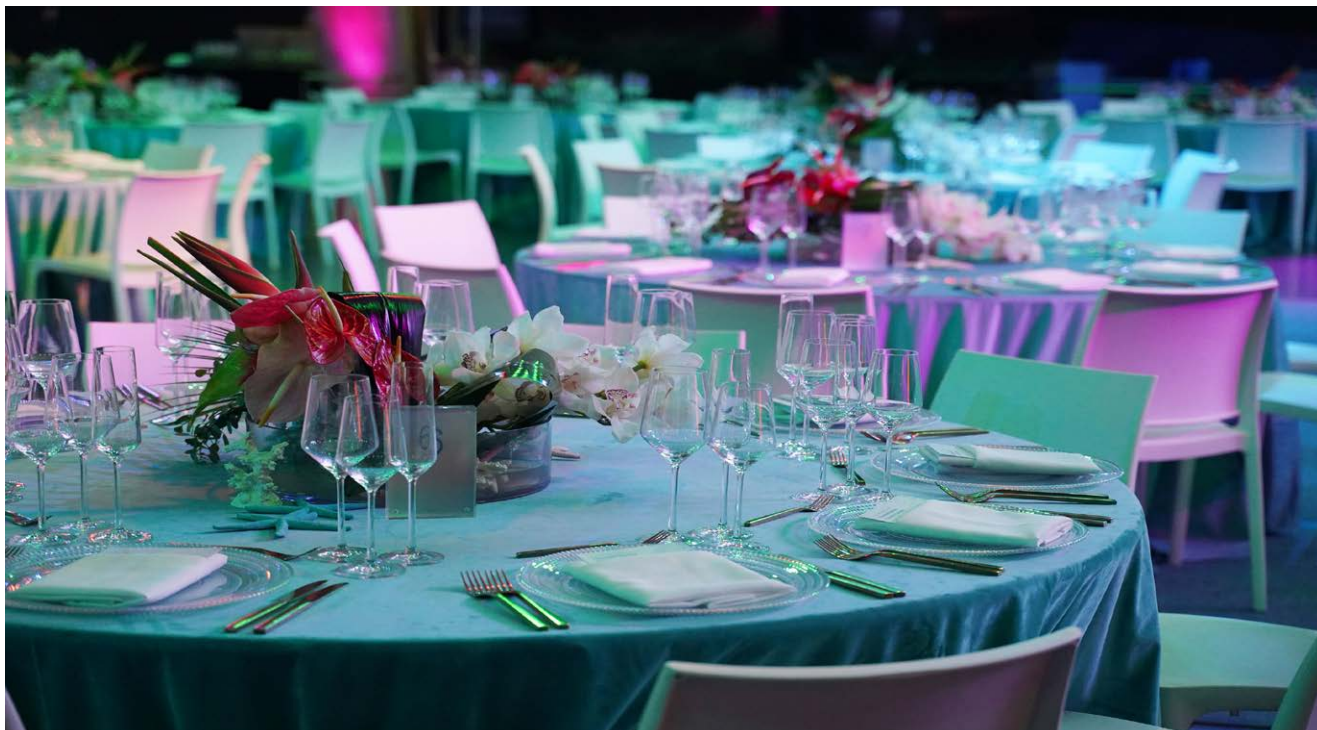


Chole with burnt onion stock, ghee roasted tomatoes, and sourdough naan. Food by Aatma. Photo courtesy Jenn Bakos Photography



Experiential dining, like this beer burro at Catersource + The Special Event 2023, is extremely popular heading into 2024. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Special Events State of the Industry 2023



The Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum of Science hosted an experiential dining experience at this year's annual fundraising gala, with an underwater theme reflected in the lighting and event decor. Photo courtesy Frost Science



An apple? Not quite! This is a sturdy chocolate shell, housing a lush interior filled with vanilla apple mousse and spiced apple compote. This interactive dessert from Lisa Dupar Catering required the crack of spoon against the shell to reveal its contents. Photo courtesy Kathleen Stoehr



Interactive (and gamified) dining is in! At Catersource + The Special Event 2023, attendees got the chance to drink wine from a Spanish porrón and see how far they could get from the spout without spilling. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

cuisine, and we saw Asian flavors fused with other cultural foods in sessions and at the evening events. The [SupHerb Farms 2024 Food & Beverage Trend Report](#) highlights Japanese, Oaxacan, Vietnamese, Nigerian, and North African cuisines as gaining popularity, and we continue to see heat from a variety of peppers and cultures be popular, as well as what the report calls “swicy”: a mix of sweet and spicy, like hot honey and mango habanero.

Sustainability

Sustainable food and beverages aren’t a trend; they’re part of a cultural shift in how caterers and consumers alike approach food. The SupHerb report broke down the different types of sustainability when it comes to food: “It’s important to note that ‘sustainability’ now encompasses social justice, workers’ rights, animal welfare, and community involvement as well as environmental-specific issues such as water, air, and soil quality and protection.”

Caterers are taking the lead in making this shift, by sourcing both seasonally and locally. In fact, some caterers are getting extra local by producing their own ingredients. An article from [Catersource](#) notes that “from foraging for wild edibles to establishing farms and beekeeping operations, these enterprising professionals are redefining the concept of farm-to-table cuisine.”

Hyperlocal ingredient sourcing is the next step many caterers are taking in the ongoing sustainability journey.

The SupHerb report also predicts we’ll start seeing more edible packaging in 2024—one more way to cut out waste by harnessing innovation.

Experiential dining

“Experiential dining is all about challenging the usual expectations and creating unique and memorable moments through inventive menus, sensory-focused and immersive dining, eccentric or thematic decoration, theatrics, unique locations and activities,” says an article from [Lightspeed](#). Good food is great; good food wrapped up in an immersive, photo-worthy, theatrical experience is better.

Experiential dining uses “entertainment, technology, storytelling, and multi-sensory stimulation to enhance the overall dining experience,” says an article from [Flavour Blaster](#). This highly engaging form of food service is in high demand, too: [Eventbrite](#) found that 75% of diners believe it’s worth paying more for a one-of-a-kind experience. These experiences frequently take the form of ticketed pop-up events.

2023 solidified experiential dining as popular; 2024 brings with it both the excitement and challenge of staying innovative as this type of dining becomes the norm.



Scottsdale Private Event Venues featured a service robot from Pringle Robotics.
Photo courtesy Dee Anne Deaton Grooveheads



Kawania Wooten during her session *What to Do When 'Stuff' Hits the Fan* at Catersource + The Special Event 2023. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Turn to page 72 in *Catersource* magazine at the back of this issue for a deep dive into upcoming food and beverage trends.

Red alert: crisis management

Event pros have been revisiting the conversation about crisis management since COVID-19, but devastating wildfires in Lahaina, Maui ramped up the conversation this year. Discussion has centered around revisiting force majeure clauses and making them more protective of event pros.

In an interview with [MeetingsNet](#), Joshua Grimes, Esq., president of Philadelphia-based Grimes Law Offices, LLC

Learn more about protecting yourself with solid contracts at Catersource + The Special Event in Austin, TX this February 12–15.

Join Leah Weinberg (Oduberg Law, LLP) for her session *What's the Worst that Could Happen? Tales, Tips + Mishaps from the Legal Side of Events* on Wednesday, February 14th at 2:30 p.m.

suggested that “planners not simply accept the typical force-majeure clause found in hotel contracts” and instead “include in the event contract ‘a clause that would allow either party to make a more-informed decision about whether it could perform’ in the wake of a natural disaster.”

In her session *What to Do When 'Stuff' Hits the Fan* at Catersource + The Special Event 2023, Kawania Wooten (Howerton+Wooten Events, The Enlightened Creative) talked about the Duty of Care, which she defines as “a legal and moral duty that events are made as safe as possible for everyone involved.” The session outlined several efforts event pros can take to prepare for crises, such as having an attorney-created, solid contract and knowing your crisis management team beforehand. “In the event world, the biggest mistake you can make is an assumption.” Wooten also differentiated between risks, emergencies, crises, and disasters and the different ways to handle each level of event interruption.

An article from [Forbes](#) notes that “over the past five years, the U.S. has experienced an average of 18 billion-dollar natural disasters per year.” As we head into 2024, expect to see continued education on the topic of improving emergency preparedness in the event industry.

Innovations in tech

There’s no denying that technology is the bread and butter of events these days. While hybrid events are sort of sticking around, and there are still some virtual events here and there, it’s clear that technology is important for all events, and in-person events are constantly incorporating new tech.

It’s becoming common for event companies to create their own apps for their events; [over 37% of events](#) now offer an app for attendees to use during the event. The [AMEX 2024 Global Meetings and Events Forecast](#) found that in 2023, mobile apps continue to be a staple in meetings and events, with a predicted usage rate of over 60%.

There are three big things we’ve heard a lot about over the last year: Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI). We’ve also been hearing about tech that automates and streamlines processes. The throughline of all of these: tech that makes the event experience easier for pros and consumers, that creates a more engaging guest experience through personalization, and provides data for improved experience.

AR and VR

AR, which integrates digital elements with a real-life environment through a phone screen, has cropped up at events and tradeshows through product demos, virtual tours, event/product/service information, and games (like scavenger hunts). These are typically used in exhibitions, sports events, cultural and artistic events, and conferences, and we expect to continue seeing AR become commonplace.

About this time last year, we expected the “Metaverse” to take full hold of the events industry. However, the concept is taking

a while to catch on; in June, [Wired](#) said that “the term itself has eroded into near meaninglessness,” and said the word can be easily swapped with “cyberspace.” In the meantime, we’ve seen other ways that VR has caught on in the events industry as the space for virtual events, as well as for 360° virtual tours of venues. We expect to see VR continue working its way into the event space; the AMEX report found that 41% of respondents expect to use VR next year.

AI

Forget “rizz”—AI is the word of the year, hands down. Some people are excited about artificial intelligence; others are more hesitant. No matter how you feel about it, AI is already working its way into the events industry; in fact, the AMEX report found that 42% of respondents said they expect to use AI in 2024.

Registration is one area foreseen to benefit from AI, and event pros are

beginning to use it to match attendees with similar interests, personalize guest experiences, generate leads, remove language barriers, create content templates, gather feedback and attendee data, and even create post-event reports. Plus, chatbots can be helpful tools for answering client questions.

As an article from [Forbes](#) put it, event planners “now have access to unprecedented levels of attendee data. They can use this information to segment groups and plan activities based on demonstrated areas of interest. On a more granular level, organizers can employ intelligent registration systems to gather data that essentially curates a guest’s experience.”

One main point repeated throughout the year: AI will help event pros personalize event content for attendees, which will drive engagement and increase ROI.

Streamlined processes

AI fits into the general direction of tech that automates and streamlines processes for event pros, freeing them up to focus on the creative and relational work that is so pivotal to the industry, leaving the repetitive, tedious tasks to tech. With so many tasks left up to different tech platforms, event pros are leaning into consolidation by integrating their tech stack. As an article from [Cvent](#) put it, “An integrated tech stack means you can house your event data in a single source of truth. It also facilitates the flow of data between internal systems, such as Marketing/CRM, HR, finance systems, and more. Not only does this provide a holistic view of your entire meetings and events program, but it also allows you to standardize and enforce global policies across your organization and improves reporting.”

As we head into 2024, it’s to be expected that new technologies will



Technology is set to play a major role in events in 2024. Shown here: a robotics show from 2023 Gala award recipient insglück. Photo courtesy Andreas Keller

Special Events State of the Industry 2023



Some caterers are getting hyperlocal by producing their own ingredients. Shown here: Vista Brewing of Driftwood, TX has its own apiary. Photo courtesy Alyssa Jaraep Photography



Flower petals are a sustainable form of confetti. Photo courtesy Jocelyn Filley Photography



Partnering with caterers who practice sustainable sourcing is a guaranteed way to make a difference. Shown here: a sustainable blue salmon fillet from Afashionado. Photo courtesy Oceanwise Seafood Festival

continue to improve and integrate into the event scene, both in the office and at the event.

The rise of big data

Another theme of the year was data. Especially considering AI's emergence, event pros are beginning to utilize data to create better engagement and ROI.

"Like most industries, big data plays a role in event planning and management," states an article from [Superevent](#). "It opens new opportunities to learn about your guests so you can plan events that delight them."

Using data collection to inform your business decisions can bring many benefits: targeted promotions, analytics for event planning, personalized experiences, and crowd flow control, for instance.

The emergence of AI in the event industry is part of the reason data is having a moment: with AI, data can be more easily collected, processed, and applied to events. An article from [MeetingHand](#) put it this way:

"AI-powered algorithms can analyze vast amounts of data collected from various sources, including registration forms, social media, past events, and attendee feedback. By processing this data, AI can identify patterns, preferences, and behaviors to gain valuable insights into attendee interests, demographics, and preferences. These insights enable event planners to create personalized experiences tailored to individual attendees or specific attendee segments."

As consumers demand more innovation and personalization, data collection is the key to standing out and delivering engaging events. However, with the increase in data collection comes increased concerns for data privacy. In an article for [Special Events](#), marketing expert Christie Osborne addressed the shift in attention to privacy regulations.

"Many small businesses have grown accustomed to the ease of robust targeting, extensive tracking, and lenient

rules surrounding data collection. After all, these features allowed for easy, low-cost marketing. However, a heightened awareness of privacy concerns has led to an overhaul in how we treat data as lawmakers set new online standards with measures like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA)."

2024 will be a year of navigating data and all the positives and negatives that come with it.

Sustainability: from chatter to action

2023 was the year of event pros losing patience with simply talking about the importance of sustainability and moving the conversation toward how to take real action. It also was the year of ESG. In an article for [Special Events](#), sustainable event consultant Suzanne Morrell discussed ESG, saying "It's essentially the new version of the artist formerly known as CSR, or Corporate Social Responsibility. Call it what you will, it's about transparency and accountability. Now more than ever, the world is not only taking notice, but also putting its money to work in the ESG space."

Let's take a look at the state of sustainability using the ESG framework.

Environmental

As for environmental sustainability, event leaders are looking to reduce or completely offset carbon emissions from events, with actions that look like anything from participating in a certified offset program (such as planting trees) to joining the Net Zero [Carbon Events Pledge](#). In fact, according to the AMEX report, most meeting professionals (78%) said their organizations would have net zero goals by the end of 2024.

Globally, there are different focuses for taking action toward environmental sustainability. The AMEX report identified these focuses by region:

- North America - explicit language about policies

- Europe - certified suppliers
- Latin America - mindful planning
- Asia Pacific - defined net zero goals

The main challenges noted by the report's respondents include identifying certified suppliers (39%), budget (35%), measuring impact and post event CO2 calculation (32%), finding locations with minimal travel (28%), and lack of skills/resources/knowledge (23%). We're hoping that 2024 brings progress toward finding solutions in these areas.

Other efforts we've noticed throughout 2023 include sustainable food sourcing, aiming for zero waste, and aligning with clients and vendor partners who value environmental sustainability.

Social

"Inclusivity" was a major conversation topic in 2023, and like environmental sustainability, event pros are looking for practical ways to apply these conversations to real events. There has been increased focus on making event spaces LGBTQIA+ friendly, as well as on accessibility for all physical ability types and catering events for neurodivergent individuals. An article for [Professional Convention Management Association \(PCMA\) Convene](#) interviewed Adam Harris, CEO of ASIAm, an Ireland-based organization that amplifies autistic voices, about how to navigate neurodiversity challenges at conferences.

"Aspects of the sensory environment that other people are unaware of: The fluorescent lighting in a room [or] the sound of the projector may be experienced more intensely by an autistic person," Harris told PCMA. "Conferences also represent a huge break in routine, which is something that can be disruptive for people with autism." Taking measures such as becoming an autism-accredited destination or venue, asking attendees in advance what accessibility requirements they have, implementing a priority registration system to help autistic attendees who struggle with crowds or the uncertainty of waiting to be helped, and creating a step-by-step "What to Expect" guide using pictures can all be helpful

Special Events State of the Industry 2023

ways to make events more accessible for neurodivergent attendees.

A recent report by Cvent addressed this topic: “A study by Meeting Professionals International found that 56% of event professionals have diversity and inclusion policies, and 42% include these statements on their websites. These planners are actively looking for venues that are accessible, use food and beverage vendors that understand and work with dietary restrictions, and provide AV equipment that caters to all communication styles.”

Of course, no solution is a one-size-fits-all, and as event pros become more cognizant of catering to each attendee’s needs, we’ll see events shift and begin embracing practical inclusivity.

Governance

Governance in events is all about holding our industry accountable. An article from LinkedIn put it this way: “One of the key steps to achieve sustainable event management is to measure and improve

your event sustainability performance. This means setting clear and realistic goals, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting and communicating your results and impacts.”

If you don’t already measure your event impact, here are some of the top tools and frameworks preferred by event pros that you can use in 2024:

- [ISO 20121](#)
- Environmental and Sustainability Management System (ESMS)
- [SASB](#)
- [GRI](#)
- [TCFD](#)

By reporting to and working within the standards set by some of these frameworks and organizations, event pros can continue holding their business and the industry to high standards, setting us all on the same path toward improving sustainability.

Wellbeing & the events industry

Attendee and event pro wellbeing alike continued to be a talking point in 2023 and will certainly remain on the radar in 2024. Beyond the scope of mental health, event pros are making moves to create event environments that improve the overall wellbeing of attendees.

The AMEX report states: “Our interview panel told us they are seeing programming trends such as longer breaks between sessions, more self-care activities available at events, thoughtful room design, food and beverage options that offer more selection to people with restrictions, as well as more streamlined travel for attendees to make sure they arrive and depart energized rather than drained.”

The report also touches on a wellness lounge found at a recent event in Paris, with certain features including meditation, relaxation, CBD, and oxygen bars. Catersource + The Special Event debuted a wellness lounge at the 2023 conference and will bring it back in 2024

with more features and guided wellness opportunities.

“Clients have requested and prioritized a holistic well-being concept through wellness and mindfulness activities, embedding yoga sessions and meditation breaks into event agendas,” says Brit Bertino (BRIT BERTINO EVENT EXCELLENCE).

2023 also saw a focus on collaboration and self-care conversations, indicating event pros are working toward creating healthier environments and practices for their own lives, as well as companies providing wellness resources to offset the intensity of the high-stress event industry.

Other trends for your radar

While we can’t possibly cover every aspect of the industry, here are a few other trends we’ve seen come into the spotlight this year:

Personalization

Personalization and customization are huge buzzwords heading into the new year. With the trend in data collection and innovative tech, we’re seeing event pros begin to satisfy customers with hyper-personalized experiences.

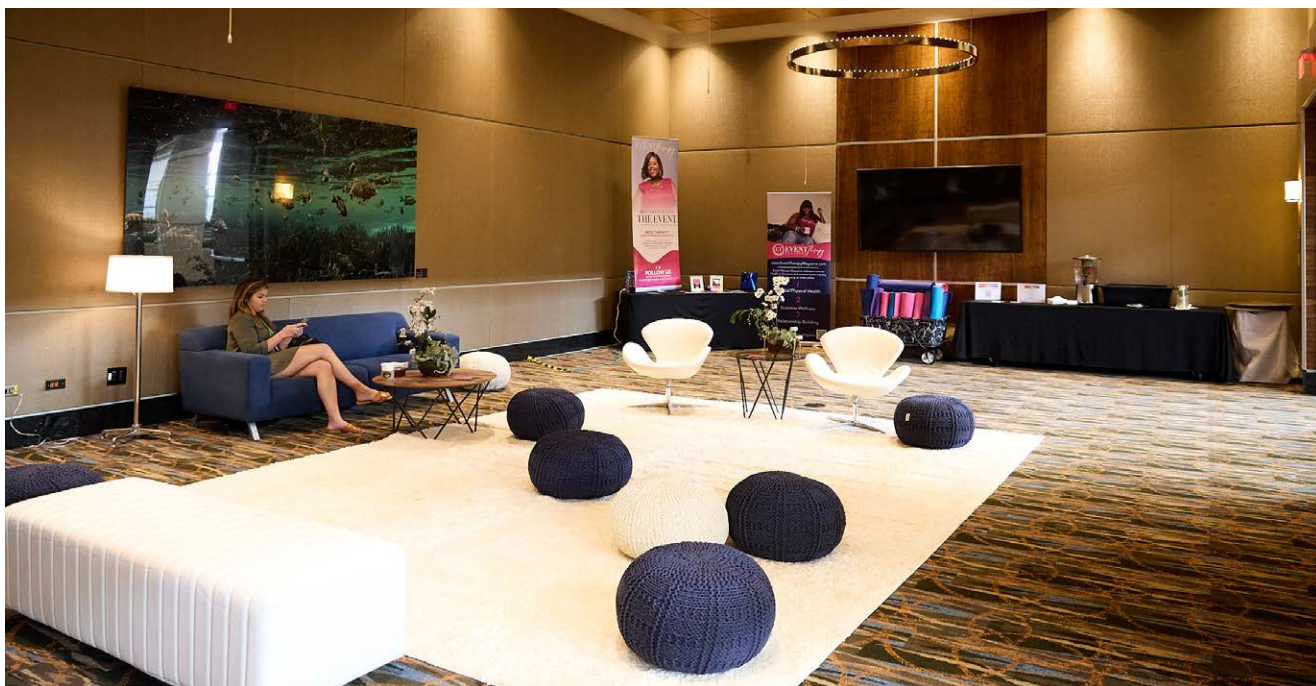
“By leveraging data-driven insights and advanced techniques, event professionals tailor content, networking opportunities, and agendas to match attendees’ preferences and objectives,” event management platform vFAIRS said in a [recent article](#).

Event platform [AllSeated](#) echoes the same sentiment: “This strategic approach aims to create highly individualized experiences for attendees, going beyond mere customization to foster engagement and satisfaction. Looking ahead, the integration of data analytics, event mobile apps, and AI chatbots is set to redefine attendee experiences, streamline venue operations, and enhance event planning efficiency, ensuring more successful and impactful events.”

Learn more about wellness in the events industry with these sessions at Catersource + The Special Event, which will take place February 12–15, 2024 in Austin, TX.

- [Snatching Wellness from the Jaws of Wellness Culture](#)
- [Let’s Have a Talk in the Walk-in](#)
- [Event Therapy Lounge: Meditation & Self Care Strategies](#)

Plus, see [Brit Bertino](#) live and in-person as well!



Catersource + The Special Event debuted a wellness lounge at the 2023 conference and will bring it back in 2024. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

Gamification

Slowly rising throughout the past couple years, we're expecting 2024 to be a prime year for gamification and interactive elements. "Through gamification, event professionals can effectively communicate key messages, facilitate knowledge transfer, and reinforce learning outcomes," noted the article from vFAIRS. "Attendees are more likely to remember and apply the information when they are actively involved and invested in the experience, ultimately leading to a more impactful and meaningful event."

There are a variety of ways that gamification can be integrated into events, too. "By integrating game-like features such as challenges, leaderboards, and rewards, organizers can encourage active participation, increase attendee involvement, and make events more enjoyable," noted one [LinkedIn article](#).

On-demand content

As we continue navigating the balance of in-person, hybrid, and virtual events, one

factor remains pertinent: attendees want access to high-quality content.

"Live streaming provides an opportunity to bridge the gap between physical and virtual attendees, creating a more inclusive and immersive experience. With on-demand content, event professionals extend the lifespan of their events and enable attendees to access and revisit the content at their convenience," says vFAIRS.

Vendor relationships

2024 will continue to see business leaders in the event industry navigate staffing issues and company culture.

The [Cvent Report](#) "Meeting and Event Trends You Need to Know for 2024 – and Beyond" weighs in on the value of relationships within a shifting workforce.

"According to the 2023 Cvent Planner Sourcing Survey for Europe, 20% of event professionals say loss of relationships is a key challenge arising from staff shortages. Rebuilding relationships will be one of the most prevalent trends impacting priorities in 2024," the report notes.

Collaboration and "coopetition" were brought up in several conversations at Catersource + The Special Event in 2023, and we expect to continue hearing discussion about the value of relationships within the event industry in 2024.

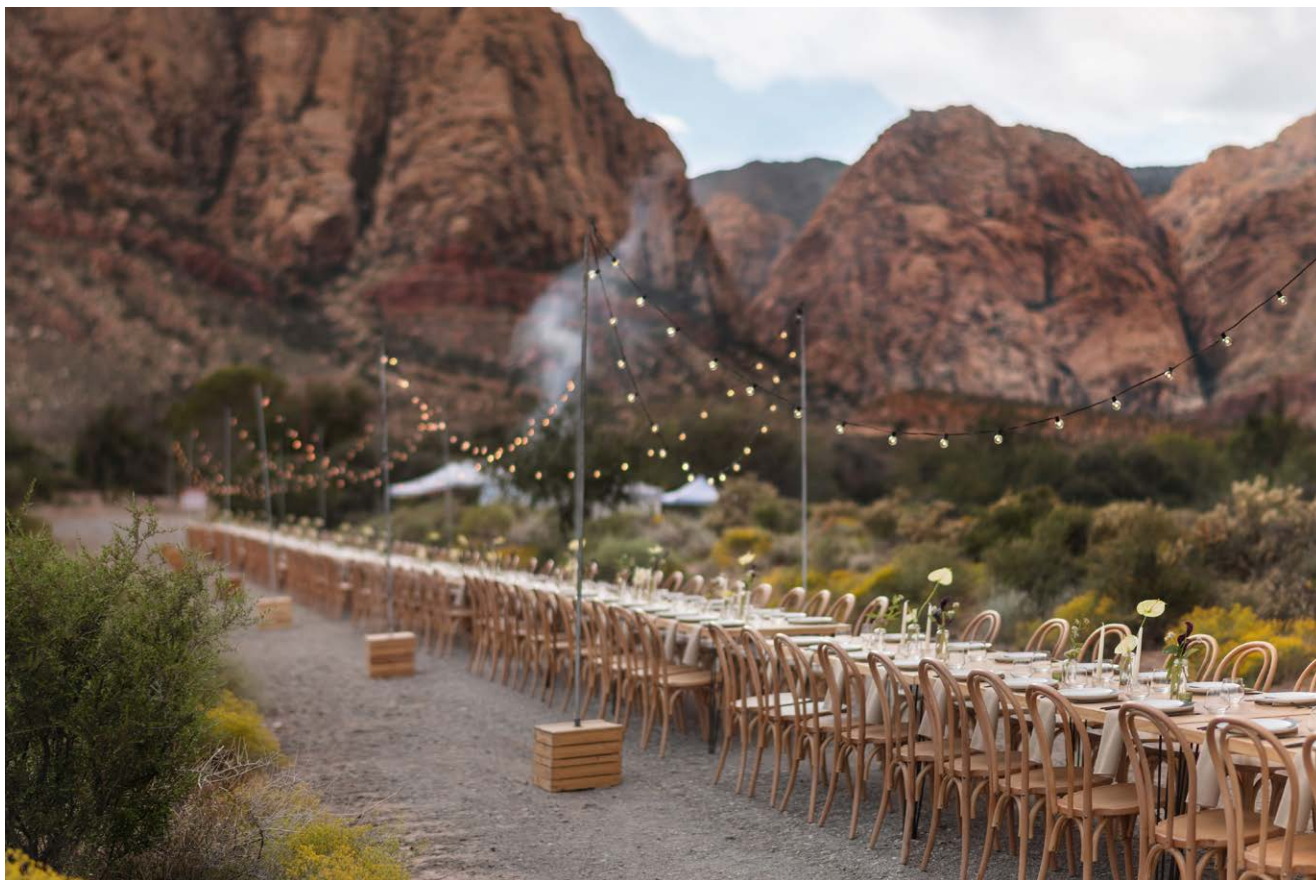
Bleisure

A major keyword of 2023 was "bleisure"—a traveling style that combines business and leisure.

"In 2024, hybrid work won't just mean splitting time between home and the office," the Cvent report states. "People work from the beach, cafes, mountain chalets, and much more. This freedom also opens new revenue opportunities for hotels that can accommodate hybrid work needs."

3D visualization tools

As tech continues advancing to meet the needs of event pros and consumers alike, 3D diagrams and mapping tools are predicted to be popular in the upcoming year.



Open Venues is a new, first-of-its-kind event venue platform which allows users exclusive access to book rare and historic properties and wild landscapes for every type of event. Shown here: Reserve at Red Rock, Nevada. Photo courtesy Open Venues

Catersource + The Special Event is a great place for trend spotting and forecasting!

Register now so you can bring back new ideas and get the advantage of being ahead of the rest!

The article from [AllSeated](#) notes: “Advanced tools for event planners create detailed 3D diagrams of event spaces, emphasizing collaborative planning, precise design elements, and the convenience of remote planning with intensified automation. Anticipating 2024, the significance of 3D diagram software is set to surge, becoming indispensable for crafting visually stunning and efficiently planned events.”

Exciting venues

Here’s something we hope catches on: a new, first-of-its-kind event venue platform called [Open Venues](#), which allows users exclusive access to book rare and historic properties and wild landscapes for every type of event, whether it’s transformative corporate events, brand activations, weddings or elaborate dinner parties. With a current collection of 25 venues in a total of four states (Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah), all locations within

the Open Venues network are only available to book via the platform. From verdant valleys, historic mansions, and downtown lofts to majestic mountains and deserts, Open Venues lends the keys to its curated collection of rarefied retreats and legendary landscapes. As immersive and unique events continue to become mainstream, we’ll keep our eye on this exciting new platform.

Conclusion

As we wrap up 2023 and enter a new year, there is one thing we can say for certain: though there are still challenges ahead, we’ve seen the industry bounce back, and the resilience and dedication of event pros is the reason we’re looking forward to 2024. ●

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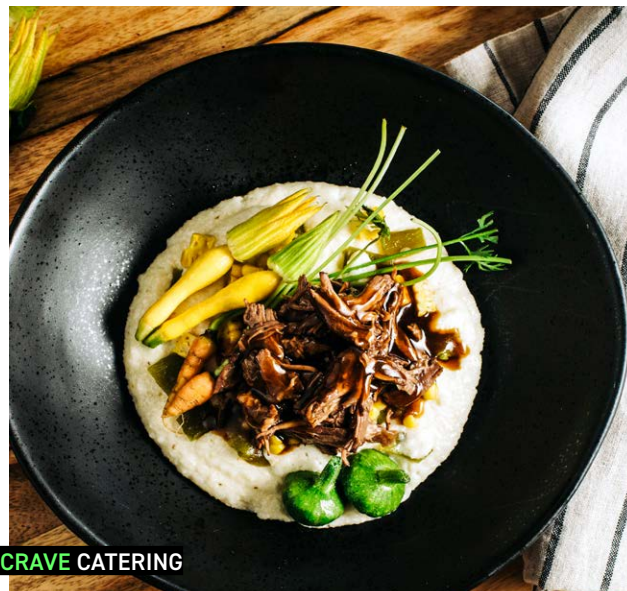
A Taste of Austin, TX

CRAVE CATERING

A grand tower of an entree
from Crave Catering. Photo
courtesy of the caterer

Get to know the vibe of
this Tex-Mex town

By Amanda Nicklaus



IN JUST TWO SHORT MONTHS,

event pros across the globe will be gathering under the hot Texas sun for [Catersource + The Special Event](#), held in the increasingly popular city of Austin.

While this city was a well-kept secret for a while, recent years have seen it grow in population and tourism. Voted No. 1 place to live in America several years in a row, this booming city is a trendy spot for bachelorette parties and tech startups. It's also a fantastic foodie spot.

Special Events got in touch with a couple of established catering companies in Austin to get the inside scoop on this food scene. Here's what you need to know when you arrive for Catersource + The Special Event this February.

Special Events (SE): What is unique about the Austin food/catering scene?



Lindsey Ganther, Sales & Client Services Manager, Contigo Catering (LG):

Austin's food scene is incredibly diverse, offering a wide range of culinary experiences. From traditional

Texas barbecue, Tex-Mex, gourmet food trucks, and a growing international food presence, the city is leaning into its reputation for being open to culinary experimentation.

(Clockwise) Shrimp n' grits cake with creole cream sauce and tiny Tabasco® bottles. Photo courtesy Lisa Hause Photography; Plated meal. Photo courtesy Lisa Hause Photography; Bite size is the right size. Photo courtesy of the caterer; Grapefruit cocktail from the Contigo cocktail program. Photo courtesy of the caterer



FOOD FOR FÊTES



CRAVE CATERING



CONTIGO CATERING



Leslie LaSorsa, General Manager,

Crave Catering (LL): Unique are the long standing family traditions in barbecue and Tex-Mex food, plus the funky newcomers all trying their thing usually in food trucks...so now we have this eclectic mash up of fried chicken, ramen

houses, world class sushi, Indian, Venezuelan, Thai, and Vietnamese, and so much of this is done very farm-to-table.

SE: What types of food/dishes is Austin known for?

LG: Oh boy! So much. To list a few:

- Barbecue: Central Texas-style barbecue. Brisket, beef ribs, and sausages are staples.
- Tex-Mex: Tex-Mex combines elements of traditional Mexican cuisine with influences from Texas. This fusion has resulted in a distinct and beloved regional cuisine known as Tex-Mex, the spicier the better!!
- Honorable Mentions: Kolaches*, breakfast tacos, crawfish boils, and Franken Tacos (creative and unconventional taco combinations).

**Editor's Note: Kolaches are sweet Czech pastries, like Danish pastries but denser in consistency.*

LL: Texas Oak Smoked Barbecue and Tex-Mex, tacos, chili con queso

SE: What are the flavors of Austin?

LG: What comes to mind is spice! Austin's food scene is bold and spicy! You can find dishes with varying degrees of spiciness, from mild to fiery hot. And when it's not hot enough, you can always count on a trusty jalapeno to dial up the heat! Even our barbecue sauce has a kick to it!

LL: Salsa and barbecue sauce, smoke and salt, margaritas and Old Fashioneds

(Above and opposite page) The imagination of these two Austin, TX caterers—how they plate, how they combine colors and textures to create an appeal that goes beyond flavor—makes it one of the primary reasons they were selected to chair events at Catersource + The Special Event in February 2024. We are delighted that they will be able to wow our attendees and provide the hospitality that is paramount to their businesses to people from across the U.S. and abroad. Photos above and on opposite page courtesy of the caterers



CONTIGO CATERING



CRAVE CATERING



CONTIGO CATERING



CRAVE CATERING



CRAVE CATERING



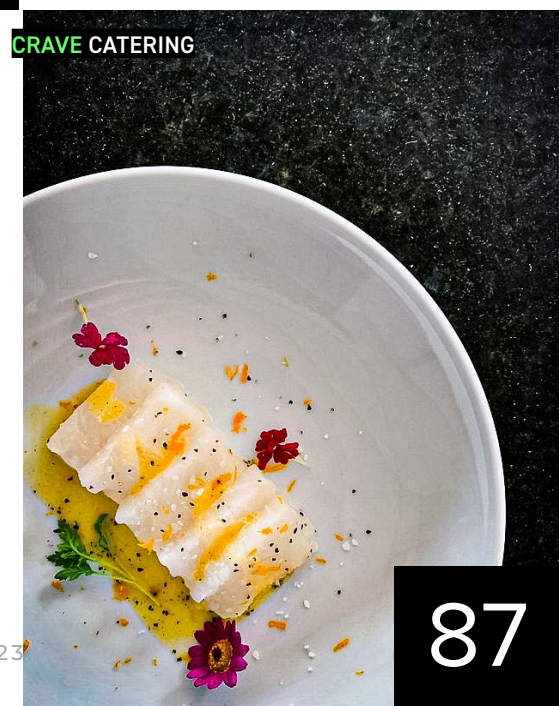
CONTIGO CATERING



CONTIGO CATERING



CONTIGO CATERING



CRAVE CATERING



FOOD FOR FÊTES



CRAVE CATERING



CONTIGO CATERING

SE: Name three words that describe the general aesthetic of the food scene in Austin.

LG: Eclectic. Vibrant. Innovative.

LL: Accessible. Comfortable. Come-back.

SE: How has the food scene changed in Austin over the years?

LG: A few things we have noticed are:

- There has been a diversity boom in this city, with an increasing number of restaurants and demand for caterers to serve international cuisines. This opens the door for lots of creativity with the creation of unique dishes that fuse diverse flavor profiles and ingredients.
- Austin's food scene has gained national attention, with numerous restaurants, food trucks, and chefs earning countless awards, solidifying the city's reputation as a culinary destination. We are seeing so many corporate groups and destination weddings who want to experience this for themselves!
- The food scene in Austin has evolved to reflect the changing tastes and preferences of both residents and visitors; the same trends we see in local restaurants translate over to the catering requests we see daily.

LL: I'd say it was much more straightforward with barbecue, Tex-Mex, and Southern comfort (did I mention chicken fried steak is a staple in the food repertoire, along with mashers and gravy?).

SE: What are the challenges you face with heat when catering outdoors? How do you overcome them?

LG: Boy oh boy! The heat in the summers is something you never get used to. While our industry does slow down significantly in the hot months, we still do produce events for our clients. We love live-fire cooking, and in the summer, it can get over 200 degrees near the fire table. We have policies in place to make sure our staff is safe in exhaustive environments, such as using fans, portable coolers, rotating AC breaks, and more. But it still is ever-challenging.

LL: We can handle the heat as it relates to food through equipment and menu design (how about no charcuterie at 5:00

(Above left) Crave Catering adds fiery touches to their offerings. (Above right and opposite) Contigo Catering's Fire Table menu includes appetizers such as chile pickled shrimp, chorizo & potato croquettes and ceviche; mains and sides include goat barbacoa and adobo grilled chicken as well as sotol smoked sweet potato and ember roasted vegetables. Herbs hang from the top to impart scent when mixed with the smoke and flame, and garlic bulbs provide visual appeal. Photos courtesy of the caterers





FOOD FOR FÊTES

CRAVE CATERING

A beautiful starter for any wedding menu. Photo courtesy of the caterer





CRAVE CATERING

Tiny tacos atop a lime vessel from Crave Catering are certainly popular in Texas. Photo courtesy of the caterer



CONTIGO CATERING

Small bites from Contigo Catering. Photo courtesy of the caterer

p.m. for cocktail hour) and perhaps a few displays on ice blocks. It's mostly our staff we have to take care of. We not only have inclement rain plans but also inclement heat plans that require coverage such as tents and fans. We also supply ice water, cold cloths in a cooler at the resorts, and several options for staying hydrated, including frozen electrolyte pops, Gatorade, and tons of water, as well as additional uniform options during the hottest months.

SE: Does Texas having its own power grid affect your business at all?

LG: Not necessarily. There is always a potential to lose inventory when power is out, but that is not often. And since we are in the event industry, we have a generator on standby!

LL: It hasn't really, except back during the Snowpocalypse of 2021. That shut the metro Austin area down for well over a week. We haven't really thought

about the fact that Texas is on its own power grid...but I guess I'll add it to my list!

SE: What do our readers need to know about Austin food before they head to Texas for our conference in February?

LG: We are not meat and potatoes people (unless it's brisket and potato salad)! We are constantly pushing the envelope and never want to produce boring food. In our industry, we continually strive to remain on the cutting edge, crafting delectable dishes that mirror our city's deep passion for culinary excellence. We are all foodies and will preach it till we are blue in the face.

LL: Make reservations before you come! Even though most places aren't fancy, the hot spots get booked up. And when in doubt, grab a Whataburger and roll down to Lady Bird Lake and enjoy! It's all about the ambience; soak it in.

Get a Taste of Austin's Catering at Catersource + The Special Event

Crave Catering is this year's official Catering Ambassador of [Catersource + The Special Event](#), to be held in Austin, TX February 12–15, 2024. Also in attendance will be Lindsey Ganther and Contigo Catering, co-chairing the [Opening Night Party](#). Keep your eyes open for more details about this evening event!



An Innovator

Rob Barber Named Special Achievement Award Winner

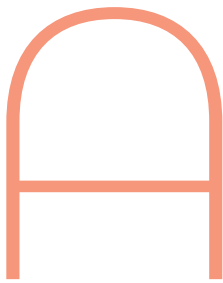
BY AMANDA



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cial Events Gala Lifetime
Award Recipient

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T FIRST GLANCE, Rob Barber's career is a string of seemingly unrelated industry jobs. He's worked in the furniture, tech, car rental, and live events industries. "It's been a lot

of places. My career's taken place in a lot of different shapes and sizes," says Barber. But it doesn't take long to recognize the throughline: innovation, creativity, and a respect for those people who share those values are woven into his career, regardless of which industry it's taken shape in.

Now, having spent nearly 15 years with **ATOMIC**, a live event production and design company, he has found the place where that innovation and creativity can blossom. During Barber's time as Vice President of Modular Systems + R&D, ATOMIC has worked on the sets of some major events—the Super Bowl, iHeartRadio, MTV, **Catersource + The Special Event**, you name it—shining as a leader.

He is also a prolific international speaker, with engagements that include Catersource + The Special Event, IMEX, and ILEA Live Conference, to name a few. His work has won awards and been featured in several publications, and if all that weren't enough, he's a genuine, thoughtful individual who has left quite a mark on the live events industry.

It is for his years of innovation and dedication to improving our industry that *Special Events* has named Rob Barber the 2024 *Special Events* Lifetime Achievement Award recipient.

A series of unique jobs

Barber had his formal education in furniture design and began his career as a furniture designer and maker. But when that job didn't pay the bills, he did a 180 and went back to school for computer science and business management. He then began working as the IT director of an agricultural company, spending 25 years developing his business and innovation skills. In fact, it was here he patented an invention you're probably familiar with: the Eggland's Best brand stamp, that prints logos directly onto eggs.

After his time in IT, Barber moved on to work as Vice President of Avis Car Rental for the state of Pennsylvania. He spent time learning the dos and don'ts of running a rental business, and eventually, through a mutual friend, met the previous co-owner of ATOMIC, who hired him to grow their rental division.

All photos courtesy ATOMIC unless otherwise noted



"To really be given the bandwidth to run and do what you think, the responsibility of that is super energizing to me."

—Rob Barber

Barber knew right away that there was something different about ATOMIC. "It was really a match made in heaven, to be honest with you," he told *Special Events* (SE). "I knew almost right away that this is where I wanted to be." He continued, "The reason I say that is, I really was being brought into this as this person who could be innovative and really not have his hands tied."

As a company that does live event production, design, set construction, and modular rental scenery, the freedom to be extremely innovative and free-thinking is a high value at ATOMIC, and that freedom is what made Barber thrive. "To really be given the bandwidth to run and do what you think, the responsibility of that is super energizing to me."

In the next few years, he was set to the task of opening several locations across the globe and co-leading the development of 12 new product launches per year. Straight out the gate, they told him they didn't think he could actually

Set for the 2019
My Legends Awards.



Taylor Swift performs in front
of ATOMIC's FASTwall
fir trees at iHeartRadio
Jingle Ball 2017.



Panel backdrop from
iHeartRadio Jingle Ball 2017
dazzles behind
Elliot at the 2019
Songwriters Hall of Fame.



For the 2017 iHeartRadio Jingle
Ball, the ATOMIC team created
Christmas tree pieces.

AN INNOVATIVE ICON



meet all these goals, which only fueled his fire. “One of the best ways to get me to do something is to tell me I can’t do it.”

That was in 2010. Since then, Barber has worked on 12 product lines and 110 products, and has contributed to 28,802 shows, and on top of all that, his team celebrates 13 industry-related design awards along with multiple patents. He’s worked with top-tier, A-list clients, including NBC, Warner Bros., Discovery, Hulu, *The Talk*, and *Ellen*, as well as on tours for artists like Madonna, Usher, Elton John, Miranda Lambert, and Mötley Crüe. He’s even led a team that started a new company during the pandemic.

Spacekit

If you ask Barber what he’s most proud of over the course of his career, he’ll tell you about [Spacekit](#), a modular wall art system company that he and his team started at the peak of COVID-19, but he’ll wrap that conversation in high praise for his team.

When it was clear that the pandemic was only beginning, the ATOMIC team set out to find new markets to apply their skills to. But instead of switching gears to make hand sanitizer or gowns, they had a better idea.

“We’re a bunch of creatives and we need to create. And even though, with live events, we wouldn’t see it for probably two years, we’re gonna create,” Barber told *SE*.

(Above) ATOMIC’s Pippa Supercolumn and table toppers could be spotted at the Opening Night Party during Catersource + The Special Event 2022. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces

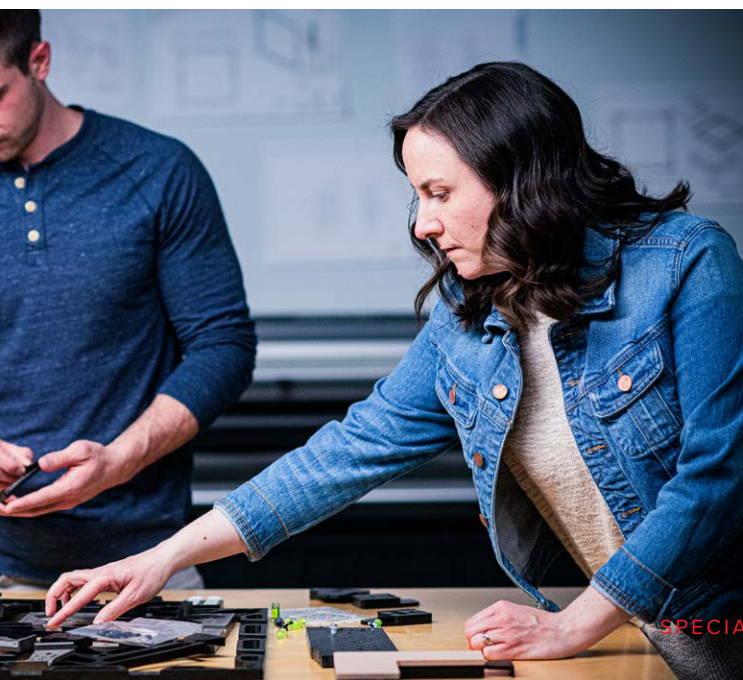


An ATOMIC set shines behind Steve Martin and Martin Short on the set of the 2017 Mark Twain Prize Awards.



(Right) If you ask Rob Barber what he’s most proud of over the course of his career, he’ll tell you about his team that designed Spacekit, a modular wall art system company that he and his team started at the peak of COVID-19.





Barber and his team took everything they'd learned about creating modular systems over the past years and applied that knowledge outside of live events, developing a system of interior design products for homes and businesses.

"The reason I say I'm so proud of it is because I never saw a team pull together more than they did then, and we were energized, smiling, and creative in the middle of a worldwide pandemic when there was no reason to be laughing and creating. We all had so many difficult decisions in front of us, both personally and professionally, yet it was powerfully therapeutic for our entire team. I'm really proud that we found such strength and purpose in the midst of such adversity."

A creative connection

Barber is the first to admit that he's taken an odd, nontraditional career route. But he agrees that creativity is the thread that has strung each experience together.

"Ever since I was a child, and long before school, I just had this obsession with tinkering and building things, but it's almost like a Lego® mentality, it's this modularity in all things." From computer code to design sets, the key word for Barber is modularity—he's always searching for that lowest common denominator. That's what makes ATOMIC the perfect fit, and that's what he carried with him in the launch of Spacekit.

"We've all been there I think at one point or another, it doesn't matter if it's an umbrella or, I don't know, something that you use at home every day, and you're like 'Why can't somebody make this better?'" He and his team obsess over that room for improvement, and while it's the company's philosophy, it's also his personal philosophy: "The more pain points I can alleviate for you, as the client, as the human, the more you want to work with me."

While he wears a lot of hats, these days, the majority of his clients are in the live events world, and he's familiarized himself with the challenges of live event production that don't need to be so challenging. He knows that event pros are constantly battling client budgets, and the biggest pain points are shipping, labor costs to install set pieces, hiring special carpenters, you know the drill—and he's eliminating those challenges by designing and building modular products that can be rented, no tools required. "You and I can build them on a six-pack of beer on a weekend and we don't have to be talented to put them together," he jokes. "It's all designed to pack like Pringles® chips."

For Barber, creativity is a way of living, and the inspiration comes from both being out of his element and in it. Traveling

Hear from Rob Barber in person at Catersource + The Special Event!

From Napkin Sketch to Show Day: What 14 Years, 12 Product Lines, 110 Products & 28,802 Shows Have Taught Me

Join Rob Barber as he unpacks some invaluable tips, tricks, and lessons learned from over a decade of crafting product lines, killer products, and over 28K electrifying shows. With game-changers and a touch of storytelling that'll revolutionize your workflow, this session promises to reshape your perspective in ways you never saw coming. Don't miss out!

Save your spot now at <https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/>

(Right) Rob Barber spoke at Catersource + The Special Event 2022 and will speak again in Austin, TX. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces



Rob Barber talks with event pro Michael Cerbelli during Michael Cerbelli's: The Hot List™ 2021 (which is back at this year's Catersource + The Special Event).

It's Time to Celebrate

Join us in celebrating this year's Leadership Award recipients at our annual Awards Ceremony on Thursday, February 15th at 5:30 p.m. on the Keynote Stage.

Considered by many to be the Oscars night of the events and catering industry, during the Awards Ceremony the Leadership, ACE, Gala, and CATIE awards are bestowed upon the best of the best in our industry. Cheer on the nominees and applaud award recipients as they take the stage to accept our industry's highest honors!

Congratulations to this year's winners and we look forward to celebrating with everyone this February!

More information can be found at <https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/>



Rob Barber and his wife Deborah receive the 2019 Medal of Honor during the 37th Commencement ceremony for Pennsylvania College of Art & Design, where they gave the commencement speech.

is one thing that inspires him: “My best ‘ah ha’ moments always seem to happen when I’m on the road. It’s the total immersion in new countries, cultures, values, and expressions that gets my creative juices flowing.” But by the same token, he finds inspiration in his everyday world, often where he least expects it. “Inspiration is everywhere,” he says, “and it can come from the most unexpected places. Like, the up-close, center-most pattern of a sunflower or the precise geometric shape of a bee’s honeycomb.” With his eyes wide open, creativity finds him anywhere.

The decision to give back

Years ago, Barber and his wife moved from the suburbs to the city, and in doing so, made the conscious decision to take an active role in their community and industry, where they could give back and connect more.

He serves locally on the board of the Lancaster County Community Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to growing Lancaster County through philanthropic giving, as well as, nationally on the board of the Parnelli Awards, which recognizes achievements in the concert and touring sector.

And his latest contribution includes a recently published essay in the book, *Lights on Lancaster* by John R Gerdy.

“I’ve had the opportunity to speak both domestically and internationally on the topics of design, creativity, and leadership and I’ll be speaking at [CS+TSE in February 2024](#). I’ve even had the opportunity to deliver the commencement speech at the PA College of Art & Design Graduation Ceremony, something I would have never imagined.”

Barber’s topics often cover creativity, teamwork, and design thinking, giving his audience a glimpse into his mind and the ways he’s found success. (See opposite page to learn about his session at this year’s Catersource + The Special Event.)

While public speaking doesn’t come naturally to Barber, it’s just one more area to challenge himself and navigate creatively. “Truth be told, I’ve always been super-nervous at the thought of any kind of public speaking. So about five years ago I set the goal of facing that fear. I’m proud of the gains I’ve made but there’s always room to improve.”

It’s easy to see how facing fears, looking for improvement, staying open to inspiration, and valuing teamwork have made Barber the industry leader that he is today. “It’s just been a super wild ride,” says Barber. We are honored to name him the *Special Events* Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient and excited to keep watching his career shine. ●



Positive Predictions

27 prominent event pros weigh in with
their forecast for the upcoming year

2024 is upon us, and as we reflect on the past year and prepare for the new one, we've asked industry thought leaders to reflect on 2023 and to share their predictions on the trends, challenges, and positives they expect to see over the next 12 months. —Amanda Nicklaus

1. **Adrienne Harris**, Planner & Designer, Adrienne Harris

The fear of the online direct-to-consumer purchasing power, which allows couples more control over their wedding planning, is coming to an end. There are fresh new opportunities for innovation and new ways to serve couples that are rewarding for everyone.

The wedding industry, especially within bridal fashion, is adapting to meet the growing demand for inclusive services that cater to culture, size diversity, and the genuine interests of the couple getting married.

Color is still key! Sophisticated meaningful wedding aesthetics are replacing traditional candy-coated seasonal soft pastels. This reflects the growing popularity of technology and the desire for something fresh and new.

2. **Amanda Ma**, Founder & CEO, Innovate Marketing Group

In 2024, the events industry will continue to push boundaries in customer experience. The focus will shift toward creating truly transformational experiences that leave attendees not only entertained but also changed in some meaningful way. This may involve the integration of cutting-edge technologies, personalized content, and immersive environments to make events more memorable and impactful.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) efforts will continue to be woven into events. Event organizers will actively work to ensure representation and inclusivity in speakers, teams, suppliers, and attendees. The success of an event will be closely tied to its ability to foster an inclusive environment.

Brands will increasingly join forces to create synergy and cross-promote their products or services. These partnerships will extend beyond sponsorship to co-creating content and experiences that resonate with a broader audience. Such collaborations will not only enhance the event's offerings but also provide valuable exposure for the participating brands.

3. **Bobby Dutton**, Founder, Owner, & Director, GBM6

We've all been on a roller coaster these past few years. We've been forced to reflect, adapt, and survive. As we launch into 2024, it's time to put the uncertainty behind us and embrace who we have become—as businesses, as leaders, as individuals, and as an industry.

Our core values have served us well, so let's let them fuel us into the next great phase of our world. We each know what we're great at. Let's own it. Let's sing it from the rooftops. Let's shine the spotlight unapologetically in all the right places. Let's create new connections between virtuosos to create new events and traditions on a whole new level.



4. **Brian Green**, Principal & Chief Executive Officer, ByBrianGreen

As Chairman of the National Society of Black Wedding & Event Professionals, I would definitely say that the event industry is becoming more aware of the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in meaningful ways that go beyond the initial clumsy approaches to DEI we saw back in 2020 that came—most of the time without a definite plan of action. In 2024, I expect that more event organizers will make a deliberate effort to create diverse and inclusive events. This will involve inviting vendors and speakers and creating platforms and programs that are more focused on the diversity in the room.

5. **Brit Bertino**, CSEP, CGSP, Event Planner & Founder, BritBertinoEvents

The special event industry stands at a pivotal moment, where sustainability takes center stage. Amidst challenges, particularly in ensuring stringent safety measures, the industry champions eco-conscious practices like contactless check-ins and well-ventilated venues, safeguarding both attendees and the planet. Adaptability shines through in the form of flexible booking and cancellation policies, offering a lifeline of reassurance for both planners and attendees in unpredictable times.

Crucially, the industry's vitality lies in its ability to curate personalized experiences. Leveraging technology, events are tailored to individual preferences, enhancing attendee satisfaction. Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality seamlessly integrate, promising immersive and interactive events. Moreover, there is a conscientious shift towards cultural experiences and corporate social responsibility, transforming events into platforms championing diverse cultures and social causes.

This delicate balance between innovation, responsibility, and well-being defines the special event industry's trajectory, promising an enthralling and impactful journey ahead.

6. **Cindy Brewer**, Principal, LEO Events

In 2024, relationships rule! Events will benefit from still-rising appreciation for in-person interaction and shared experience. Continued adoption of technology that enhances many interactions will also drive people to seek out organic and human-centric experiences.

Fueled by supplier diversity managers, procurement will make inclusivity a deciding factor in how companies select partners, venues, and destinations.

AI will be more visible and more prevalent. Last year's trendy tools are next year's bona fide best practices. But never forget, in live experience, authentic is superior to artificial—and audiences know the difference.



Brian Green



Brit Bertino



Cindy Brewer

7. Dan Farrell, Vice President
- Midwest, Marquee Event
Rentals; Event Rental Shared
Interest Group Chair, American
Rental Association

Weddings are returning to a steady pace and following a more traditional seasonality. As supply chains open up, new inventory is more accessible and seating, furniture, and high-end tabletops will take the lead in demand. It is important for the event rental industry to recognize those needs and offer fresh sustainable product lines. Event rental companies are eager to grow in 2024 and they will be bold in their strategies.

Many in the event rental industry entered 2023 with a hesitant outlook because the possibility of recession was strong and developing a workforce was a challenge. I believe the threat of recession has decreased and a workforce was more available than forecasted. My prediction for 2024 would be a stabilization of events with a competitive eye on budgets now that the shock of inflation has subsided. It is important for special event professionals to understand that rising production and asset costs may cause a need for re-evaluation of event budgets.

8. David Merrell, CEO &
Creative Director, AOO Events

Corporate demand has waned slightly in the past six months as the corporate world adjusts to post-COVID demand. It is getting re-settled and re-prioritized back to a place where events have ROI and purpose. I believe we are all feeling that pullback now as corporations

adjust, and labor forces in industries such as automobile industries, hotels, hospitals, and Hollywood renegotiate and come to new understandings. This is not about behavior due to recession fears, but more about a course correct from the new challenges that came from the COVID epidemic. I believe that this slight pullback will continue for about the next six months, and then we are going to see an increase in events and RFPs moving forward in the second part of the year 2024. 2025 is going to be off the hook as all restrictions, adjustments, etc. are finally worked out and the economy comes back full throttle.

9. Deborah Elias, CSEP,
CMP, CIS, President & Chief
Experience Officer, Elias Events

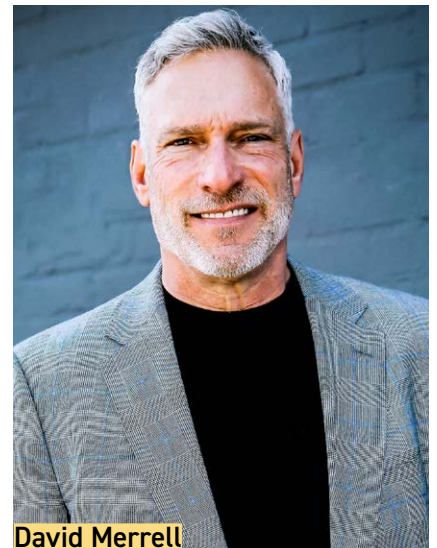
I predict that AI will revolutionize events in the following ways:

Autonomous technology will become increasingly prevalent at live events. This will include robots serving food and drinks, vending machines capable of distributing on-demand products, and even AI-generated emcees to host events. These advancements will enhance efficiency and the overall attendee experience.

AI will play a significant role in generating event proposals. One key aspect will be the ability to create visual representations of original ideas. For instance, instead of searching the internet for a suitable image, AI-powered software like MidJourney will allow event planners to easily generate custom visuals, making it simpler to convey concepts and ideas effectively.



Dan Farrell



David Merrell



Deborah Elias

POSITIVE PREDICTIONS

10. Ian Ramirez, CSEP, Venue Director, Madera Estates

The wedding industry is set to witness a force of newly engaged Gen Z couples burst onto the scene, ready to bend traditions and redefine weddings as we know them. As an industry, we should be prepared for:

Longer buying cycles. Gen Z is research-driven, so having an expectation of an impulse buy or employing a hard sell may not work with them. Always add value and employ a layered follow-up approach, including texting, social media DMs, and automated email campaigns that can last up to six months.

Destination weddings within the U.S. As this price-savvy, wanderlusting generation takes center stage, destination weddings will continue to rise in popularity in 2024. And not just outside of the U.S.! As costs continue to rise from coast to coast, Gen Z has realized that their dollars can go a lot further in other states. Venues and vendors alike should not ignore the opportunity to market to couples that live in more expensive states!

11. Jaclyn Watson, Owner & Principal Planner, Jaclyn Watson Events

Technology will play an even more significant role in wedding planning for 2024. Couples are increasingly relying on wedding planning apps, virtual reality tours of venues, and AI-powered tools to help streamline the planning process. These innovations have made it easier for couples to navigate the complexities of wedding planning, from managing budgets to selecting vendors and creating digital guest lists to having a virtual tour of what their wedding day will look like! It has also been a powerful tool for vendors, allowing them to be more

creative with their clients and show them a bird's eye view of what they are thinking.

One more prediction in the flower sector: We are predicting that texture is going to come into play more than ever before. Couples now want immersive experiences for their guests and are using various textures, shapes, and both real and dried flowers. The asymmetrical arbors and more wildflower looks are here to stay.

12. JC York, President & COO, Classic Entertainment / Wise Guys InterACTIVE

Within the entertainment side of things, I see an increase across the board for all, even though some may have already seen that increase. Corporate events are coming back and are willing, once again, to pay for the engagement that comes with entertainment, as well as see the value. I do believe we will continue to see a rise in business direct with venues as they themselves have shifted to include entertainment as an added value to their daily operations or wanting to offer more to their guests and attendees. And while not necessarily new, I believe there will be a continued increase in demand for interactive engagement.

And as a positive note, I know that our industry will continue to support its own and rally around one another. Be it working together with partners, reestablishing previous working relationships, and even working side by side with companies like their own (coopetition); as well as supporting those within our industry who find themselves in situations that are deemed a crisis or catastrophic need and supporting those who help our industry, like the [SEARCH Foundation](#).



Ian Ramirez



Jaclyn Watson



JC York



Jeff Crotto

13. Jeff Crotto, President, All About Events; President-Elect, American Rental Association

It used to be common for clients to copy what they saw at another event. Now we're seeing an increased demand for unique or one-of-a-kind decor items. With event rental, it is possible to have some customizable options. One popular item is a customizable bar that clients can change out panels on the face of the bar with different designs, colors, or materials to match the pattern and hues they want. Tents with custom draping/lighting are in demand as outdoor events have had staying power from the pandemic.

14. Jeniffer Bello, CMP, President/CEO, JB Experiences

In the realm of experiential events for 2024, the trend is to craft experiences that transcend the ordinary and deeply resonate with attendees' emotions. Brands and companies are increasingly focusing on delivering larger-than-life experiences. It's not just about conveying information but creating immersive, personalized experiences that linger long after the event concludes. When attendees reflect on their time at the event, they should vividly recall sensory details, sounds, and sights, leaving them with a sense that the experience was transformative.

15. Kristin Banta, Founder & Creative Director, Kristin Banta Events

Environmental consciousness is quickly becoming the norm and with that, sustainable events are as well. From social to corporate events, event producers and their clients will work to reduce their carbon footprint by incorporating eco-friendly practices, from digital promotion and sustainable swag to sourcing locally and reducing waste.



Jeniffer Bello



Kristin Banta

Hear More Perspectives from the Pros

You can get even more insight from these industry professionals when they present during this year's Catersource + The Special Event:

- [Adrianne Harris](#)
- [Bobby Dutton](#)
- [Brian Green](#)
- [David Merrell](#)
- [Deborah Elias](#)
- [Ian Ramirez](#)
- [Jaclyn Watson](#)
- [JC York](#)
- [Jeniffer Bello](#)
- [Kristin Banta](#)
- [Laura Cardo](#)
- [Leah Weinberg](#)
- [Lenny Talarico](#)
- [Meagan Culkin](#)
- [Michael Cerbelli](#)
- [Miro Diamanté](#)
- [Suzanne Morrell](#)
- [Teri Jakob](#)
- [Tim Altbaum](#)

POSITIVE PREDICTIONS

16. Laura Cardo, Director of Client Relations & Brand Management, Kristin Banta Events

Like it or not, I predict that AI-driven technology will continue to be on the rise and will continue to be integrated into events in order to enhance personalization, content recommendations, real-time assistance, and immersive experiences for all attendees.

17. Leah Weinberg, Esq., Co-Founder & Partner, Oduberg Law, LLP

For 2024, I predict that event professionals are going to invest more in the legal side of their business, from strengthening their contracts to auditing their classification of employees and independent contractors to starting a relationship with a business attorney *before* they actually need one. In 2023, we saw the issues our firm's clients were having with *their* clients, so going into the new year, event pros are going to want to be more proactive in preventing those situations from occurring in the first place. And the best way to do that is by having a solid client service agreement in place, implementing

strong systems and processes that allow pros to better serve their clients, and placing a lot of emphasis on delivering the best experience possible to their clients.

18. Lenny Talarico, CSEP, CHE, Chief Experiential Architect, Lenny Talarico Events

Despite the post-pandemic resurgence of live events, I anticipate growth for in-person attendance. Face-to-face interaction remains strong; however, due to budget and time constraints, events may become more concise in duration.

I think we will continue to see an emphasis on events that foster personal connections, providing opportunities for deeper interpersonal engagement.

Hybrid options will still exist since some attendees prefer remote participation when physical presence isn't feasible.

Corporate and incentive travel are poised to surge as we confirm the irreplaceable value of in-person peer interactions; however, geopolitical issues will have an impact on travel destinations.

Turnaround times will remain shortened, leaving event planners with limited room for price negotiations with condensed planning windows.



Laura Cardo



Leah Weinberg



Lenny Talarico

Want to hear more from these industry leaders?
Register

Catersource + The Special Event, the premier gathering for professionals in the catering and events industries, to be held February 12-15, 2024 in Austin, TX. We hope to see you there!

19. Mara Mazdzer,

President, WIPA; Owner, Event Planner, & Designer, Fuse Weddings

2024 is going to continue to see couples planning weddings that fit their vision for their celebration, forgoing traditions, norms, and expectations that don't align with their priorities. We'll continue to see non-traditional wedding parties, or weddings without wedding parties altogether. Couples will continue to nix traditional elements like parent dances or dads walking daughters down the aisle if their family dynamics make that complicated. Cake cuttings, bouquet tosses, and garter tosses will also continue to dwindle in frequency as couples settle into planning an event that feels like an authentic reflection of them.

We're seeing a steady hold on an abundance of entertainment at weddings. Long gone are the days of the simple question of "DJ vs band" as couples today plan for a band and a DJ in addition to other talent acts to surprise and delight guests. Arrival musicians that differ from the ceremony musicians but double as the cocktail hour talent are very popular at the moment. Big bands followed by a DJ for the late night and after party are also a standard request we see, as couples often have three to four talent acts booked for their big day.

20. Meagan Culkin,

Owner, Magnolia Collective

As a wedding planner and designer, I am always paying close attention to the trends and shifts in focus of the couples who are planning their weddings. In

the last year or so, we have seen more of an intentional shift towards **smaller scale weddings** in terms of the event size, often ranging from 50-80 guests. We have also noticed a dramatic shift toward smaller wedding parties of only a Maid of Honor and Best Man, and in some cases, no wedding party members at all.

We have noticed couples leaning away from the overly luxurious floral installations, but are leaning more toward intimate dinner party aesthetics, with understated florals and table lamps. The elevated client experience continues to remain a priority, and we've seen a shift toward thematic weddings, which I think is a trend that will continue as well.

21. Michael Cerbelli, CEO & President, Cerbelli Creative

As far as trends go, hybrid events, which combine in-person and virtual elements, are expected to continue to be popular in 2024. Immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), are being used by event planners to create more engaging and interactive experiences for attendees. For example, VR can be used to give attendees a virtual tour of a venue or event, while AR can be used to overlay digital information onto the real world. Event planners are also using data and analytics to make better decisions about everything from event content to marketing and promotion.

Despite the challenges, the events industry is expected to be successful in 2024. People are eager to get back in person and attend events, and event planners are finding new and innovative ways to meet the needs of their attendees.



Mara Mazdzer



Meagan Culkin



Michael Cerbelli

POSITIVE PREDICTIONS

22. Miro Diamanté, Director, Event Services, Accent Indy, a DMC Network Company

As we step into 2024, the special event industry is poised for an exciting transformation. One of the most striking trends we anticipate is the continued dominance of bespoke requests for themes and experiences. Gone are the days of canned themes and generic mood boards; today's guests crave events tailored perfectly to their likes and interests. Pop culture is set to maintain its stronghold on event trends with the influence from the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically the ballroom and drag cultures. We foresee these cultures making waves in the realms of fashion, music, and entertainment, shaping event experiences that are both vibrant and inclusive. Successful event planners in 2024 will go a step further by incorporating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives and drawing inspiration from various cultures to create fully immersive and well-rounded experiences that are welcoming and inviting. These events will not only be brimming with rich cultural elements but also shine a spotlight on marginalized communities, empowering them to be visible and financially successful. This shift towards greater inclusivity and authenticity promises to make 2024 a dynamic and exciting year for the special event industry.

23. Shaun Gray, Managing Member, Shaun Gray Events, LLC

As we gear up for 2024, my positive prediction for the wedding industry is that authenticity will reign supreme! Don't get me wrong, a polished and stunning event will never go out of style, but more than ever, couples are on the hunt for service providers who bring genuine

passion and individuality to the table. They don't just want a cookie-cutter celebration; they want their wedding to be a true reflection of their own unique love story.

So what does this mean for us as wedding and event planners? It's time to get real. Drop the salesy jargon and connect on a human level. Showcase not just the picture-perfect weddings you've pulled off, but also the heart and soul you pour into your work. Couples appreciate when you share the challenges you've overcome to make a wedding day special—it proves you're invested, adaptable, and, most importantly, human.

The bottom line is, if you're authentic in your approach and true to yourself, you'll not only resonate with today's couples but also create a memorable experience that's meaningful for everyone involved. Let's make 2024 the year of authentic celebrations!

24. Suzanne Morrell, MBA, SEPC, Blue Advisor, Owner & Founder, Creating Environments

With growing attention to ESG around the globe, we're going to see talk turn into action. With scrutiny of greenwashing, and the fear of losing business by green hushing, the event industry must take active steps towards accountability, transparency, and commitment to sustainability.

Sustainability plans: narratives communicating climate commitments will become commonplace and required for some RFPs. All event stakeholders, from AV companies to caterers to décor companies, must have sustainability statements. Your contractors matter and impact your opportunities in maintaining clients.

Counting Carbon: Just as we have to keep within a financial budget with events, we're going to have to get used to budgeting carbon emissions, and water usage as well. One of the



Miro Diamanté



Shaun Gray



Suzanne Morrell



Teri Jakob

top changes we can make is to reduce food loss and waste by choosing lower carbon emitting menus, procure locally, reduce overproduction, and donate and compost where available. Next is to look for climate friendly venues in locations that have resources in place to make producing events sustainably part of the plan, so we can focus on what we do best.

25. Teri Jakob, CMP, CMM, Associate Director, Special Events, UPMC Pinnacle Foundation

One of the foremost fundraising event trends is the continued rise of virtual and hybrid fundraising events. The success of online fundraisers has demonstrated their efficacy, and organizations have embraced these formats to reach broader audiences, reduce costs, and improve accessibility.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning play a pivotal role in identifying donor preferences and tailoring fundraising strategies accordingly. Nonprofits that leverage technology and data to personalize their fundraising approaches while maintaining transparency and accountability in their financial stewardship will be the ones to excel.

Additionally, sustainability and social responsibility will be central themes in the fundraising landscape of 2024. Donors are becoming increasingly conscientious about the environmental impact of events, and organizations will be under pressure to adopt eco-friendly practices and transparent reporting. People are looking to feel engaged and inspired; they are more selective about where they spend not just their dollars,

but also their time. Donors want to give to organizations that align with their personal values and provide a sense of community and togetherness. In essence, the ability to harness the evolving landscape and blend tradition with innovation will be the key to success in the ever-changing world of fundraising events in 2024.

26. Thomas Serrano, CEO & Founder, Exclamation Group

Luxury clients' events (my expertise) will remain strong to support revenue overall in the USA, with even more limited editions and special collections to purchase at the event only. I also predict the 2024 Olympics in Paris will have a halo effect for the event industry in the USA. Finally, The Sphere in Las Vegas will boost the entertainment industry and Las Vegas as a destination!

27. Tim Altbaum, CMP, CMM, CEO, Vario Productions

Attendees have increasingly high expectations for the audio/visual and event production aspects of meetings and events. They want experiences that are engaging, interactive, and memorable. This can be challenging to achieve, especially for large events.

Event organizers are increasingly using data and analytics to measure the success of their events. This is putting pressure on all suppliers in the events industry to collect and track data that can be used to measure the effectiveness of their work, while being mindful of data privacy laws and the risk collecting such data presents. ●



Thomas Serrano



Tim Altbaum

CONFET

Here We Are Entertain U

Seattle Grunge Party Hits all the Right Notes

By Kathleen Stoehr



(Above, left) Fresh Seared Sea Scallop, Apple Gastrique, Micro Sorrel; (Middle) Welcome beverages and snacks included Rainier Beer & Mini Champagne Splits provided by Tuxedos & Tennis Shoes, and, provided by Lisa Dupar Catering, Bacon Beer Glazed Nut Mix with Crisp Applewood Smoked Bacon, Toasted Almonds, Salted Cashews, and Chili Spiced Beer Glaze; (Bottom, left) Bountiful market produce from Jon the Farmer overflowed; (Opening photo) A Seattle backdrop was created throughout the evening for attendees to pose in front of.

TTI

e Now, S



All photos courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos

This past November, two Seattle catering and event companies were tasked with bringing the vibe of their city to attendees from across the U.S. and abroad at an annual executive summit. But not any attendee: these are the crème de la crème of catering and events companies, a consortium of the most successful hospitality companies from each region of the U.S. Let's just say that "one-upmanship" is a hallmark of the Leading Caterers of America executive summits each year, so throwing parties for peers can be intimidating (but fun).

An obstacle: the event was to be held at DSquared Hospitality/Tuxedos and Tennis Shoes Catering's commissary—a facility currently undergoing a major expansion. Earlier in the year, walls were being knocked down, new offices were being built—would the space be ready in time? Not to worry—DSquared Hospitality and its partner Lisa Dupar Catering put together a night to remember as they replicated the famed Pike Place Market inside the building.

Seattle grunge was the inspiration, with attendees garbed in all iterations of ratty band t-shirts, flannel shirts, ripped jeans, boots, and Converse tennies. A soundtrack from the '90s played hits from Nirvana, Hole, Pearl Jam, and others when local band Fruit Juice took a break. This casual atmosphere made for the best of events—upbeat and full of laughter and conversation—while people mingled through the kitchen, venue, and warehouse, sampling the distinct cuisines and styles of Seattle neighborhoods that give the city its collective flavor.

The parking lot became an area filled with pizza ovens, buskers, jugglers, and other totable snacks—mostly inside tents, due to the Seattle drizzle. An open bar with signature cocktail The Last Word (a Prohibition-era cocktail made a cult classic by famed Seattle bartender Murray Stenson, who had passed just weeks prior) plus other libations kept people lubricated, kitchen spaces were turned into inviting serving areas, reception was a dazzling display of Dupar-crafted chocolate with small logoed to-go bags to stuff with barks and balls, and stilt-walkers dressed as the Seattle Space Needle posed for selfies as roller girls twirled through the event with delicious bites of all kinds.

It was an evening to be remembered, a success, a win. Or, in the words of Kurt Cobain, Dave Grohl, and Krist Novoselic's *Smells Like Teen Spirit*:

*And for this gift I feel blessed
Our little group it's always been
And always will until the end
Hello, hello, hello*



CONFETTI



(Clockwise from above) Seattle band, Fruit Juice, cranked out music throughout the night; The Last Word was the official cocktail of the evening (gin, green Chartreuse, Maraschino liqueur, lime juice, brandied cherry garnish); DSquared Hospitality created a rockband-style poster touting the event and all of its sponsors; a kitchen "snack" of Grilled Teriyaki Chicken, Steamed Jasmine Rice, and Pickled Vegetable Salad.





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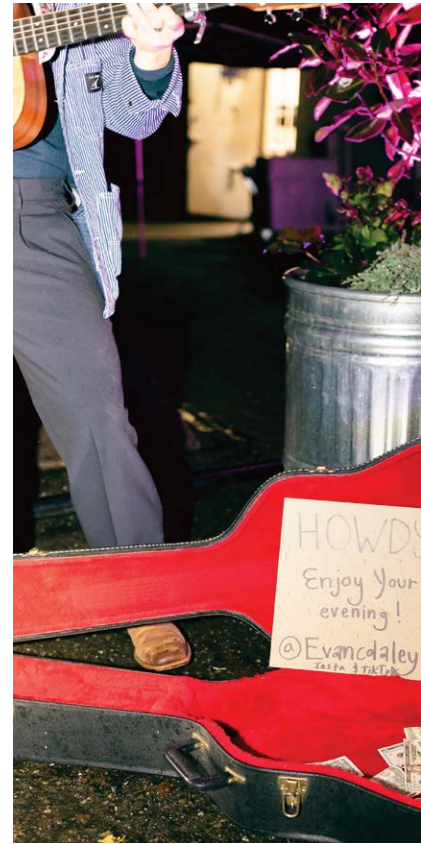
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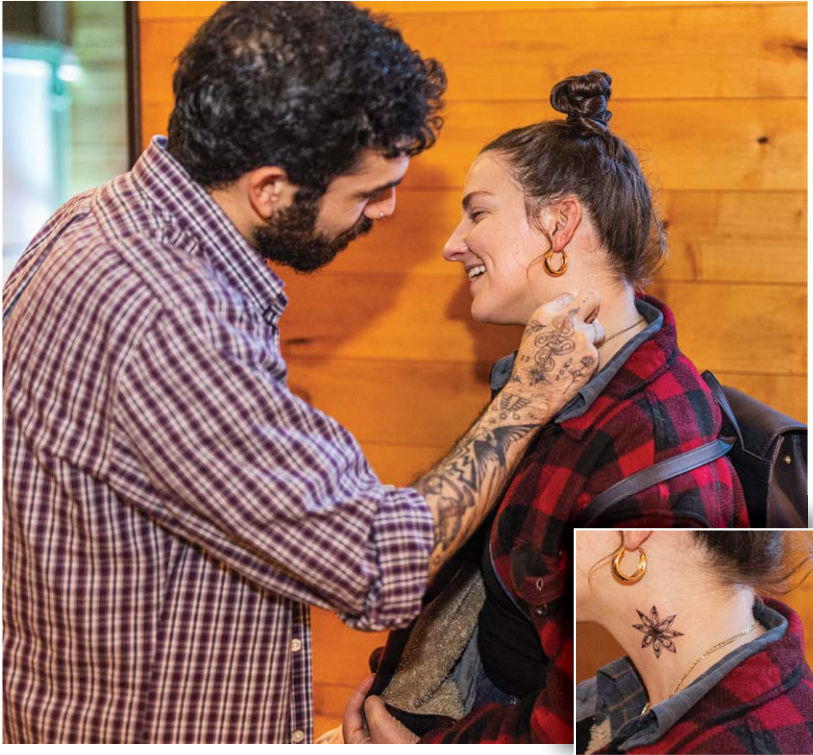
CONFETTI



(Clockwise from above) A recreated Pike Place Market with circular bar in the center; a talented busker greeted guests upon entry; temporary tattoos of the DSquared logo were a great way to broadcast the event host's brand; band stickers were placed on tables and found their way onto shirts, foreheads, and more; instead of hiding the more "unsavory" areas of the venue, DSquared embraced each room with terrific signage; a bread display in the market—guests could grab a loaf to bring home at the end of the evening.



CONFETTI





(Clockwise from upper left, previous page)

A variety of temporary tattoos were made available to attendees;

At the Northwest Small Plate Station, Cedar Plank Roasted Salmon was served with fry bread and toasted Hazelnut pesto;

Hama Hama local oysters on the half shell served with classic mignonette sauce and a selection of hot sauces were fresh, briny (due to the fall season), and delicious and I'm dying writing this caption because I want more right now;

Bartenders clad in Beastie Boys and Guns 'n Roses tees, caps, and flannels served the best of Manhattans, martinis, and all iterations of the finest in non-alcoholic selections as well.

CONFETTI





(Clockwise from upper left, previous page)

An attractive wall composed of tea and honeysticks, postcards, market shopping bags enticed all;

Stilt walkers dressed like the Seattle Space Needle activated the space, danced, posed for photos, and generally kept the energy flowing;

A final dessert station included Lisa Dupar Catering's (LDC) Mountains of Chocolate Bark including Almond Dark, Hazelnut Milk, Cashew White (shown) as well as LDC's Tumbled Nuts (Almond Dark, Hazelnut Milk, Ruby Peanut) and House Cracker Jaxx (Caramel Corn with Pistachios & Dried Cherries drizzled with Dark & White Chocolate);

A beverage station for everything non-alcoholic included Lemon Basil water, Orange Mint water, and Lavendar Lemonade. Cans of soda on ice could be found in drawers; assorted glassware was colorful and fun to choose from.



Monday event sponsors included

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(Clockwise from left) At the International Station biscuits were unapologetically displayed on special choices for attendees to sample, and bring home. Mushrooms, Greens & Herbs with Ginger Ponzu, and western Washington on the Olympic Peninsula.



...y, Tuxedos & Tennis Shoes' rolling dim sum cart presented Beef Bao Buns from Lisa Dupar Catering; in the kitchen, petite
...eed racks, then applied with honey butter via a pastry bag; Sno-Valley Mushrooms Market Stand offered an eye-popping array
...ome; A tasty sample from the Sno-Valley Mushroom Stand was Sno-Valley Mushroom Rice Paper Fresh Rolls with Preserved
...u Dip; A bartender boasts a Hoh Rain Forest t-shirt—Hoh being one of the largest temperate rainforests in the U.S., located in
...a. And besides the cool tee-shirt, he also mixed really great beverages for the guests.

AS SEEN IN *Grand Rapids*

On a recent familiarization (FAM) trip as a guest of the Amway Grand Plaza as well as the JW Marriott, *Special Events* was invited to experience the rising destination that is Grand Rapids, Michigan. Between touring the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park and the Downtown Market, relaxing in the newly renovated Celeste and Seraphina hotel spas, enjoying pickleball lessons, walking the ArtPrize festival, and feasting on the finest of food and beverages, the trip was a great insight into the city's social scene. With beautification projects revitalizing the destination and plenty of cultural offerings all around, Grand Rapids is a hidden gem that is a worthy spot to host your next event. ●

—Amanda Nicklaus

All photos courtesy *Special Events* staff unless otherwise noted.



Veuve Clicquot at the Amway Grand Plaza gave FAM trip guests a taste of Michigan, including this Tuna Crudo in Ice Bowl, which was paired with a lighter take on a Negroni (in honor of Negroni Week which was also taking place).



(Left and Right) On an annual competition that lasts for weeks, art installers fill the city's public spaces, and artists showcase their work.

(Right) One of the must-see art installations at the Meijer Gardens.





(top) The FAM trip during ArtPrize, an international art festival and cultural event that runs for 18 days. During this time, temporary exhibitions are set up across outdoor and indoor spaces and attendees can vote for their favorite pieces.

One of Grand Rapids' venues is the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park.

Ranked in the top 45 most-visited art museums worldwide, the sculpture collection features more than 200 works spread over 150 acres of horticulture.

(Below) The Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park holds several event spaces, including this greenhouse which was decorated with fall harvest items, including pumpkins, apples, and chrysanthemums.

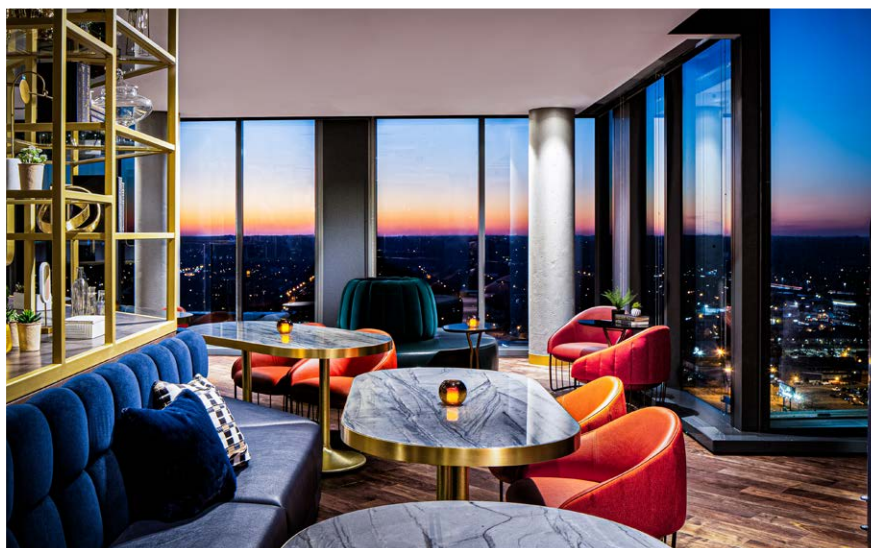


AS SEEN IN *Grand Rapids*

(Top right) MDRD at the Amway Grand Plaza displays beautiful rooftop views of this rising destination.

(Middle) At the four-course dinner at Margaux, guests were treated to the restaurant's take on the tinned fish trend: Bela mackerel accompanied by cornichons, pickled cauliflower, olives, and house-made crackers.

(Below) Looking for a different way to decorate tables? The Amway's Veuve Clicquot tasting room table was set with an artistic display of fresh baked bread, high-quality olive oil, and pickles for guests to munch on between courses.



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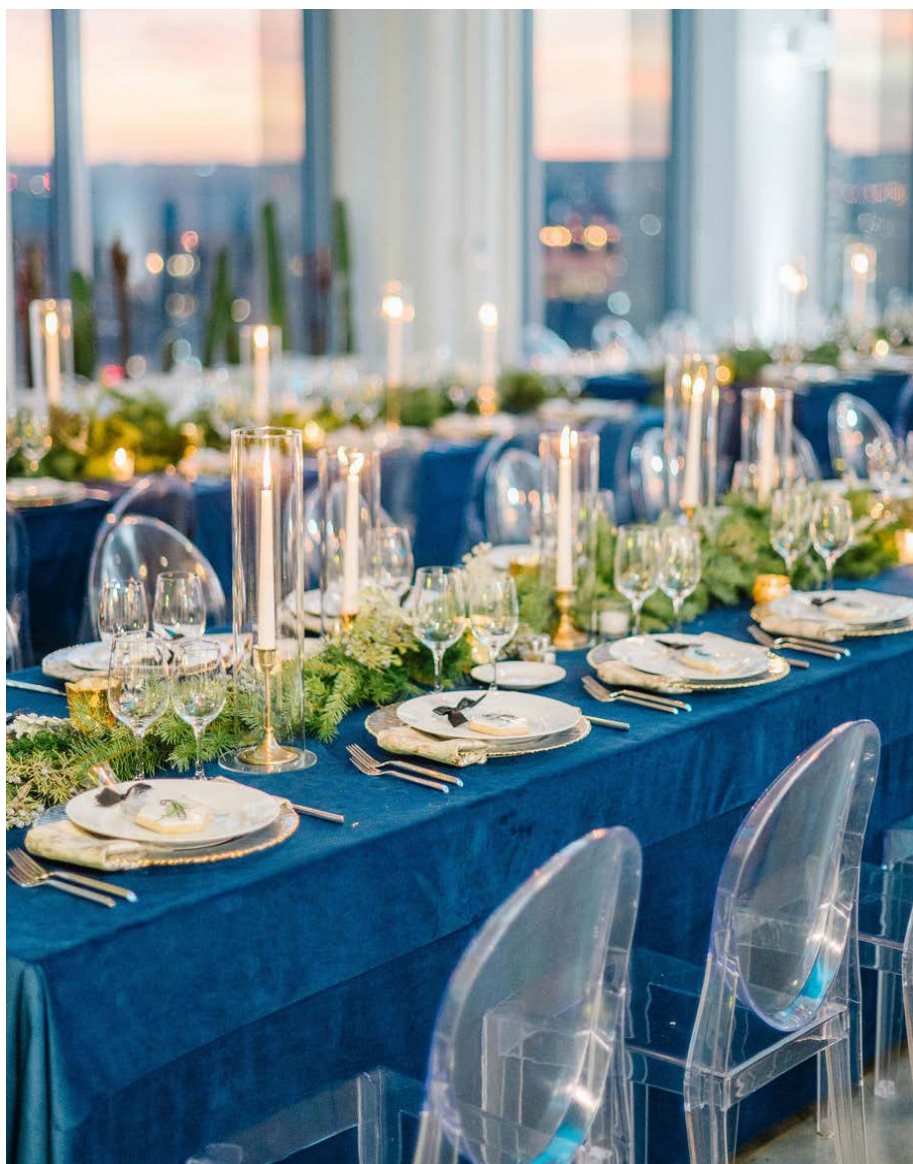
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STEAL THIS



Blue is a cool-hued color that fits a winter palette, but the right tone (like this tablecloth from Vida Events) creates a warm setting | Photo courtesy Anna and Mateo



All winter long, evergreen branches make for great floral décor | Event by Chowgirls Catering | Photo courtesy Lucas Botz



Invitations are the first place to set the scene of the dress | Photo courtesy Momental Designs



Christmas trees painted onto champagne flutes gives an holiday theme into the smallest of details | Photo courtesy

Deck The Halls

There's a reason everyone loves decorating for the holidays. This special time of year is steeped in sentiment, and while traditional décor stirs up nostalgia, there's plenty of room for creativity and innovation. Here are some fresh ideas for celebrating the holiday season and keeping the magic alive. ● — *Amanda Nicklaus*



any winter event | Design by and



old-fashioned feel and sneaks the
y Lynne Reznick Photography



White poppy anemone, white roses, and great masterwort against the green of eucalyptus and evergreens makes for a stunning winter bouquet | Photo courtesy Lynne Reznick Photography



STEAL THIS



A tablescape is the perfect place to bring in holiday colors, and candles add a magical touch | Photo courtesy Megan & Kenneth Photography



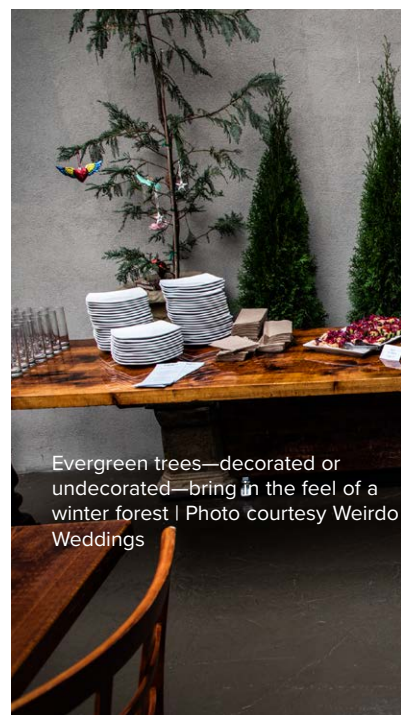
Sugar cookies with printed holiday symbols (Vida Events) | Photo courtesy Anna and Mateo



At Gala Award-winning event Merry Mary themed birthday party featured “elf works ornaments to bring home as a party favor



Even the menu can feature seasonal images



Evergreen trees—decorated or undecorated—bring in the feel of a winter forest | Photo courtesy Weirdo Weddings



Bash (Table 6 Productions), this pink Christmas-tops," where guests decorated cookie tins and glass | Photo courtesy Damon Tucci Photography



Cake toppers are a great place to bring in seasonal imagery | Photo courtesy WeirDo Weddings



ery | Menu by Momental Designs | The More We See



Nutcrackers, trees, and gifts are all classic holiday symbols that can get worked into functional décor | Photo courtesy Lynne Reznick Photography



STEAL THIS

At this holiday wedding, guests signed a Christmas tree skirt instead of a guest book. Talk about creating memorable holiday traditions! | Photo courtesy Lynne Reznick Photography



Florals can reflect popular holiday color schemes—think red and green for Christmas, blue and white for Hanukkah, and black, red, and green for Kwanzaa | Event by Bellwether Events | Photo courtesy Genevieve Leiper Photography



Bundles of mixed evergreens and vibrant red berries are a great replacement for summer florals | Photo courtesy Lynne Reznick Photography





Seasonal cocktail garnishes by Vida Events | Photo courtesy Anna and Mateo



Winter berries, greens, tiny flowers, and needly evergreens create an elegant winter boutonniere | Photo courtesy Lynne Reznick Photography



Take some time to contemplate what you want to change in 2024, whether it means more or less of something.

**Editor's Note: I could write an entire article about the contributions Meghan Ely has made to this publication, as well as our sister publication, Catersource. She was one of my first gifts of knowledge and assistance when I started my job in 2014, and I'll be forever grateful to her. You can see her speak at [Catersource + The Special Event](#) in Austin, TX February 12–15, 2024.*

Beyond the Beginning & End: My Leadership Lessons with WIPA

By Meghan Ely

If there is one thing that I've learned, it's that I'm really great at the middle of things.

You see, my origin stories tend to be lackluster. And, my endings aren't that much better, often channeling T.S. Eliot in a "whimper-not-a-bang" sort of way.

My WIPA International Board journey has followed suit. I was recruited with the promise of simply having to create the monthly newsletter. Now, after 2,722 days, 90 board meetings, and countless SOP revisions, I'm going to miss my last board meeting to get LASIK. Whimper, indeed.

So, for today, I want to focus on the middle—specifically, all the good stuff I soaked up. I hope the lessons I've learned provide you with a solid foundation for your leadership journey.

Recruit for your weaknesses

You are not great at everything, and the sooner you realize that, the further you will go. My initial challenge was obvious: I had zero chapter-specific experience. Once I got past the initial panic, I surrounded myself with people who knew better. I quickly realized that there's where progress lives—and aimed to fill my gaps.

Be grateful for the dissenters

Bill Gates once said, "Your most unhappy customers are your greatest source of learning." I found that I especially learned from the members and leaders who pushed back the most. In fact, if we could work through our respective frustrations, we often became the best and most productive colleagues, if not friends.

Motivation makes all the difference

The happiest industry leaders are the ones motivated and rewarded by personal satisfaction. If you can be fulfilled without ongoing

board acknowledgment or external recognition, you're likely to accomplish more, stay engaged longer, and leave with a positive legacy.

Small wins grow into bigger wins

In July 2017, I found myself on the short end of a nominations process that required a significant overhaul to end up with a fairer, more welcoming procedure. All in all, it took six years, one month, and 24 days.

The glacial pace of associations requires an unlimited amount of patience. But when you do reach the desired outcome, there's no better feeling of accomplishment as a leader. So don't lose hope; keep chipping away.

People first, always

We are in the business of people, and that doesn't change when you step into the role of an event association leader. Yes, there are policies and bylaws and rules (namely, Robert's) to follow, but in any decision, I always took a pause and considered the impact it had on the individuals, as well as the risk over reward. I only regretted decisions that skipped this step.

You've got to know when to fold 'em

The gift of an Immediate Past Presidency is that you're handed an expiration date. But Renee Dalo said it best: leaders build leaders. And that final step in the leadership journey, making space for others, turns out to be the most important one.

Finally, your legacy is what you make of it. You and you alone decide how much you want to invest in it. So do your best to live the length and width of your years as a leader, so you can be guaranteed that the good work continues when you've moved on to your next adventure.

As you forge your path in leadership, consider: What will your middle look like, and how will it shape your legacy? ●

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