

SPRING 2025

Catersource™



CS+TSE 2025

*Stays on
Trend*

**Feeding the Frontlines: Inside
the World of Relief Catering {10}**

**The Economic Impact of
Elections: Tariffs {16}**

**A Culinary Recap of
AOCF 2025 {36}**

Pleasant Picnics {48}





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VOLUME 23, NUMBER 1



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Catersource + The Special Event 2025, along with Art of Catering Food, showcased some of the top trends of the year



Behind the Cover

Bite-size tacos served in limes (which doubled as a garnish) were passed during Catersource + The Special Event 2025's Closing Night Celebration, which was held at The Venue Fort Lauderdale. Turn to [page 26](#) for more from the conference.

Photo courtesy Ivan Pineda Photography/SpotMyPhotos/AGNYC Productions Inc

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Uplifting Others

This past weekend I spent a surprisingly snowy Sunday cleaning my office. I have plentiful volumes to dust, and am typically distracted once or twice by a book that had impact on me personally. After reading a few chapters of *Then We Come to the End* by Joshua Ferris—one of my favorite workplace-setting books—I opened Michael Roman's *Catering Tactics, Strategies & Solutions*.

Published in 2013, it was the first book I picked up when I started my job at Catersource. The book is out of print now, but for those of us lucky enough to own a copy, there is still much to learn from Michael's wise words. It's truly amazing that most of the situations he wrote about well over a decade ago are still absolutely and without a doubt still common in 2025.

Michael is mentioned at Catersource often, and we yearly honor his memory with our Michael Roman Lifetime Achievement award, this year presented to Tom McDowell of Connecticut Wedding Group. I opened the book, too, because Michael is mentioned in this issue on [page 25](#) as Meryl Snow offers her swan song. A longtime contributor to this magazine, she is letting go of her column to refocus her life as she approaches retirement. She is the only columnist I've had as a constant throughout my career here, so I'm feeling glum about her departure.

A note about Meryl: I was petrified of her when I started. I looked at her photo and my first thought was that she resembled Sarah Michelle Gellar from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and her reputation put her on that same level. A force! I met Meryl in person about six weeks later at Art of Catering Food in Atlanta, and of course she couldn't have been more gracious and down to earth.

Like Michael, Meryl has uplifted others with her vision, approachability, and passion for catering. I'll miss her wise words, but watch this space for her hand-picked replacement, starting in our summer issue.

Kathleen

Kathleen Stoehr, Director of Community & Content Strategy

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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@catersource.com.

WEBSITES

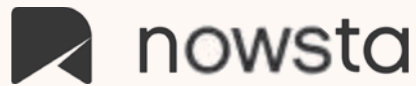
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Foodservice Group

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Where Work Meets FLOW



Ruben has started his Usher shift.

Daily Digest - March 1, 2025 Mode: Daily

Summary Sources Report Cost Analysis

Filters: 0

here were 567 Requested Shifts for this day.

88% Fill Rate
50% Filled

63 No-Shows
11% No-show rate

73.4%
On-Line Rate

51 Dismissed
Or 0/0/0

999 Stat
Label

Timecards from the are still being app Information please may be subject to

Total Spend
\$28,910.00
This Day's Balance
(Includes estimates)

Internal Worker 48%
Agency 42%
Talent 10%

Actual spent \$17,400.00 Est. spend \$11,510.00

Your next invoice will be generated on Apr 2, 2025

Breakdown by Position
3 Positions used

Warehouse 44%
Server 32%
Forklift Operator 24%

Total Hours 291,839.25 Total Shifts 43,054

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By Amber Kispert

Catersource + The Special Event: Taking it to Tinsel Town

Catersource + The Special Event 2025 just wrapped an amazing week in Fort Lauderdale, but we're already thinking ahead! The team is deep into planning for a week of stellar learning, networking, and opportunity next [March 2-5, 2026 in Los Angeles](#). Additionally, Art of Catering Food (taking place March 1-2, 2026) will bring fresh ideas, expert techniques, and real-world strategies to help chefs and caterers create unforgettable catered experiences.

Be a part of Catersource + The Special Event 2026

Call for Speakers is now open for both Catersource Conference & Tradeshow and The Special Event, which will be co-located in Los Angeles. Go to <https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/> for conference information, or <https://cs2026.c4p.catersource.com/> to pitch a session topic.

We are also accepting submissions for Art of Catering Food 2026. Food and beverage (and recipes to accompany) are at the helm of this conference, but we are also looking for hands on activities, solutions for off-premise catering in dire or unusual conditions, outrageously creative ways to deliver the guest food experience, and more.

Put your thinking cap on: what have you learned over the past year that you could share with your colleagues to make their work lives easier? What was the restaurant or food truck experience that you recreated and turned into a best-selling short plate on your wedding menus? What are your best catering hacks?

Go to <https://aocf2026.catersource-cfp.com/> to pitch a session topic.

ACE Awards 2026 now open

It's once again time to celebrate the best of the best! Submissions are now being accepted for the 2026 ACE Awards! To submit an entry and see the full list of categories, please visit our awards portal at ace-gala.awardsplatform.com. Join in the excitement and the spirit of our industry as we celebrate the hard work and exceptional accomplishments of our peers.

All photos courtesy Ivan Pieda Photography/SpotMyPhotos/AGNYC Productions Inc unless otherwise noted.



The Beverage Garden proved to be a popular draw at the show.



Attendees head to the tradeshow following the Opening General Session.



Pzazz Productions welcomed guests to the Opening General Session with a *Wicked/Wizard of Oz* Performance.

And the award goes to...

Catersource magazine is delighted to announce the recipients of this year's ACE Awards, who were honored during Catersource + The Special Event on February 27th in Fort Lauderdale, FL.

Congratulations to all of this year's [finalists](#)!

Best Off-Premise Catering

Diner En Blanc Vancouver Racquet Club Experience
| White Table Catering & Events

Best On-Premise Catering

Restaurant Associate's Chef Event 2023
| Mazzone Hospitality

Catered Fundraising Event of the Year

Mid America LGBT Chamber Business Pride Awards
Gala | Dutzel's Catering & Events

Catered Micro Event of the Year

The Illumination Foundation | TGIS Catering

Catered Social Event of the Year

High Rollers at McCune Mansion | Culinary Crafts

Important Dates

- September 1, 2024–September 15, 2025, | Eligibility Period for Entries
- September 15, 2025 | Regular submission deadline (\$125 fee)
- October 31, 2025 | Late Bird submission deadline (\$175 fee)

Catered Wedding of the Year

Cultural Fusion Wedding | Culinary Crafts

Product or Technological Innovation of the Year


Innovative Heat Wall Display | TGIS Catering

Sustainability in Catering

FivePoint Event | Primal Alchemy Catering

National Caterer of the Year

Marcia Selden Catering & Events

Submissions are now being accepted for the 2026 ACE Awards! To submit an entry and see the full list of categories, please visit our awards portal at <https://ace-gala.awardsplatform.com/>. 



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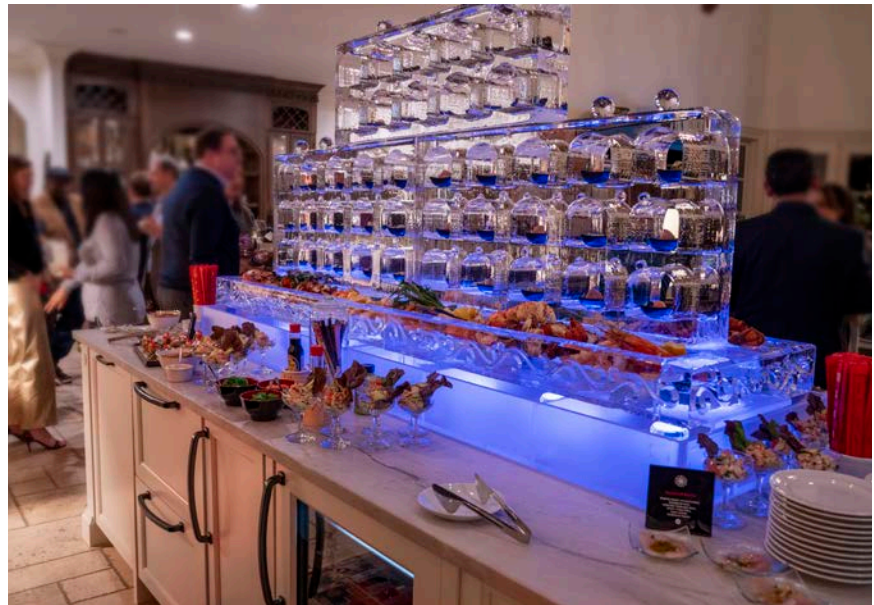
The CATIE Award Recipient and Finalists for Best Buffet or Action Station

Every year, the CATIE Awards recognize the most innovative and inspiring culinary experiences in the catering industry. The 2025 finalists for Best Buffet or Action Station elevated food presentation and interactive dining to an art form, captivating guests with bold flavors, creative storytelling, and immersive design.

Recipient: “Winter Seacuterie” by Proof of the Pudding

Taking home the top honor, Proof of the Pudding’s *Winter Seacuterie* was a breathtaking feast of the ocean’s finest delicacies, masterfully arranged for a private holiday event. Designed to be both a luxurious grazing experience and a show-stopping visual, this station showcased Regiis Ova caviar, Alaskan king crab, South African lobster, Chilean sea bass, jumbo shrimp, and wakame fried oysters, all anchored by a dramatic ice bar of sushi.

Each component was carefully curated to balance elegance with guest engagement. A standout feature was the caviar tasting, where guests were guided through the subtle differences of premium selections served with blinis, kettle chips, crème fraîche, and on mother-of-pearl spoons. The pièce de résistance was the towering ice sculpture, which cradled sushi and sashimi in bell-shaped recesses,



Winter Seacuterie from Proof of Pudding was a spectacular feast featuring the ocean’s finest delicacies. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Proof of the Pudding

inviting guests to pluck their favorite bite from the frozen display. The seamless execution, premium ingredients, and artful presentation cemented this station as a worthy champion.

Finalist: “Mini Entrees Conveyor Belt: Steampunk-Themed Company Rebrand” by Smashing Dishes

Bringing the industrial age to life, Smashing Dishes created a *Steampunk-Themed Mini Entrees Conveyor Belt* that blurred the line between culinary craftsmanship and mechanical innovation. Designed for a company’s post-COVID rebrand event, this station was an

engineering marvel, with a conveyor belt adorned in brass gears and Victorian-inspired embellishments delivering small plates to eager guests.

The menu paid homage to the era’s aesthetic and industrial roots, featuring smoked trout with crème fraîche and caviar, duck confit on gluten-free seeded crackers, and smoked cheese and potato croquettes over rust-colored romesco sauce. As the plates glided down the custom-built track, guests were enchanted by the theatricality of the experience, capturing videos and marveling at the intricate mechanics. This station wasn’t just about serving food—it was about storytelling, innovation, and creating a truly one-of-a-kind event.

Finalist: “Street Corn Cacio e Pepe” by 24 Carrots Catering & Events

Bridging the gap between Italian tradition and Mexican street food culture, 24 Carrots Catering & Events presented *Street Corn Cacio e Pepe*, a visually stunning and interactive station that reimaged two beloved comfort foods. The focal point was a parmesan wheel, used both as a cooking vessel and centerpiece, where chefs prepared fresh house-made pasta infused with the umami richness of Cacio e Pepe and the smoky sweetness of Mexican street corn.

The station, named *Masa de Maiz*, was more than just a serving space—it was a fully immersive experience. Set in a speakeasy-style art gallery, the presentation featured vibrant florals, ornate pottery, and colorful citrus arrangements that elevated the sensory experience. Each serving was finished tableside with roasted white corn, queso fresco, fresh chives, and a final flourish of melted parmesan scraped directly from the wheel. The combination of bold flavors, interactive preparation, and artistic ambiance made this station a standout in culinary fusion.

A celebration of culinary innovation

This year’s CATIE recipient and finalists pushed the boundaries of what a buffet or action station could be, proving that dining is as much about experience as it is about taste. Whether through high-end luxury, mechanical ingenuity, or cultural fusion, these caterers delivered unforgettable moments that left guests in awe.

Dreaming of artful creative plates for your own team? If you want to be inspired by even more International Caterers Association CATIE Awards finalists, see the entire list at <https://www.internationalcaterers.org/>. **CS**

“ This year’s CATIE recipient and finalists pushed the boundaries of what a buffet or action station could be, proving that dining is as much about experience as it is about taste.”



Smashing Dishes’ Steampunk-Themed Mini Entrees Conveyor Belt. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Smashing Dishes



24 Carrots Catering & Events’ Street Corn Cacio e Pepe. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/24 Carrots Catering & Events

Proof of the Pudding, Smashing Dishes, and 24 Carrots Catering & Events are proud members 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](https://www.internationalcaterers.org).

CATERING TO DIVERSITY

BY AMBER KISPERT



Wake Forest University and Proof of the Pudding partnered to provide disaster relief food services to those working on Hurricane Helene recovery efforts in western Northern Carolina. Using Wake Forest University's facilities, Proof of the Pudding efficiently prepared and staged fresh boxed lunches, hot breakfasts, and dinners. Photo courtesy Wake Forest University

Feeding the Frontlines

Inside the world of relief catering

In times of crisis, relief catering stands at the heart of humanitarian response, ensuring that displaced families, emergency responders, and disaster-stricken communities receive nourishing food when they need it most.

“Food is more than just sustenance; it’s a source of comfort, connection, and resilience,” says Michael Stavros (M Culinary Concepts, which provides relief catering through the [M Culinary Emergency Response Services](#) division of its business). “Being the ones to provide that nourishment has given us a front-row seat to humanity at its best and witnessing that strength and generosity firsthand is truly inspiring.”

Behind every meal served is a dedicated network of chefs, logistics experts, and volunteers working tirelessly under challenging conditions to bring comfort through cuisine. As the demand for emergency food services grows in an increasingly unpredictable world, the role of relief catering has never been more vital. As a caterer, stepping into this line of work can be demanding, but it’s also an opportunity to make a meaningful impact on people’s lives.

“Once you’ve provided your first relief meal, you are changed forever,” says Tracy Vessillo (Puff ‘n Stuff Catering*, which frequently provides relief catering during hurricane events in the Orlando area). “We are always proud of the events we put out; it’s so rewarding to have a client that is thrilled with their wedding, fundraiser, corporate event, but nothing compares to knowing that you provided a life-saving meal to folks that are going through something so unimaginable.”

Disasters make headlines

In recent years, the world has experienced an alarming rise in [natural disasters](#); in the U.S. alone, communities have been devastated by several hurricanes (Helene, Milton, and Ida), tornadoes (such as those earlier this month), and wildfires (Los Angeles, Northern California, and Maui).

“Relief catering exists in many markets, and as natural

disasters continue to increase, so does the demand for dedicated teams in this field,” says Stavros. “But make no mistake—this is the most extreme form of food service. It’s not for everyone. It requires grit, adaptability, and a deep understanding of the challenges that come with operating in unpredictable conditions.”

Scientists attribute this increase, in part, to climate change, which has intensified weather patterns and made extreme events more frequent and severe. Rising global temperatures have led to prolonged droughts, creating the perfect conditions for wildfires, while warming oceans have fueled stronger hurricanes. Similarly, melting polar ice contributes to rising sea levels, increasing the risk of coastal flooding. These changes have made natural disasters not only more common but also more destructive, causing significant loss of life, displacement, and economic damage.

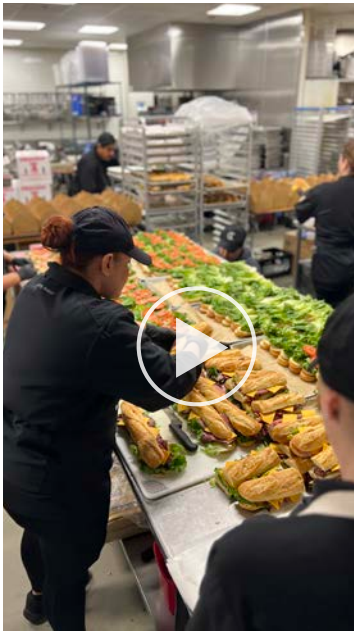
“Natural disasters—whether fires, hurricanes, or floods—have a way of bringing communities together in the face of adversity,” says Stavros.

“We saw acts of generosity and resilience that remind us why we do what we do,” adds Carizza Rose (24 Carrots Catering & Events*, which teamed up with [World Central Kitchen](#) to serve 3,000 meals for the LA Strong event at SoFi Stadium).

In addition to climate change, urbanization and deforestation have exacerbated the impact of natural disasters. As cities expand into vulnerable areas, more people and infrastructure are exposed to these risks. While natural disasters are inevitable, their increasing frequency and severity are now becoming a major topic of concern and policy.

“The need for relief catering has grown tremendously over the years,” says Vessillo. “There are now entire conventions just around disaster relief; and the only way it slows down is if, God willing, we have less and less disasters.”

However, relief catering isn’t solely reserved for natural disasters. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic brought several caterers into relief catering: Marcia Selden Catering & Events* partnered with Food for the Front



(Video, Left) 24 Carrots Catering & Events volunteered their time to make and distribute 3,000 meals during LA Strong, a relief event coordinated by World Central Kitchen in response to the Los Angeles wildfires. Video courtesy 24 Carrots Catering & Events; (Right) Beyond preparing meals in their facility, the 24 Carrots Catering & Events team showed up on the ground, setting up food stations and distributing every meal themselves during the LA Strong event. Photo courtesy 24 Carrots Catering & Events

Lines, which delivered meals to first responders and hospitals; BellaRu Catering took it upon itself to provide meals to a homeless shelter to help feed people who were sheltering in place within local hotels; and Proof of the Pudding activated more than seven mobile kitchens (through the relief division of its business [Pop-Up Emergency Management Services](#)) to service those affected by the pandemic throughout the Navajo Nation.

"The human spirit is so determined and resilient," says Lee Anderson (Sugar Beach Events*, which provided meals in the aftermath of the Maui fires in 2023). "I had no idea so many people would pull together to help during a disaster. It was eye opening in the challenging world of today to see so much love poured into relief efforts."

Relief through comfort

In disaster-stricken areas, caterers aren't serving high-end hors

d'oeuvres or managing luxury banquets. Instead, they're providing warm, nutritious, and readily available meals that are safe, filling, and appropriate for vulnerable populations.

It's important to prioritize high-quality, home-style meals because for many first responders, a hot meal may be their only true moment of relief, so offerings should focus on comfort, nourishment, and variety.

"We tend to provide calorie-heavy meals since these folks are working around the clock to get disaster situations under control," says Vessillo. "In these situations, many folks are looking for comfort food."

- **Hot breakfasts:** Classic, hearty options like scrambled eggs, turkey sausage, biscuits with gravy, cheesy grits, breakfast potatoes, fresh fruit cups, and coffee (lots of hot coffee for the long days and cold temperatures).
- **Boxed lunches:** Quick, filling, and diverse selections such as roasted turkey and cheddar sandwiches, Italian subs, croissant club

sandwiches, cookies, fruit cups, granola bars, and chips.

- **Hot dinners:** Home-style comfort meals like herb-roasted chicken with mashed potatoes and green beans, oven-roasted turkey with gravy, beef and vegetable stew with cornbread, or lasagna.

When planning your menu, it's important to assess key factors such as location, timing, available resources, and utilities to craft a menu that is both high-quality and logistically feasible.

Think about a scalable, versatile menu that can easily be adjusted depending on available ingredients and fluctuating demand. Consider dishes that can be made in bulk with minimal equipment and that transport well, such as stews, protein bowls, or sandwiches.

Additionally, consider dishes that can be modified if there are leftovers. For example, if you make meatloaf, you can turn it into meatloaf sandwiches or crumble it and add it to pasta or use it in stuffed peppers the next day.

“Relief catering exists in many markets, and as natural disasters continue to increase, so does the demand for dedicated teams in this field. But make no mistake—this is the most extreme form of food service. It’s not for everyone. It requires grit, adaptability, and a deep understanding of the challenges that come with operating in unpredictable conditions.” —Michael Stavros

“You don’t have the luxury of making intricate meals with a lot of steps,” says Anderson.

A hot meal in the wake of a disaster offers more than just calories—it provides a sense of normalcy, a small moment of comfort amid the upheaval. It reminds people that they are not alone, that someone cares enough to prepare something warm and nourishing just for them. For emergency responders working long hours in grueling conditions, a well-prepared meal can be a morale booster, a respite from the stress of their mission.

“Through our relief catering efforts, we aim to do more than just provide nourishment—we strive to be a source of comfort and strength,” says Stavros. “Our goal is to fuel relief personnel so they can continue their selfless work while also offering a moment of respite and reassurance to those facing hardship. A well-prepared meal can be a small but meaningful reminder that they are supported, cared for, and not alone in their journey.”

Lessons in logistics

For caterers new to relief work, the planning phase is crucial.

“Preparation, preparation, preparation. Once the storm hits,” says Vessillo, “if you are not prepared, you will not be able to help anyone.

“There can be a lot of costly mistakes if you are not experienced in this type of catering. Make sure you do your homework and remember

that people are depending on us as caterers—failure is not an option.”

One of the greatest hurdles relief caterers encounter is logistics. Unlike traditional catering, where menus are planned well in advance and meals are served in controlled settings, relief caterers must quickly assess conditions on the ground and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. They must source ingredients under pressure, establish makeshift kitchens in unfamiliar territories, contend with power outages and water shortages, and ensure that food reaches the people who need it most—often in remote or devastated areas.

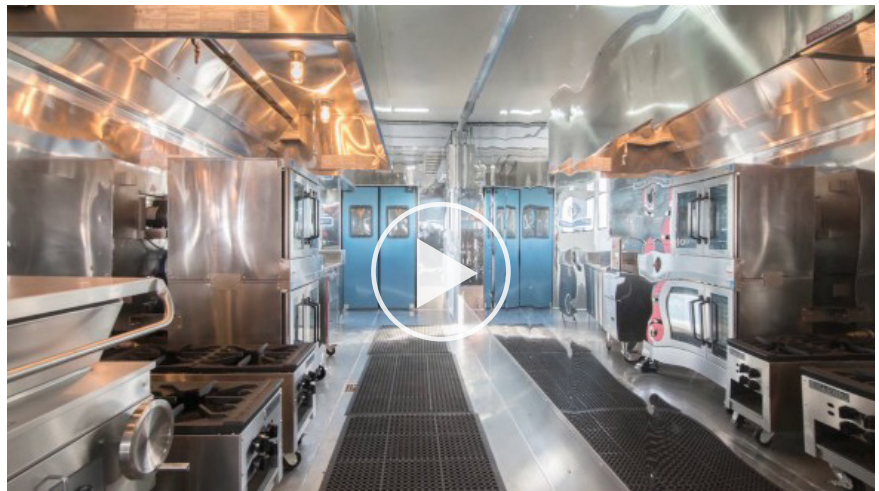
“Timing is everything—we need to be ready to activate, dispatch, set up, and serve in 12 to 48 hours in many cases, without advance site inspections and typical detailed event planning,” says Stavros. “We adapt quickly to our environment—the mindset we bring to every

challenge is that whatever it takes, we make it happen.”

Despite these obstacles, relief caterers demonstrate extraordinary resilience and creativity. Many rely on mobile kitchens, repurposed food trucks, or even large-scale cooking operations within shelters, stadiums, or convention centers to provide hot meals in record time. They collaborate with aid organizations, local authorities, and volunteers to distribute meals efficiently, often going beyond the call of duty to accommodate dietary restrictions, cultural preferences, and the emotional needs of those they serve.

“You pivot,” says Anderson, “because there is no other choice—adapt and overcome.

“You have to be prepared to roll up your sleeves and do the work; it’s not easy and it’s not for the faint of heart—you have to be willing to do whatever needs to be done, no matter how menial.”



M Culinary Concepts has three state-of-the-art mobile catering kitchen units—each comprising three expertly designed and manufactured trailers ready to deploy for emergency relief. Video courtesy M Culinary Concepts

“Being part of the [SEARCH Foundation](#), a 501c3 for industry professionals in crisis, gives me a unique perspective,” adds Kate Patay (SEARCH Foundation chairwoman). “While we assist financially, each major crisis comes with additional challenges, and the way the crisis relief caterers can come into an area that is devastated, set up a temporary kitchen, and feed the aid workers, first responders, and more, around the clock, is truly remarkable. I’m in awe of their abilities and how they make such a difference.”

In disaster situations, supply chains are often disrupted, making it difficult to source ingredients. Consider building relationships with local farmers, suppliers, and distributors who can provide emergency supplies if usual sources are unavailable.

“The relationship we have with our suppliers is paramount,” says Mara Routh (MOE Restoration Catering), which has provided relief catering in the aftermath of several hurricanes over the years, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. “I feel like they are my partners.”

You may also need to have non-perishable items and alternative ingredients on hand to maintain meal consistency during shortages.

Maintaining high food safety standards is essential, especially in relief scenarios where compromised water and sanitation conditions can lead to illness. Ensure staff are trained in safe food handling practices, carry sanitizing solutions, and have easy-to-follow hygiene protocols. If refrigeration is limited, focus on foods that don’t spoil quickly.

“People think it is like super charged camping ... far from it,” says Routh. “When base camps are set up, I am mindful of having cheerful, hardworking caring people on the team. We are not just feeding them, but we also need to be a friendly ear and good listeners. We want to be able to come from a place of ‘yes,’ to meet the needs of the people on the camp.”

Additionally, plan meal transport carefully,

and consider insulated containers to keep food fresh and safe during transit.

To make an impactful difference in relief catering, forming partnerships with relief agencies, nonprofits, and local government organizations can be invaluable. These partners often provide logistical support, security, and additional resources that caterers might not have access to on their own. Working in coordination with these groups helps ensure that the most vulnerable populations are served promptly and consistently. Make sure to establish a clear communication channel with these organizations in order to avoid duplication of efforts and optimize resources.

“There is a great satisfaction knowing what you are doing is making a difference. Helping people, breaking bread, creating a few moments in the day where the person eating what you have prepared sustains them, maybe lightens that load, and helps speed the recovery effort,” says Michael Pappas (Proof of the Pudding, which recently helped with relief efforts following Hurricane Helene). “The people on the frontlines may never know what it took to make it happen, but we know, and we are proud to have been part of it.”

Price points

When pricing relief catering, caterers should consider several key factors to ensure the pricing is both fair and sustainable. First, the costs of ingredients and supplies should be accounted for, with an emphasis on bulk sourcing to reduce expenses. Labor costs are another crucial consideration. Since relief events often involve preparing and distributing large quantities of food, caterers should adjust staffing levels based on the scope of the event. Volunteers may reduce staffing expenses, though it’s important to ensure that core staff members are compensated for their work.

“It’s ‘all-hands-on-deck’ for disaster relief,” says Vessillo. “Every executive, sales team member, office employee knows they need to be available. It’s a stressful



Wolfgang Puck Catering provided meals to first responder groups during the Los Angeles wildfires, despite the challenges. Photo courtesy Wolfgang Puck Catering



Since 2008, Puff 'n Stuff Catering has provided meals for relief efforts, building relationships with local government. This past hurricane season, they supported community efforts in Milton, serving thousands of meals with mobile kitchens and insulated food storage systems. Photo courtesy Puff 'n Stuff Catering



responders, local shelters, and community
their own commissary space evacuation.



meals and mobile kitchen setups during hurricane
governments, logistics firms, and utility companies.
communities displaced by Hurricanes Helene and
kitchen equipment including refrigerated trucks
sy Puff 'n Stuff Catering

situation to say the least; hard work and long hours are the M.O. for providing disaster relief catering.”

Transportation costs for delivery, such as fuel and vehicle use, should be factored in as well. In certain cases, transportation expenses may be covered or subsidized by nonprofit groups or sponsors.

Relief catering often involves working with organizations that have limited budgets, so offering discounted pricing or even donating some services is common. Caterers might use a sliding scale pricing model, which adjusts according to the financial situation of the organization or recipients. While the goal of relief catering is to provide affordable or free food to those in need, it’s still essential to account for a reasonable profit margin to cover operational costs.

Though many caterers don’t get into relief catering for the financial incentives, some have found that recovery efforts are a lucrative endeavor to enter into. For example, M Culinary Concepts launched M Culinary Emergency Responses Services as a way to keep their catering team members working year-round (despite Phoenix’s event slowdown in the summer months) while also stabilizing their off-season cashflow.

“We could keep our people working through our low season in a way that benefited the greater good,” says Stavros.

The power of people

The heart of relief catering lies in the dedication of those who make it happen.

“Our team’s dedication to the cause is truly inspiring, and we prioritize supporting one another to sustain our energy and effectiveness,” says Stavros. “The deep connections we build with those we serve is a powerful reminder of our purpose, fueling our resilience and motivation.”

Helping people took on a whole different meaning for Sugar Beach Events in Maui, as it did for Wolfgang Puck Catering in Los Angeles, following the wildfires because

the communities in crisis they were helping were their own communities.


“Knowing people who you work with that were personally impacted is very different than seeing it in the media,” says Jake Leach (Wolfgang Puck Catering). “That was a big part in us instantly jumping in to help our community and neighboring communities, and a good opportunity to bring some positivity within our team. [The wildfires] threw a curve in our operations due to our own evacuation, but once we were back in the kitchen, a lot of teamwork was required.”

In fact, many of the volunteers were those who experienced devastation firsthand but still found the will to help others.

“We give people a sense of purpose,” says Anderson. “The volunteers kept us going.”

The next time we hear about a disaster, let us not forget those who work tirelessly behind the scenes, stirring giant pots over open flames, distributing meals with reassuring smiles, and proving that even in the darkest times, a good meal can be a beacon of hope. Relief caterers may not always make the headlines, but their impact is felt in every meal they serve, every person they comfort, and every community they help rebuild—one plate at a time.

“Knowing that our work fulfills one of the most fundamental human needs—nourishment—is what keeps us going,” says Stavros. “When conditions are at their toughest, that’s when we’re needed the most, and that responsibility fuels our determination. No matter the challenge, we show up, fire up the grills, and just keep cooking.”

“Not one person, nor one company, can do it,” adds Routh. “It takes a village, and it is great when you work with an honest village that has integrity.” 

**24 Carrots Catering & Events, Marcia Selden Catering & Events, Puff 'n Stuff Catering, and Sugar Beach Events are proud members of the [Leading Caterers of America](#) (a consortium of the top catering and event planners throughout the United States and Canada).*



By Carl Sacks



The Economic Impact of Elections: Tariffs

The 2024 election results delivered an apparent mandate for change in many areas. Unfortunately, some of these modifications seem likely to negatively affect the catering industry. Some of the policy changes expected to have the most significant impact on caterers are the tariffs currently being implemented. As of the time of preparation of this article, it seems likely that tariffs will be imposed on most imported items, even those coming from our closest allies.

Note that tariffs are charged on the wholesale value of products on entry into the U.S. and are paid by the businesses that receive them, not by the growers, manufacturers, or consumers. For the tariff costs to be borne by the end user, prices

would need to rise, reigniting the inflation spiral.

Caterers generally do not import products directly but are not end users either. As such, a 25% tariff will typically raise the prices caterers pay for these products, not by the full 25% but by somewhat less. The assumption is that the importers will absorb some of the tariff-based increase. However, since caterers are value-adding intermediate consumers of imports, these tariffs will likely impose substantial cost increases on our industry.

Mexico and Canada

Virtually all caterers in the U.S. purchase perishable food items from these two countries. While much of the U.S. protein supply is

domestic (poultry, eggs, and beef in particular), a substantial amount of seafood and pork comes from Canada. At the same time, Mexico provides massive amounts of seasonal produce. A 15% increase in prices of these products based on a 25% tariff will make a noticeable difference, possibly as much as 2-3% food cost on food revenue.

China

As the world's manufacturing center, China provides many products caterers use. These include electronics, kitchen machinery, linens, and other tabletop items. While the catering industry is not as susceptible to price increases on Chinese products as some other sectors, these cost spikes may shave a small percentage off operating profit.

“Caterers need to pay close attention to developments in this area, to be prepared for the impacts that are likely to occur.”

European Union

The list of high-value products caterers use that originate in Europe includes olive oil, condiments, cheeses, chocolate, wines, and spirits. Tariffs on these items, many of which have been drifting up in price already because of climate change (olive oil and chocolate in particular), may force some repricing of specific catering items to mitigate these additional costs.

South Asia, South & Latin America, Oceania

Tariffs on these regions have not been announced yet, but it seems likely that they will be soon. Each of these regions provides products used by most caterers—farmed shellfish and rice from South Asia, produce and coffee from South America, and various protein items from New Zealand and Australia.

If all these tariffs are implemented, another likely impact will be reciprocal tariffs being put in place by the countries in the regions listed above. Caterers are generally not in the export business, but many corporate clients are. As such, the economic damage caused by this trade war could apply downward pressure to the post-COVID recovery in corporate event catering.

Tariffs will also likely lead to a stronger dollar and higher U.S. interest rates. A strong dollar does have some minor benefits in purchasing power for imports, but not nearly enough to offset the inflationary impact of the tariffs.



A return to higher interest rates could be highly damaging to the catering industry. This is not so much because of direct borrowing by caterers, but because of secondary impacts such as a decline in housing and stock market values. This is sometimes referred to as the “wealth effect.” This is when households become richer because of rising asset values, such as corporate stock prices or home values, and they spend more and stimulate the broader economy. The opposite is also true—if mortgage rates go up and stock values go down, then spending on other items will likely scale back.

Because catering is often considered a high-ticket luxury good, spending on catering could be one of the first items jettisoned during a downturn caused by higher interest rates. This was certainly the case during the Great Recession and the early days of COVID-19. Many social catering buyers will see the costs of such high budget impact items such as

mortgages and credit card interest go up. And corporate buyers will also likely see budget pressures increase when and if interest rates do begin to rise again.

Tariffs are an extremely blunt economic tool and will likely cause damage to consumers and businesses on both sides of the transaction. Caterers need to pay close attention to developments in this area, to be prepared for the impacts that are likely to occur. **CS**



Carl Sacks has spent more than 17 years as a consultant to the catering industry, starting

at *Catersource*, and currently as the managing member of Certified Catering Consultants. His list of clients includes many of the most prominent and successful caterers in the industry.



By Amber Kispert

THE BOLD & THE BITTER

Often considered the spice rack of a bar program, cocktail bitters add depth, balance, and complexity



A good rule of thumb regarding bitters is to use only two to three dashes at a time. Photo courtesy [@dashfirebitters](#)

In the vibrant world of cocktails, few ingredients carry as much mystery and magic as bitters. Once relegated to the dusty corners of apothecaries and bars, bitters are now a mainstay in the arsenal of mixologists and caterers alike. These flavor boosters have the power to transform, turning the ordinary into the extraordinary.

From their historical significance to modern-day experimentation, bitters continue to evolve, pushing the boundaries of innovation.

“Working with bitters is an intrinsic part of making cocktails,” says Adam “George” Fournier (Spago).

Breaking down bitters

Bitters are highly concentrated, intensely flavored, aromatic liquids created by infusing botanicals—such as herbs, spices, fruits, roots, and bark—used in small dashes to enhance cocktails, much like salt or pepper in cuisine.

“Bitters are not a singular ingredient; they are a combination of ingredients that come together to add depth and complexity and to soften out the harsh edges of ingredients,” said Lauren Mote (Bittered Sling) in an [article for Tales of the Cocktail](#). “It’s not necessarily that you notice the bitters there; it’s that you notice when they’re missing.”

Now don’t confuse bitters with digestifs, even though there is some overlap between the two. “Potable bitters,” such as [digestifs](#), are bitter liqueurs, like Italian amari (Fernet-Branca, Campari, etc.) that can be enjoyed on their own or as a star ingredient in a cocktail. They have a higher ABV and are often used as a base for cocktails or sipped neat.

“Non-potable bitters,” on the other hand, are only intended for use as a



Display your bitters collection prominently at the bar. Use tasting cards to educate guests about the unique qualities of each flavor. Shown: Attendees to the Tasting Experience at the Beverage Garden during Catersource + The Special Event 2025 had the opportunity to sample several bitters to better educate themselves on the nuances of flavor. Photo courtesy Catersource staff

flavoring agent, not to be consumed on their own due to their strong flavor.

“There is a lot of overlap right down to the ingredients though,” says Anthony Caporale (director of spirits education at the Institute of Culinary Education).

The science of flavor enhancement

So, exactly how do bitters contribute to a cocktail? They serve as the perfect contrast to sweet and sour elements, cutting through and rounding out the drink’s overall flavor profile.

Bitters work by stimulating the palate and enhancing other flavors.

“The bitters help our taste buds and brains skip over the initial burn of alcohol,” says Fournier.

Just a few drops can:

1. **Add depth:** Bitters contribute layers of flavor, making cocktails more nuanced and interesting.
2. **Enhance complexity:** They bridge disparate ingredients, harmonizing sweet, sour, and spirituous notes.

3. **Balance sweetness:** A dash of bitters tempers overly sweet drinks, making them more palatable.
4. **Awaken the palate:** Bitters stimulate taste buds, ensuring every sip feels vibrant and alive.

“Bitters provide two things: flavor and functionality,” says Ben Branson (Seasn). “Flavor wise they can add an intense top note or layer of flavor, and functionally bitters add depth and complexity.”

“They can also help to bind—while also accentuating—other ingredients; very much in the same way that seasoning behaves in food.”

The bitter truth

Not all bitters are created equal. The beauty of bitters lies in their complexity. Each type offers a unique array of flavors that can complement or contrast with other ingredients.

“If there’s a flavor you are looking for, you’re going to be able to find a bitters that can match that flavor,” says Caporale.

However, one of the most common misconceptions about bitters is equating them solely with Angostura bitters. Angostura is a specific brand



of aromatic bitters that includes a blend of spices and botanicals offering a rich, warm, and spicy flavor profile with notes of clove, cinnamon, and gentian root.

"It's like if you're a pastry chef and the only thing in the cabinet is vanilla extract," says Caporale of the overuse or misconception of Angostura.

While Angostura bitters are indeed iconic, they represent just one flavor among many.



Elevate a classic Old Fashioned (sugar, Angostura bitters, bourbon, and an orange twist) by smoking it. Photo courtesy Ghost Media

Aromatic bitters

The backbone of many classic cocktails, these bitters (like Angostura or Peychaud's) are rich with warm spices such as cinnamon, clove, and nutmeg.

Best uses: Classics like Old Fashioneds and Manhattans.

Citrus bitters

Featuring bright, zesty notes of orange, lemon, or grapefruit, these bitters add a refreshing twist.

Best uses: Ideal for light, refreshing cocktails like spritzers or margaritas.

Herbal bitters

Infused with botanicals like mint, basil, or chamomile, they deliver earthy and grassy flavors.

Best uses: Great for gin-based cocktails or herbal teas.

Fruit bitters

Raspberry, cherry, or peach bitters provide a fruity accent.

Best uses: Pairs well with sweeter cocktails.

Spice-forward bitters

Bold and sharp, with flavors like cardamom, ginger, or chili.

Best uses: Adds heat to tropical cocktails like a spiced rum punch.

Floral bitters

Subtle and aromatic, featuring lavender, rose, or elderflower.

Best uses: Adds elegance to champagne cocktails or light non-alcoholic cocktails.

Unique and experimental bitters

Unusual yet captivating, these may include flavors like celery, coffee, cucumber, or even smoked wood for an adventurous profile.

Best uses: Perfect for adventurous creations.

Understanding the flavor spectrum allows you to choose the right bitters for the mood and theme of your event.

"Bartenders are always looking to make something that is unique, and the more ingredients they have to choose from the better," says Lee Egbert (Dashfire Bitters). "I think flavor trends will change and that is where you'll see more unique flavors that follow those flavor trends, and I think it really helps with bartenders creating a unique menu for their guests and creates a unique experience for them."

A mixology masterclass

The cocktail world is all about bitters these days, and bartenders are enjoying the nuance they can achieve with just a dash or two.

"Bitters are our spice rack," said Lucas Ramsey (Eclipse Restaurant) in an [article for Sauce magazine](#). "They can add so many levels of depth and complexity."

For beginners, incorporating bitters into cocktails should be approached gradually. A good rule of thumb is two to three dashes at a time.

"A little goes a long way. Too many drops are like getting punched in the face," says Josh Warrenner (The Black Cat).

"Think of bitters the way you would extracts because they bring a lot of flavor to a drink," adds Caporale.

"When you are making a spirt-forward drink, and you want to taste that craft spirit, I don't want to step all over that. There's a lot going on in bitters, so you don't need to go overboard with it."

Experimentation is key—whether using bitters to add warmth to a whiskey cocktail or a bright citrus note to a gin-based drink, the possibilities are endless.

"Start simple. Use single flavor bitters that have flavors that you're already familiar with like cinnamon or lavender," says Egbert. "That will guide what kind of cocktails you can do and once you know the spirit it tastes best with, you can look for cocktails that use that base spirit and then try expanding into different bitters."

"I recommend trying different combinations and brands," adds Shayne Toscano (Wolfgang Puck Catering). "Sometimes, something you wouldn't expect to work well can surprise you. Each brand has its own profile—some are fruitier, while others focus on spice and herbs. It's worth experimenting to find which ones you like best in your cocktails."

Today, bitters have also expanded into non-alcoholic cocktails.

"Bitters play a big role in the taste of spirit-free cocktails due to them not having much alcohol," says Warrenner.

A few dashes can completely transform a spirit-free cocktail, bringing harmony to the mix. As the demand for sophisticated alcohol-free drinks rises, bitters have become a go-to ingredient for crafting elevated zero-proof cocktails. Their ability to mimic the depth of alcohol without the effects makes them an essential tool for bartenders catering to mindful drinkers.

Beyond the glass

Bitters aren't only for mixing cocktails; they can be a game-changer for your entire menu with culinary applications as well (such as marinades, vinaigrettes, and desserts).

"It's very easy to utilize them anywhere you would use an extract," says Egbert.

For example: incorporate bitters like cardamom or coffee into marinades for meats; a dash of citrus or

SPICED GALS

*Recipe courtesy Wolfgang Puck Catering
Photo courtesy Lisette Gatliff*

ingredients

- 45 ml tequila
- 22 ml Campari
- 22 ml Ancho Reyes
- 15 ml pineapple syrup
- 1 dash orange bitters
- Dried pineapple garnish

method

1. Combine tequila, Campari, bitters, and syrup in a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake.
2. Pour into a rocks glass, garnish with dried pineapple or orange twist.
3. Enjoy!



A TASTING GUIDE FOR BITTERS

Bitters can be a little overwhelming due to their intense flavor, so it's important to approach tasting them with care and attention.

- 1. Start with the basics:** Begin with a classic aromatic or citrus bitters to get a feel for how they behave on your palate.
- 2. Smell first:** Take a moment to inhale the aroma, as it provides the first clue to the flavor profile.
- 3. Taste neat:** Bitters are highly concentrated. Start by adding a few drops to water or tonic to dilute their intensity and reveal subtler flavor notes and allow it to touch your tongue. Notice the immediate sensations—do you feel bitterness, sweetness, or heat?
- 4. Sip slowly:** Let the bitters linger on your palate. See how the flavors evolve and what kind of aftertaste they leave. Do they become more complex or smoother with time?
- 5. Experiment with pairings:** Once you identify the flavor profile, imagine how it might enhance cocktails or dishes.

Pro tip: Create a tasting grid to document each bitters' aroma, initial flavor, body, and finish. This will serve as a guide when incorporating them into your menu.



(Top) A classic champagne cocktail features an Angostura bitters-soaked sugar cube, champagne (or other sparkling wine), and either a lemon or orange twist. Photo courtesy Ghost Media/Alexander Cross Photography; 24 Carrots Catering & Events served a Mole Old Fashioned (bourbon, mole bitters, cinnamon simple syrup, and orange peel) during a recent event. Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon

grapefruit bitters can bring vibrancy to vinaigrettes or fresh greens; you can even use chocolate bitters to enhance brownies or caramel bitters to amplify panna cotta.

"Bitters can also be sprayed on items to give it aroma," says Egbert, "that helps elevate your senses."

Bitters are small but mighty. They are a testament to the idea that small details make a big difference. They are more than just an ingredient; they're an experience.

By embracing their complexity, caterers can craft menus that are as memorable as they are delicious. So, grab a bottle (or five) and start experimenting. Your clients—and their taste buds—will thank you.

"The way bitters can elevate a drink is remarkable—you might taste a cocktail and feel like something's missing, but I can assure you, a few dashes of bitters can perfectly round it out," says Alexander Greene (Chilled 100 Ambassador). **CS**

Editor's note: Dean Mistretta, MBA, CHE, Director of Catering, Decadent Catering and Johnson & Wales University contributed to this article.

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Four Ways to Spark Innovation

As a parent, there are few things I enjoy more than watching my kids play; those times when their imagination is on full display—when they make up games, leverage creative juices, and come up with new uses for the toys, boxes, and objects that are sourced from around the house. Children by nature are incredibly innovative, yet as we get older, we lose some of that magic. We have different priorities, and when we realize that our time can be monetized, it changes how we spend it. Instead of time for imagination, thought, and wonder, we obsess over how much we can do or accomplish to pay for the things we need and want. We become more aware of social norms and develop a fear of looking silly or out of place when our ideas are too far outside the box. We stop questioning things because we worry about being wrong or looking stupid. Children are great at putting things together that seemingly don't belong, and in the process of growing up, we stop making those random connections that have the power to fuel a creative solution.

For many companies this creates limitations on their ability to be innovative. It's easy to throw money at problems; it's harder to challenge your team to problem solve with limited resources and tap into their creativity. As caterers, we are constantly asked to stay on top of industry trends, and often we are put in situations or events that require innovation. Out of our element without endless equipment or additional food at our fingertips, we must rely on making do with what we have to make sure our events go off without a hitch. Here are four ways to generate new ideas and spark innovation among your team.

1. Celebrate the process, not the result

Too often we highlight only the solutions that work, but this encourages team members to play it safe and only pursue initiatives that are guaranteed to be successful. Innovation is a numbers game and the more attempts we put out there, the more potential we have for great ideas and solutions to get implemented. Without the safety to throw all ideas out there, we miss those "bad" original ideas that someone else builds on and eventually turns into a great idea.

2. Innovation can come from anywhere

Innovation should not be assigned to one person, limited to senior leaders or only given to creative individuals. Companies who value the contributions from all of their team members create an environment where they are

empowered to find solutions and improvements to everyday systems, processes, procedures, and services. They encourage everyone to make suggestions, provide feedback, and take ownership for what they do. They create a culture where everyone is responsible for innovation, not just the people in charge.

3. Don't overlook the small things

When most people hear innovation, they think about wild, bold, and transformational developments. While these are indeed factors in innovation, they neglect to highlight all the small steps that preceded the result. Small incremental improvements over time add up to significant outcomes. A minor change to how an item is prepped in the kitchen might be part of many things that make a kitchen more efficient, thus saving time and money. Different placement of items in the warehouse might clear the way for a new racking system and in turn improve the overall organization.

4. Infuse purpose into the process

Team members are sometimes told that something needs to be better but are not told why. This creates a missed opportunity because the focus becomes very narrow. When we understand the purpose of why our work matters, we are more motivated to find creative solutions and more likely to explore a wider range of possibilities to get there.

If you're looking to unleash imagination and unlock innovation in your organization, find ways to celebrate those who are curious and willing to take risks. Encourage creativity from all team members, don't downplay small improvements, and remind your team the "why" behind their everyday work. When leaders empower their team members to innovate, amazing things begin to happen. A child-like spirit begins to infuse creative thinking into daily responsibilities, resources are utilized in new ways, and momentum begins to snowball into a culture that stays at the forefront of trends, maximizes efficiencies, and creates events that inspire all that are involved. **CS**



Anthony Lambatos grew up in the catering business working for his father and founder of **Footers Catering** in Denver, CO. Anthony and his wife, April, purchased the business in 2010 and have successfully made the transition to a second-generation family business.



By Meryl Snow

A Final Farewell

It was a Monday in January 1987 when Andy and I, young and eager new caterers, found ourselves sitting in the front row at a conference, filled with excitement and anticipation. As we watched a larger-than-life figure take the stage, it felt as though he was speaking directly to us—answering our questions, understanding our struggles, and easing our fears. That conference was called Off Prem, and the man on stage was Michael Roman—someone who would soon become a mentor, guide, and ultimately, a dear friend.

Michael was more than a catering coach; he became a trusted advisor and an inspiration. In 1992, Off Prem became Catersource Conference & Tradeshow, and that's when Michael invited me onto the stage beside him—a moment I felt completely unprepared for. But he saw something in me that I didn't yet see in myself. He told me I was the voice of the 500 caterers in the room, and he reminded me often that one day, it would be my turn to give back to the industry.

And so, for the past several decades, catering has been more than just a career—it has been my passion, my livelihood, and my community. Andy and I built Feastivities and our subsidiaries with dedication and heart, creating memories with our team and clients that I will always cherish.

Just as the catering industry continues to evolve, so too does my own journey. Among the many rewarding aspects of this journey, one of the greatest has been the opportunity to work alongside talented caterers—speaking at conferences, being invited into

“I pass the baton knowing that the future of special events is in exceptional hands, and I can't wait to see where you take it.”

your businesses, and collaborating directly with your companies and teams. These relationships, experiences, and shared successes have been the foundation of a career that I hold dear.

This year also marks a personal milestone for Andy and me. We've said goodbye to our spacious suburban home and embraced a new, more liberated lifestyle in a cozy city condo. This change signifies more than just a move—it represents a shift toward new priorities, where we can dedicate more time to what truly matters: traveling, cherishing moments with our three grandchildren, and fully embracing life.

Now, as I take a step back, I do so with a mix of excitement and nostalgia, knowing that the industry I love is in capable hands. While I will miss the daily energy and interactions, I look forward to new opportunities while continuing to support the industry in other ways.

As I transition into this next chapter, I do so with full confidence in the next generation of caterers and event professionals. This new wave of talent is driven, innovative, and brimming with passion. They are embracing new technologies, pushing creative boundaries, and redefining what's possible in catering and events. Their fresh ideas, relentless drive, and fearless ambition are shaping the future of our industry in ways we never could have imagined.



Michael Roman and Meryl Snow, Catersource 2010.

I have had the privilege of watching many of you rise—learning, evolving, and stepping into leadership roles with confidence and vision. Just as the generation before us laid the foundation, I have no doubt that today's rising stars will take it even further, building an industry that is stronger, more dynamic, and more resilient than ever before. I pass the baton knowing that the future of special events is in exceptional hands, and I can't wait to see where you take it.

Looking back, this journey has been nothing short of extraordinary. The connections formed, the experiences shared, and the memories created have been the heart of my career. To my colleagues, mentors, collaborators, and friends—thank you. Your support has meant the world to me, and while I may be stepping back, I will always remain a part of this incredible industry.

Here's to the growth, camaraderie, and success—and to the bright future that awaits this next generation of catering and event professionals. I'll be cheering you on every step of the way! **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**.



STAYING ON *Trend*

By Amber Kispert

Catersource + The Special Event 2025 put a spotlight on many of the year's hottest trends

Catersource + The Special Event is always a premier place to spot the latest trends, and this year's attendees got their fill.


Authentic, immersive, and abundant: those are the words that could be used to describe the trends that were highlighted during this year's conference. Between the culinary demonstrations, tradeshow floor, education, and evening events, it was easy to see what your clients might be looking for this year. These trends are not only keeping up with the times; they're setting the table for the future. Here's a look at some of our top takeaways.

The trendiest & tastiest

Every year, the culinary maestros featured during Art of Catering Food as well as Catersource + The Special Event put a spotlight on the ingredients and dishes that are captivating tastebuds. Here's a rundown of some of the tastiest menu trends that caught our eye.

The power of plant-based

Plant-based proteins (turn to [page 40](#) for a look at how alternative proteins are impacting menus) have steadily been in the spotlight for quite a few years now, but the difference currently lies in how they are served. Specifically, caterers and chefs are leaning into an inclusive mindset when approaching vegetarian or dietary menus in order to ensure that all guests are experiencing the event the same way, rather than one guest receiving a thoughtfully plated and balanced meal while someone else receives a plate of pasta or vegetables that may come across as a bit of an afterthought.



Grilled angel food cake with liquid nitro mango sorbet (made live onsite) and rum mojito sauce (Bill Hansen Catering) served during Connect Social.



"We don't treat vegans the same," said Chef Jeffrey Schlissel (The Bacon Cartel) during his Art of Catering Food session, *Mastering Legume-Cuterie: Plant-Based BBQ with Higher ROI*. "When a vegan walks in we should show the same creativity and intentionality by making great food."

This is where innovative and creative plant-based dishes are becoming the star; think of things like [braised jackfruit in place of oxtail](#); smoked, cured, grilled, and seasoned vegetables placed on a grazing board that mimic the flavors and craveability of a traditional charcuterie spread; or even put a plant-based spin on a beef wellington by swapping out the steak in favor of [carrots](#) or sweet potatoes.

Flavor of the year: pistachio

In its annual [Hospitality Trends Report](#), af&co. and Carbonate named pistachio as its flavor of the year. According to the report, "Able to

All served during Art of Catering Food: (Clockwise from top left) Salted honey Basque cheesecake with brown butter phyllo and citrus marmelata (Chef Karen O'Connor, Daniel et Daniel); Wagyu brisket with celery root purée & pickled vegetables (Duce Raymond, Sweet Baby Ray's Catering & Charles Haraz, Blue Plate Catering); Chef Jeffrey Schlissel (The Bacon Cartel) displayed a "legume-cuterie" board and offered a tasting.

skew salty or sweet, pistachios are perfectly ambidextrous and made for our Instagram age where color is compelling. They're taking the place of almonds and hazelnuts in pastries, and playing a starring role in savory salads, sauces, drinks, and much more."

Chef Karen O'Connor (Daniel et Daniel) embraced this trend wholeheartedly when she incorporated pistachio into a showstopper of a dessert during the day two Lunch & Learn as part of Art of Catering Food, which featured a salted honey Basque cheesecake ([find the recipe here](#)) garnished with pistachios and rose petals.

Pickle me this

Sure, several [fermented foods](#)—pickles, olives, vinegar, yogurt, sour cream, sauerkraut—have long been standard American fare. But whether most consumers realized these items are fermented or know what fermentation means is debatable.

Times have changed. In recent years, there has been an explosion of awareness, interest, and demand for fermented foods and beverages—and not just for familiar favorites. Today, consumers are clamoring for kimchi, kefir, and natto. They're testing tempeh, miso, and koji. In fact, the National Restaurant Association highlighted fermented ingredients in its [2025 forecast](#).

Chefs Paul Buchanan (Primal Alchemy Catering) and Dave MacLennan (Even Keel Fish Shack) explored fermentation and pickling at length during their Art of Catering Food session *Pickle Me This: Big Flavors in Your Culinary Arsenal, From Fermentation to Vinegar*.

These items are zesty, spicy, and flavorful. They feature healthful benefits, are good for gut health, reduce inflammation, and bolster the immune system.

Beyond the good-for-you perks of fermented foods and beverages, there is also the flavor aspect. The fermentation process introduces a depth of flavors and versatile textures that can transform ordinary dishes into extraordinary, craveable culinary experiences. Incorporating fermented elements like pickles, relishes, or sauces (such as this recipe for a [fermented jalapeño chimichurri](#)) can add a sour, tangy, umami-rich dimension to your dishes, creating a mouth-watering menu.



Served during the Opening Night Party: (Clockwise from top left) Glowing cotton candy; Attendees could add a cocktail bubble to their drinks which would add a bit of extra aroma once it burst (apple, mixed berry, citrus, or passion fruit); Smoked Old Fashioned cocktails are always a hit with bourbon lovers.

"Why serve food the old-fashioned way when you can turn it into a spectacle? Events are making sure the 'how' is just as exciting as the 'what.'" —Anil Pacheco

Sensory overload

Sensory experiences play a crucial role in events and catering, shaping how guests perceive and remember an occasion. From the moment attendees arrive, their senses are engaged through a carefully curated atmosphere.

Sight is often the first impression, with elegant décor, ambient lighting,



and artfully presented food setting the tone. Think of things like elaborate stations (more on that in a bit), glow-in-the-dark items, and visual stimulants such as flames, smoke, nitrogen, and dry ice.

Sound enhances the mood, whether it's a live band, a curated playlist, or the sizzle of meat on the grill. The tactile experience also matters—linen-draped tables, ergonomic seating, and the texture of food all contribute to comfort and engagement.

While taste may perhaps be the most powerful sensory element in catering, scent has become an important supporting player in recent years. Consider this: the aroma of freshly baked bread or roasting chilis can evoke nostalgia and anticipation, while bold flavor combinations (such as Indian cuisine—for example, check out Keith Sarasin's recipe for Makhani sauce served atop paneer) delight the palate.

"Taste is important, but taste is a personal experience," said Tiffany Rose Goodyear (Scentex) during her session *Science of Scent: An Olfactory Exploration Through the Life of an Event*. "With smell, it is a shared experience."

In fact, scent is 100 times more powerful than sound and five times more powerful than touch, according to Goodyear.

Scent is not only a powerful tool in the hands of a chef, but it can also assist in developing the theme and ambiance of any event.

Goodyear shared this example: During a *Love Boat*-themed event with Marcia Selden Catering & Events, Scentex developed custom

scents reminiscent of oceanic breezes as well as exotic florals.

Scent can even be interactive, as we've seen with cocktail bubbles, which add a custom aroma.

"People have been undervaluing scent," said Michael Stavros (M Culinary Concepts) during his annual trends session, "but scent is the most powerful sense that we have because it links us to memories, so use it."

Additionally, incorporating all five senses goes a long way toward ensuring that every attendee is able to have a shared experience at least once; perhaps they are hard of hearing, for instance, but they can still smell, touch, and taste.

"An event is a room full of nervous systems," said Goodyear in an article for *Special Events*. "We experience the world through our five senses.... Us as experience creators—it's essential that we talk to every single sensory receptor in peoples' bodies."

However, it is important to note that not everyone will have the same memories associated with a specific scent. Whereas one person may associate the scent of pine with the holidays, for example, someone of a different culture or religion may associate it more with the outdoors.

"Interpretation is not universal, it's subjective," said Samantha Stilwell (CultureDynamiq) during her session *Be Unforgettable: Enhancing Delight through Cultural Awareness*. "Culture and memory shape perception, and emotional memory is so much more powerful than factual memory."

By thoughtfully engaging all five senses, caterers can transform a gathering into a memorable, immersive experience.

Stationed for success

Impactful stations at events go beyond just serving food—they become interactive experiences that engage guests and elevate the atmosphere. The best catering stations seamlessly blend flavor, presentation, and entertainment, ensuring that food becomes a highlight of the event rather than just a necessity. Here's a look at some of the trends currently influencing stations.

Sharing a story

For the past couple years, “immersive” has been the word du jour.

Immersive catering transforms dining into a full-fledged journey, engaging guests with interactive elements, storytelling, and theatrical presentations. It invites people to step beyond passive dining and into an experience that stimulates all the senses (as noted previously) with each element adding layers of excitement and engagement.

In the past, immersive experiences were typically relegated mostly to interactive chef stations, but now buffets are tapping into this trend, even without the addition of a chef or station attendant.

“You can create an experience around the food you are serving,” said David Merrell (AOO Events) during his annual trend session.

Consider things like themed buffet décor, elevated designs, and how the space is utilized. Even the [venues](#) themselves can add to the immersive aspect of buffets (turn to [page 32](#) in the adjoining *Special Events* magazine for a deeper look at this trend).

Consider 2025's Opening Night Party, which was separated into three distinct themes: past, present, and future with all three venues

(Stache, Backyard, and Revolution Live) adding to the immersiveness of the event. For example, Stache had a pre-existing vintage library with beautiful wooden bookshelves already in place, so event chair Chef Boris Seymore (BDS Catering & Events) embraced this by displaying food directly on the bookshelves themselves. Adding to the immersiveness were the performers and atmosphere talent who interacted with the station. Backyard, conversely, is decorated to mimic a backyard beach bash, so what better way to immerse guests into this vibe than with arcade games, beach balls, churros, conch fritters, tacos, and grilled kabobs.

“Some venues are so iconic that they speak for themselves,” said Merrell. “These venues are becoming more important because clients are wanting a story to be told.”

Communal and immersive cocktails also play into the idea of using catering as a storytelling technique.

“Beverage immersion is taking cocktails from just a bar to a full-on experience,” said Anil Pacheco (AOO Events | AOO Florals) during Merrell's trend session. “Guests aren't just sipping, they are part of the story.”

Event attendees are also looking for authentic experiences, tapping into their memories and emotions. Menu items such as street foods, which are inherently authentic and nostalgic, seamlessly fit the bill.

“You lean into the immersion of it and the authenticity of the foods and the facades of it and you hit a home run,” said Merrell.

Go big or go home

It's not just having unique, over-the-top experiences, though; it's about accessing something exclusive and being part of something. It's about cultivating upscale experiences that attendees can't find anywhere else.

One trend that has shaped the catering world for several years now is the idea of “abundance,” with elaborate buffet setups that bring guests in instantly.

“Think about the scope and scale of the presentation when you have less expensive food to work with because you can hide some cheap stuff in there, but it looks really fun and it looks really inviting,” said Stavros. “You eat with your eyes first, and if you walk up to [an elaborate] station you're going to devour it.”

“You can make food the main attraction,” adds Pacheco. “Nothing says ‘welcome’ like a spread longer than your guest list.”

On the opposite side of the spectrum, miniature canapés and tiny desserts are having a major moment as well.

“If you make anything mini, people get excited,” said Stavros, “because you've got fun on the plate. But, if you're going to do a station full of mini stuff, you better put a lot of mini stuff on that station because it's going to get empty real quick.”

Beyond blooms

The price of flowers has continued to rise, which has resulted in clients and industry professionals alike thinking outside of the proverbial bloom box.

For example, miniature lights and other household items can add a unique visual element to your tablescapes, while greens and produce can offer a [sustainable solution](#).

“The only thing more impressive than your event is your eco-friendly street cred,” said Pacheco. “Live plants, moss, and natural textures create an eco-friendly vibe while keeping the waste to a minimum; these alternatives create a multi-sensory experience that guests can interact with unlike flowers that are purely decorative.”



STATIONED FOR SUCCESS



(Left column starting from top) A vintage bookshelf (used as a food station) and atmosphere talent helped immerse attendees into the past during the Opening Night Party; These stations at the Closing Night Celebration added a pop of produce to their floral arrangements; Spring Pea Toasts with Gouda served during Art of Catering Food (Chowgirls Catering); "Flavor Bombs" are sauces and marinades that can be made with in-season produce and then saved for later. Shown: roasted cumin pork tenderloin with pickled jalapeño chimichurri served during Art of Catering Food (Chef Jenny Bast, Catering Creations). (Above) An abundant charcuterie display served during Art of Catering Food utilized varying heights and vessels for visual impact.



IN SEASON

In season

Seasonality is not a new topic for caterers. For one, humans are naturally inclined towards in-season produce; it's why watermelon trends in the summer while root vegetables grow popular in the winter. But beyond biology, seasonal menus allow caterers to source the freshest ingredients available without sacrificing quality to shipping timelines or transitory storage and refrigeration.

With a growing number of consumers preferring to "eat local," seasonality in the kitchen lets one procure items from farmers and butchers within the community. This means featuring food that is harvested at its peak rather than prematurely, and it relies on [sourcing in-season food from local farms and suppliers](#) instead of transporting over long distances when out of season.

"It's not just a menu choice; it's a whole vibe," said Pacheco. "Events are ditching mystery meat for fresh, local ingredients that taste great but look even better, and food just hits different when you can say this tomato has a backstory."



For example, Chowgirls Catering (who took a deep dive into sustainability and seasonality during their Art of Catering Food session *Achievable Sustainability Standards and Menu Creativity*) has an item on their menu simply called “Crostini with Seasonal Toppings,” in which the chef creates a seasonal bite based on the ingredients that are in season. During the session, attendees sampled a crostini topped with pea purée and gouda ([find the recipe here](#)) in [celebration of spring](#), while a previous tasting event held during the summer topped the crostini with whipped chèvre, saffron tomato jam, and sautéed organic spinach.

“Emphasizing seasonal menu items allows us to maximize the use of ingredients we already have on hand,” said Liz Mullen (Chowgirls Catering). “This can be a great challenge for our chefs to create beautiful, innovative dishes with the freshest, in-season produce while reducing food waste in our kitchen.”

“Clients appreciate it when we can explain why certain ingredients, like tomatoes for bruschetta, aren’t available year-round,” adds Lindsay Erstad (Chowgirls Catering). “They not only understand, but they also get excited about experiencing the best flavors of the season.”

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways caterers can meet client expectations without compromising flavor, texture, or presentation. Start small by featuring one local ingredient or menu item that’s unique to your region.

Not only does seasonal produce taste better, but it also offers a fresh, creative twist that excites clients. Plus, sourcing locally helps you build relationships with farmers and suppliers, which can give you a competitive edge. You may discover ingredients other caterers haven’t even considered, allowing you to stand out while educating your clients about the benefits of going local.

“Caterers are designing menus in real time, creating seasonal cocktails and limited-time food stations based on [ingredient availability](#),” said Chris Sanchez (LUX Catering & Events*) in *Catersource’s State of the Industry report*.

Consider this example: During Art of Catering Food, AJ Harris (Dish Food & Events) had planned to serve his award-winning Carrot Wellington during the Taste of the CATIES Lunch & Learn; however, due to unforeseen circumstances, his dish never made it onsite, so with a little creativity and ingenuity Harris and the back-of-house Art of Catering Food chefs were able to pivot and prepared a Sweet Potato Wellington as a substitute.

As a complement to seasonality, many chefs are turning toward creative solutions to get the most out of their seasonal ingredients as well by extending lifespans through such processes as pickling and fermentation (as discussed previously), in addition to utilizing seasonal ingredients in sauces and marinades, which can be batched and saved for later.

We saw the sign

Event and catering signage are evolving; innovative designs and technology are now being used as a way to enhance guest experiences and reinforce brand messaging.

Many caterers are now incorporating digital signage at food stations, using LED screens or projectors to showcase dynamic menus, real-time event updates, chef highlights, and engaging visuals. These modern solutions not only improve functionality but also contribute to a more immersive event atmosphere, where guests can interact with the signage in a meaningful way.

“Digital signage has come a long way,” said Stavros. “It’s getting better and better looking.”



(Starting from top) Large format signage during the Closing Night Party; the whiskey bar during the Opening Night Party; Vintage style theme during the Opening Night Party.



nt Celebration; Light up signage denoting the direction of signage helped immerse guests in an old-timey gangster

An emerging signage trend is the use of holograms positioned high above a station, as TLC Creative Technology illustrated with its HoloSign during Merrell's trends session and during the Closing Night Celebration.

Station signage is now incorporating event themes, as well as getting creative with the materials used (think of things like chalkboards, polaroid photographs, and food carvings).

Large-scale signage at food stations is playing an increasingly important role in enhancing both the aesthetic appeal and functionality of catered events. Oversized menu boards, backlit signs, and hanging banners help guide guests efficiently through food stations while reinforcing branding and event themes. These bold, eye-catching displays ensure that guests can easily identify different food options, dietary accommodations, and ingredient sourcing, reducing the need for staff explanations and streamlining the service experience.

"For mega events where you don't want people to be reading individually, they can walk up and see what's on the entire station, so they know whether they are going to stop there or not," said Stavros. "They just make it a little bit easier."

On the opposite side of the size spectrum, passed items are also getting innovative with their signage by clipping them vertically or even adhering them directly to the tray itself.

"That way there's less interference on the actual tray so you can fit more," said Stavros.

Automatically interesting

Artificial intelligence (AI) continues to be the topic of the moment within the catering and events industry as professionals try to

not only understand best practices but navigate the challenges and opportunities that come along with [new technology](#).

"Now remember, everyone knows that AI means artificial intelligence, but it has to be automatically interesting," said Kevin Bilida (TLC Creative Technology) during Merrell's session. "You should turn AI in your brain into automatically interesting, because if it's not interesting to the catering world and live events world, AI means nothing."

For example, [robotics](#) (specifically robotic baristas and bartenders) are becoming more common at events, not only as an entertainment tool, but also to help ease some of the pressure on bar staff.

"You can increase your bar output because the bartender can be working on another drink as the robot bartender is handing a guest a drink," said Bilida.

AI is also transforming the catering industry in myriad ways, as Chef Rich Rosendale discussed during his session *Catering with AI*, including:

- Enhancing creativity: AI complements, not replaces, culinary skills
- Streamlining operations: AI improves efficiency
- Personalizing experiences: AI-driven personalization crafts unique dining experiences tailored to each guest's preference
- Event logistics: Predictive AI scheduling optimizes every aspect of event planning and execution
- Customer engagement: AI-powered storytelling creates compelling narratives that elevate the dining experience

Now, AI isn't flawless, which is why a caterer's touch is still needed, but it can be a great source for inspiration, to help with roadblocks, and can offer a starting point, thus cutting down on menu R&D (research and development) significantly.



Chef Rich Rosendale (Rosendale Events) used artificial intelligence to develop this recipe, which he then demonstrated during his session on AI (sous vide pork belly, parmesan, heirloom tomato confit, crispy pork skin tuile, and micro herbs).

AUTOMATICALLY INTERESTING



During the Closing Night Celebration, a robotic arm was ready and waiting to serve attendees cocktails.

“It’s like having a window to the world’s flavors and trends, helping you to innovate and keep your menu fresh and exciting,” said Chef Peter McCaffrey in an [article for Catersource](#).

This method of using AI was on full display during Catersource + The Special Event when Rosendale prepared an AI-generated dish featuring sous vide pork belly, parmesan, heirloom tomato confit, crispy pork skin tuile, and micro herbs.

Since the initial emergence of AI, there has been constant discussion over whether AI will result in caterers and chefs being out of a job, but many industry professionals are of the opinion today that no, AI will not replace the events industry but will enhance it.

“Our industry still has not fully recovered from an employment perspective,” said Stavros, “but I predict that one of the unintended consequences of AI is that it’s going to eliminate a lot of middle and upper management and creative jobs, so there’s going to be a lot more people looking for work at some point, and that’s going to bring them back to our industry.”

“We have always needed human interaction in our industry. AI can help us build programs, build menus, and come up with great ideas, but AI isn’t going to serve somebody; I don’t want a robot serving me, I want another human being there because I want that interaction, but there are a lot of tools in the meantime where AI can help in our world.”

As technology continues to evolve, the catering industry will see even greater integration of robotics and AI, making food service faster, more personalized, and more sustainable. These innovations not only enhance operational efficiency but also create unique, memorable dining experiences that blend convenience with cutting-edge technology.

Even though AI and robotics are still quite a ways off from being fully embraced and integrated into the events industry, learning about it now and experimenting with how to use it is of the utmost importance.

“It’s not significant just yet, but it will be,” said Merrell. “Even though you may not be able to sell it to your clients just yet, you will, and it’ll become more prevalent, which is why it’s worth paying attention to now.”

Rosendale agrees. “Whether you are open to embracing AI or not, it’s coming,” he said. “So, it’s your job to find a way to catch all the balls in the air so that you are not at a disadvantage.”

Deliver a moment

Innovations in food and beverage delivery at events have evolved to offer both efficiency and spectacle, making dining an interactive experience. Today's event guests aren't content with traditional butler passing or station design anymore; they're looking for creativity, innovation, and the "wow" moment.

Caterers are stepping up the challenge by finding unique and engaging ways to pass items to guests. One standout method is the revival of hawker trays, where roaming vendors equipped with wearable serving stations move through crowds, offering bites and drinks on the go. These mobile food stations reduce congestion at food stations while keeping attendees engaged with an interactive, nostalgic experience. Hawker trays themselves can even go beyond the expected through the use of lighting, color, and unique vessels.

Another exciting trend is the use of conveyor belts (turn to [page 08](#) for more on how to incorporate this method) to deliver food directly to guests. At high-end festivals and VIP areas of sporting events, diners can pick from a rotating selection of small bites and beverages without needing to wait in line. Hanging food displays, such as suspended pretzels or zipline-style delivery systems, add an element of surprise and spectacle to the experience.

Beverage trucks and trailers that incorporate built-in tap systems have long been popular, and now this has given rise to "wine trikes," a pedal-powered mobile wine bar that brings beverages directly to guests.

Some high-tech events have even introduced robotic arms that pass food to guests with precision and flair (as noted above). These innovations not only enhance efficiency but also add an element of entertainment, making food service an integral part of the event itself.

"Why serve food the old-fashioned way when you can turn it into a spectacle," said Pacheco. "Events are making sure the 'how' is just as exciting as the 'what.'" **CS**

**LUX Catering & Events 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.*

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Hanging Bavarian pretzel station during the Opening Night Party.

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- [That's a Wrap on Catersource + The Special Event 2025](#)
- [A Look Back at Art of Catering Food 2025](#)
- [Connect Social Kicks of CS+TSE 2025 with an "Old Florida Oasis"](#)
- [CS+TSE 2025: Education on the Menu](#)
- [An Event Evolution: Inside the CS+TSE 2025 Opening Night Party](#)
- [CS+TSE 2025: There's No Place Like Home](#)
- [Your 2025 DICED Champion: Chef Paul Acosta](#)
- [CS+TSE 2025: Closing Night Celebration](#)

Thank you to every speaker, sponsor, attendee, volunteer, and more who made this show such a thrilling success.



By Robin Selden

Be in the Room Where It Happens: A Culinary Recap of AOCF 2025



(Top) *Exploring Canada's Bounty Beyond Poutine & Beaver Tails!* presented by Jeremy Langemann (Bingemans); (Above) *Beautiful Stations for Catered Occasions* presented by Jorden Dolan (Savory Events).

If you're a catering chef and weren't at the [Art of Catering Food](#) in Fort Lauderdale, you missed out, big time! As the emcee, I had the privilege of guiding 300 incredible catering professionals through two days of inspiration, education, and plenty of mouthwatering moments. And while I was technically the one holding the mic, I spent just as much time soaking in the knowledge as everyone else in that buzzing ballroom.

For those unfamiliar, AOCF is no ordinary conference. It's the *ultimate* catering experience with an awesome blend of food demos, industry insights, networking, and of course, a whole lot of culinary creativity. The magic of AOCF lies in its unique setup: one ballroom, 300 like-minded attendees eager to be inspired, and countless opportunities to learn, taste, and connect. It's a room filled with people who *get* it; the long hours, the passion, and the relentless drive to create unforgettable and delicious experiences for our clients.

One of the things I love most about AOCF is the camaraderie. You're not just watching speakers present; you're learning *with* them. Talented chefs take the stage, to share their insights, methods, and delicious creations. And yes, you get to sample those masterpieces! Talk about a perk of the job. When you start to see the volunteers come around the corner from behind the stage you know you are in for something special.... A taste sensation that's a sample of the delicious work these chefs are crafting and speaking about on that stage!

Day one

On day one, Chef Jeremy Langemann's (Bingemans) *Exploring Canada's Bounty Beyond Poutine & Beaver Trails* had everyone thinking differently about Canadian cuisine. Chefs Jenny Bast (Catering Creations) and Jonadel Tarrayo's (Daniel et Daniel) *Creating Culinary Flavor Bombs in Bulk* sparked serious excitement, the kind that has you scribbling notes in your notebook like your life depends on it. Chef Jordan Dolan's (Savory Events) *Beautiful Stations for Catered Occasions* presentation showcased stunning, thoughtful buffet displays that took food styling to the next level; and let's not forget the cherry on top of day one: the high-energy, wildly entertaining *Reverse Engineering: Unraveling the Secret Structure of Wedding Cakes* session by none other than Food Network star and cake extraordinaire Ron Ben-Israel. His innovative take on deconstructing a cake gave us a peek behind the curtain on how this master crafts his cakes ... and we got to taste them too.

This year's lineup was nothing short of phenomenal. Day one's Lunch & Learn was an innovative spin on Southern comfort food by chefs Boris Seymore and Keyon Hammond. Picture rich, soulful dishes reimagined with surprising twists. I mean those [coconut grits with oxtail and jackfruit](#) were outrageous! The food was creative and crave-worthy.

Day two

Day two's lunch took it up another notch with ICA (International Caterers Association) CATIE Award-winning dishes presented by the chefs who created them. These were more than just pretty plates; they were masterclasses in flavor, technique, and artistry and oh-so-

“Send your team, send yourself, and experience first-hand what makes AOCF the ultimate destination for catering professionals who want to grow, thrive, and ignite their creativity.”



Wedding cake extraordinaire Ron Ben-Israel presented *Reverse Engineering: Unraveling the Secret Structure of Wedding Cakes* during this year's conference.

inspiring! The [short ribs](#), [vegetable wellingtons](#), and the delicious [desserts](#) were SO YUM!!!

Day two was equally memorable. Chef Eric LeVine was super inspiring as our AOCF Keynote, and it was nice to see him back on stage at the conference. Chefs Karen O'Connor (Daniel et Daniel) and Alicia Smith (Cru Catering) dove deep into menu development, breaking down the art (and science) of crafting compelling yet strategic menus. Duce Raymond (Sweet Baby Rays Catering) and Chef Charles Haracz (Blue Plate Catering) delivered a flavorful masterclass in modern barbecue trends and collaborations, and Chef Nettie Frank wrapped things up as our sweet conclusion with her session, *Let Them Eat Cake: 10 New Sweet & Savory*

Dessert Ideas, which was as sweet and satisfying as the title suggests.

Oh, and did I mention the book signings? Many of these talented chefs are also authors, and attendees had the opportunity to snag signed copies of their books, which was a fantastic way to keep the inspiration flowing long after the conference ended. I wish I could mention [every single session](#), as the education was top-notch and curated for our audience in such a masterful way, but you'll have to take my word for it and come see for yourself next year.

Every catering company needs to be in that room! I'll say it loud and clear: if you're in the catering industry, you *need* to be at AOCF. Period. It's

the most underrated, underutilized conference in our industry, and that needs to change. What happens in that room is invaluable. It's not just the demos, the tips, or the trends; it's the connections, the conversations, and the camaraderie that make it truly special.

Every year, I see young chefs have those priceless "a-ha" moments. The kind that can redefine their career paths. This year was no different. Several newcomers approached me, glowing with inspiration, saying they'd never miss AOCF again. They left energized, brimming with ideas, and deeply grateful for the insights shared by both the speakers and their peers, and that's the beauty of this conference: you leave with more than just new recipes and presentation ideas. You leave with friends, mentors, and a renewed sense of purpose. The folks in that room aren't just colleagues; they become your tribe. The people who truly understand what it means to pour your heart and soul into creating unforgettable experiences.

Last year, after Catersource + The Special Event (turn to [page 26](#) for a look at the top trends from this year's conference, as well as from AOCF), [I wrote an article](#) urging every catering company to invest in sending their team to that conference. I feel just as passionate, if not more, about the Art of Catering Food. There's simply no substitute for being in *that* room, with *those* people, learning *those* lessons and could not personally feel more gratitude to be on that stage doing what I love as your emcee!

[So, mark your calendar for March 1-2, 2026.](#) Start planning now. Send your team, send yourself, and experience first-hand what makes AOCF the ultimate destination for catering professionals who want to grow, thrive, and ignite their creativity. Because there's nothing quite like being in the room where it happens! [CS](#)

All photos courtesy Dana Gibbons Photography/Ivan Piedad Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc.



(Top) AOCF keynote Chef Eric LeVine sampled a Hoisin Duck Quesadilla with a Plum & Pear Slaw topped with Chipotle Aioli during his session; (Above) Chef Nettie Frank presented *Let Them Eat Cake: 10 New Sweet & Savory Dessert Ideas*.



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. 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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MEAT THE CHALLENGE

Alternative proteins such as plant-based, insects, algae, and organ meats are bringing innovation to menus

The culinary world is in the midst of a protein revolution. As sustainability, health, and dietary diversity continue to be a focus,

alternative proteins are no longer just for the health-conscious or eco-minded. From cricket flour to algae, organ meats to plant-based innovations, these protein sources are no longer niche—they're going mainstream.

"I've always been passionate about experimenting with new ingredients and flavors and I'm always intrigued by how we can challenge conventional norms in cooking," says Chef Christopher Matthews (Eatertainment Events & Catering). "As sustainability and health become bigger topics in the culinary world, alternative proteins present a fascinating way to innovate and address the growing demand for more sustainable dining options."

(Left) Mae Mae-Beet Sliders from Great Performances. Photo courtesy Cami Cicero; (Facing page) It's never easy recreating a classic and well known dish like a Beef Wellington as a vegan dish, but Dish Food & Events did just that with the CATIE-winning dish [Carrot Wellington](#) (parnip puree, urfa roasted rainbow carrots, chestnut cream, cremini and baby portobello duxelles, and dill oil), which not only allows guests to taste the freshness of the garden, but it also creates an appetizing visual, using a rainbow of colored carrots. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Dish Food & Events



Health check

As global concerns about environmental sustainability, health, and ethical food production grow, alternative proteins present a viable solution.

The United Nations projects that by 2050, feeding the global population (which is expected to rise to 9.5 billion people) will require a 70% increase in food production.

Traditional protein sources, particularly red meat, come with hefty environmental costs, including high water usage and carbon emissions. By contrast, crickets,

for example, require a fraction of the water and land needed to raise livestock, while algae are one of the most sustainable food sources on Earth, thriving in conditions that require minimal resources.

"Food is one of those really significant climate issues," said Edwina Hughes (CoolFood, World Resources Institute) in a session during the Culinary Institute of America's [Menus of Change conference](#) "and it's a naughty issue."

In 2019, [the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change \(IPCC\)](#), featuring food scientists and policy makers, released a global assessment that

named alternative proteins as the transformative solution.

Meanwhile, consumers are increasingly demanding sustainable, health-conscious menu options.

In fact, 72% of Americans feel eating more sustainably is urgent, said Hughes.

"[Focusing on mindful eating and whole ingredients] led me to explore alternative proteins as a way to create delicious, satisfying meals while aligning with my values of sustainability and health," says Chef Jeffrey Schlissel (The Bacon Cartel). "It then became a passion for pushing the bounds of what alternative protein foods are because I wanted to provide options for diverse dietary needs and demonstrate that plant-based and alternative proteins can be as craveable and satisfying as traditional proteins."

The power of plants

We can't dive into the world of alternative proteins without first looking at [plant-based proteins](#), since they have quickly become the darlings of the culinary world.

"They're healthier, more inclusive, more sustainable, and—most importantly—delicious," says Katie Cantrell (Greener by Default). "When plant-based dishes feature exciting flavors and are prepared well, they can be a delightful departure from the standard options that everyone expects, and even stand out as the star of the show."

Some examples of plant-based proteins that are finding star-making roles on menus include such options as [jackfruit](#), lentils, tempeh, [soy](#), chickpeas, and of course [mushrooms](#).

"So often plant-based options are an afterthought, a box to be checked off so that there's something for vegetarians to eat while all of the



energy is channeled into the meat-based options,” says Cantrell. “As a result, many people have negative connotations of plant-based items as bland and insubstantial. Often the plant-based option is just roasted vegetables, which are lacking in calories and protein, leaving diners hungry 20 minutes later.

“When caterers use their creativity and skill to craft dishes containing plant-based proteins that feature popular flavors and ingredients, they can sell them as exciting new options that all guests can enjoy.”

While a Quinoa-Stuffed Bell Pepper might sound boring even to vegans, everyone’s mouths will water at the idea of Porcini Truffle Risotto with Cannellini Beans or Fresh Spring Rolls with Lemongrass Tofu and Peanut Sauce.

Plant-based proteins lend themselves quite well to a variety of cuisines, especially those with bold, rich flavors like Mexican, [Floribbean](#), Mediterranean, and Asian. They can easily take on spices and sauces, making them versatile in many dishes.

It’s also important to emphasize the popularity and deliciousness of the plant-based options, rather than that they’re plant-based. Many studies have found that prominently labeling an option as plant-based/vegetarian/meatless dramatically lowers the chances that an omnivore will choose those options, says Cantrell.

“Often caterers market vegetarian options towards vegetarians, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; people who don’t identify as vegetarian will not go out of their way to select a vegetarian meal or settle for a hummus wrap when there are burgers available,” she says. “By placing the focus on flavor, we can avoid the identity triggers that come with emphasizing that foods are plant-based.”

Under the sea

While we mostly think of seafood as being fish, crustacean, or bi-valve, sea vegetables are one protein category that is currently gaining traction.

The category of sea vegetables is incredibly broad and includes such ingredients as nori, duckweed, spirulina, sea moss, kelp, dulse, agar agar, and so many more. These exotic sounding delicacies have been a staple in Asian cuisine for centuries for good reason—each one is packed with fiber and nutrients like antioxidants, iodine, iron, protein, amino acids, folic acid, calcium, and more, making them superfoods. However, in Western civilizations they are only now just being added to menus. In fact, Whole Foods identified plant-based aquatic ingredients as one of its [top trends for 2025](#).

What’s more, since about 70% of the Earth is covered with water, sea vegetable aquaculture is viable in myriad locations on both the East and West coasts of the U.S.

For example, kelp farming requires no land, fresh water, or fertilizers and actually helps improve water quality by absorbing carbon dioxide and excess nutrients. As a result, seaweed and kelp have become favorites among eco-conscious chefs and diners alike, appearing in everything from kelp noodle salads to seaweed crisps, making it easy for consumers to enjoy a delicious, low-impact food source. Or consider featuring spirulina in smoothies, energy bars, or as a topping for vegan bowls. Use seaweed in sushi-inspired hors d’oeuvres or as a salty garnish for soups.

Algae and seaweed are also the main ingredients in many plant-based seafood alternatives, such as tuna, salmon, scallops, and [shrimp](#).

“We saw an opportunity to create unique and sustainable menu



Foie gras mousse and wine gelée on brioche with pomegranate



Marinated Beef and Seaweed Salad. Photo courtesy Thomas Ca



seeds from Culinary Crafts. Photo courtesy Elisha Braithwaite



terers of Distinction

Organ meat

Organ meats are being touted as a superfood providing significant protein, vitamins, and minerals, leading diners to seek meat blends that combine traditional muscle meat like ground beef with organ meats, thus making it easier to enjoy the nutritional benefits without having to learn how to prepare liver, kidney, or heart.

Consider highlighting them in familiar dishes, such as [liver pâté](#), heart skewers, or bone marrow bruschetta.

Insects

Though thought to be niche by some, insect protein is regularly consumed by more than two billion people in 80% of the countries in the world. However, insects have yet to make a dent in the palates of Americans.

“Here in the West, it is taboo to eat insects, but in many other countries, it is the norm,” says Schlissel.

However, the “taboo” nature of insects may be on its way out thanks to the emergence of insect powders and flours.

For example, cricket powder is made from crickets that are ground whole. The texture is like any kind of flour and the taste is rich—a little nutty, with a hint of earthy umami flavor and raw cocoa, which makes it very easy to slip into recipes.

“So many people go to the extreme when talking about eating something that they consider a pest,” said Joseph Yoon (Brooklyn Bugs) during a [webinar](#) on cooking with insects with the American Culinary Federation.

“There’s all these negative ideas that insects are the furthest thing from something you would actually want to put in your mouth, but we’re not talking about going into your backyard and catching some bugs—one of the fundamental things of cooking with insects is that it still has to taste good.”

Although there has been a learning

items that could cater to diverse dietary preferences and reduce the environmental impact of our operations,” says Charlie Schaffer (Schaffer LA). “Sustainable seafood alternatives, in particular, became a focus due to the alarming rates of [overfishing and the need to preserve marine ecosystems](#). We were excited to challenge culinary norms and introduce our customers to new flavors and textures—our goal is to [create a menu](#) that is both innovative and environmentally responsible.”

Thinking beyond the basics

Protein alternatives are not strictly reserved for plant-based options; there has been a rising interest in expanding the definition of “protein” to include a wide range of options.



recipe

CRICKET HUMMUS

Recipe courtesy Kathleen Schaffer

Photo courtesy Schaffer LA

ingredients

- 3 T roasted garlic
- 1 cup hempseed
- ½ cup sesame tahini
- ⅓ cup fresh lemon juice
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 4 T cricket powder (such as Aketta)
- 2 T sesame oil
- 1 cup water
- 3 T honey
- 1 tsp Sri Lankan roasted curry
- 1 tsp toasted cumin, ground
- 3 cups chickpeas

method

1. Hydrate the cricket powder with lemon juice in a food processor
2. Mix garlic, hempseed, tahini, extra virgin olive oil, and sesame oil in a robot coupe until a paste forms and the hempseed has been broken down to become smooth
3. Add remaining ingredients to robot coupe and mix until a smooth hummus forms
4. Chill to reserve

curve for Western consumers, creative branding and appealing products are helping normalize insect protein as a healthy and environmentally friendly choice.

Known for being high in protein, rich in essential nutrients, and highly sustainable, insects have become a popular choice for protein bars, pasta, muffins, cakes, crackers, and even chips. Or if you're feeling adventurous, incorporate whole roasted crickets as a garnish for salads or tacos, adding a crunchy element.

Not only do insects pack a protein punch; insect farming is also sustainable and a completely organic process. The world is looking at dwindling water supplies and insect cultivation can help with water conservation, especially when you consider it takes one gallon of water to make cricket protein and 2,000 gallons of water to make the same amount of beef protein.

Regarding greenhouse gases, crickets

“I approach alternative proteins like any ingredient: layering flavors, enhancing texture through preparation techniques, and ensuring visual appeal with thoughtful plating.” —Chef Jeffrey Schlissel

produce a mere 1% of what cows produce.

“Edible insects capture the interest and intrigue,” says Yoon, “and insect agriculture connects us with a viable solution within global food systems.”

Beyond traditional beef

There have been several alternatives to traditional proteins that have emerged as of late (exotic meats such as wild boar, frog legs, ostrich, elk, and bison).

Consumer demand for new flavors and experiences coupled with the reality of rising costs for many

everyday proteins in some cases has elevated the introduction of less-common meats, poultry, and other animal-derived products.

We can expect more operators to go beyond standard beef, pork, poultry, and seafood to explore a wider variety of animal proteins, according to [Technomic](#).

Blends and hybrids

Though still emerging, cultured meats and fermented proteins like mycoprotein (e.g., Quorn) add cutting-edge appeal.

Whereas blended products include



Root vegetable pavé with mushroom demi-glace. Photo courtesy Wolfgang Puck Catering/Lisette Gatliff

blends of plant-based meat and conventional meat, hybrid products are combinations of plant-based meat and cultivated meat. However, consumer acceptance of either type of product may be challenging; [surveys of consumer preferences](#) indicate that conventional meat products are perceived as tastier compared to alternative meats, including blended products.

“Within the industry, alternative proteins are niche, as many vegetarians or vegan diners don’t want a protein that looks and acts like an animal protein and would rather have fresh local ingredients,” says Drew Swanson (Wolfgang Puck Catering). “Sure, the interest in these alternative proteins comes from market demand, but I would encourage chefs to focus on vegetables and local, seasonal offerings.”

Many of these hybrid products have

the potential to introduce cost-competitive versions of cultivated meat to the market while improving the taste of plant proteins.

“As these proteins become more mainstream, I see them being an integral part of our menu, providing more options for our customers while maintaining our culinary standards,” says Matthews.

Integrating into menus

The reality is that not every audience will embrace exotic meats, nor will they entirely welcome plants as a main or first course, so that’s why menu development is such a crucial first step.

It starts with first understanding the protein’s characteristics—it’s flavor profile, texture, mouth feel, etc.—then it’s time to consider cooking

methods, versatility, and customer appeal.

“The key is in the preparation and pairing,” says Matthews. “We’ve developed methods to cook alternative proteins in a way that enhances their natural flavor and texture, like marinating or adding specific seasonings.”

Maybe you want to use these alternative proteins in a familiar classic, such as serving a cricket-flour brownie with vanilla ice cream which will feel approachable. Or maybe you want to give alternative proteins a starring role rather than hiding them. For instance, a lentil and beet “steak” can be plated beautifully to rival any traditional dish.

“I approach alternative proteins like any ingredient: layering flavors, enhancing texture through preparation techniques, and ensuring visual appeal with thoughtful plating,” says Schlissel.

Navigating costs

For most foodservice operations, protein is the ingredient with the highest food costs—and the most volatile pricing. Shortages and market fluctuations, whether seasonal or circumstantial, can make profitability and consistency challenging—especially when it’s not possible to adjust menu prices. This is particularly true of premium proteins such as beef.

Alternative proteins can offer a solution to this challenge since they can help diversify the menu and reduce dependency on traditional meats, especially as sourcing conventional proteins becomes more expensive and supply chains fluctuate. They can provide a more consistent price point, reducing some of the uncertainty in the supply chain. Plus, alternative proteins often require less land and water to produce, making them more resilient to supply chain disruptions. However,

availability and sourcing could still pose challenges.

While some alternative proteins, like organ meats, are cost-effective, others, such as algae or lab-grown products, can strain budgets.

“We’ve found that while alternative proteins can sometimes be more expensive upfront, we can manage costs through careful portion control, creative menu design, and balancing them with more affordable ingredients,” says Matthews.

Schaffer adds that he also helps manage costs by “integrating them into high-margin dishes and using them in creative ways.”

Breaking barriers

While cost may be prohibitive to integrating alternative proteins into menus, the real challenge is breaking through customer perceptions.

Convincing clients to embrace alternative proteins can be a challenge, as these foods often carry stereotypes of being unappetizing or overly niche.

“Resistance often comes from misconceptions about taste or nutrition,” says Schlissel, “but most customers are curious and open-minded, especially when the focus is on creating delicious, approachable dishes.”

Educate customers about the products by including brief descriptions about the alternative protein used in a dish or share the compelling backstories of these proteins. Highlight their cultural significance, sustainability, and health benefits. Clients often respond positively to foods with a purpose. Or offer samples of something to break through preconceived ideas of what a dish may taste like. Also, make sure to account for those customers who just aren’t adventurous, offering alternative proteins alongside traditional options.



Aged Pekin duck wood-roasted on the bone, quandong, and dried liver from Brae. Photo courtesy Colin Page



This Braised Lentil & Vegetable Shepherd's Pie features russet mashed potatoes, carrots, celery, bourbon, green lentil du puy, portobello mushrooms, and peas. Photo courtesy Idaho Potato Commission

As awareness of alternative proteins grows, they are poised to become staples rather than novelties.

Alternative proteins represent more than a trend—they are a shift toward a more sustainable and inclusive food future.

“Our journey has been one of discovery and innovation,” says Schaffer. “Incorporating alternative proteins has not only allowed us to create exciting new dishes but has

also deepened our commitment to sustainability and responsible dining.”

So, whether it’s a cricket-enriched canapé or an algae-infused smoothie, now is the time to embrace the protein revolution.

“Start with curiosity, experiment without bias, and focus on flavor first,” says Schlissel. **CS**

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Andrea Correale with Elegant Affairs says packing the perfect picnic features traditional bites with a creative spin | Photo courtesy Elegant Affairs



Crudites platter, pepperoni pizza, and raspberry cheesecake | Photo courtesy Entertainment Events & Catering



For 30+ years, Tasty Catering has been creating delicious custom picnic menus featuring a variety of delicious options including favorites like grilled-to-order burgers and their 18-hour smoked brisket | Photo courtesy Tasty Catering



Red Onion Tarts | Photo courtesy Kemp and Kemp Catering



(Left) Picnic-style grazing board | **Photo courtesy Aussie Beef & Lamb**; (Below) Oasis Picnics specializes in creating picture-perfect, luxury pop-up picnics on the island of Oahu | **Photo courtesy Greg Noir**; (Bottom right) This Spring Party features Teacup Charcuterie, White Chocolate Cheese Pops, Gazpacho Shots, Butter Cups, Smörgåstårta (Swedish Sandwich Cake) and Frosted Cookie Cups | **Photo courtesy California Milk Advisory Board**



Nothing beats an icy-cold popsicle when the summer sun is blazing during al-fresco events | **Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts**





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An elegant, mysterious greeter from Vamos Events met attendees at CS+TSE's Connect Social event. Turn to [page 32](#) for the top trends seen at this year's show.

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EDITOR'S PAGE

Bon Voyage

For those of you who have been in the event industry for a while, you probably know my boss, the fabulous Melissa Fromento. She is that no-nonsense blond hurricane with the dangly earrings and blue eye shadow that has been bustling around (especially) The Special Event for decades.

While I've been with the company for over 11 years now, she served for 35 (!!). She became my supervisor in December 2019, right as the year was turning to 2020. That year, 2020—not only was it our very successful pandemic show in Las Vegas, which bowed the Thursday before the world shut down—but she also received the Steve Kemble Leadership Award at our annual Leadership Luncheon. I have never seen anyone more surprised when her name was announced, but she gracefully managed an acceptance speech that was filled with warmth and humility.

Actually, as I write this, Melissa will be my boss for just a few more days. Wouldn't you know it, but she decided to retire on March 31, opting to literally "sail off into the sunset" as she embarks on a new chapter of her life, with cruise shipping a huge part of her agenda for 2025.

I wanted to write about Melissa today, because it's a fact that the kind of leadership you have on the job can make or break your experience. It can determine whether you look for new opportunities or keep yourself happily planted. All I know is that I'm not the only person who would follow that lady to the ends of the earth in search of a new way of creating a customer experience, while (of course) keeping an eye on the bottom line.

So, bon voyage, my dear colleague and friend. Retirement is sweet when you leave a legacy.

Kathleen Stoehr
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Photo courtesy Tim Tab Studios and Catering by Michaels



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 courtesy Tim Tab Studios and Catering by Michaels



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 courtesy Tim Tab Studios and Catering by Michaels



Nonprofits

Galas and fundraisers are key to the success of most charitable organizations. With a focus on achieving positive financial and membership goals, the LCA is highly attuned to the needs of charities. The LCA is a great resource for all of the necessary components to make nonprofit events successful.

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That's a Wrap!

Catersource + The Special Event 2025 wrapped up an amazing week in Fort Lauderdale at the end of February! Thank you to everyone who joined us—or partnered with us—for inspirational keynotes, educational sessions, exciting tradeshow activities and competitions, and our ever-beloved evening events! The events industry is made up of incredible individuals who form a strong community, and we are so honored to host the gathering of those who make gathering special.

Join Us in Los Angeles, CA

Of course, now that this year's event is over, it's time to prepare for next year! Our team is already deep into planning for a week of stellar learning, networking, and opportunity next March 2-5, 2026 at the Los Angeles Convention Center. Mark your calendar and get ready to join us in the City of Angels!

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Have a topic you'd like to share with your peers? Call for Speakers is now open for Catersource + The Special Event, which will be in Los Angeles March 2-5, 2026. Go to <https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/> for conference information, or <https://tse2026.cfp.catersource.com/> to pitch a session topic. We can hardly wait to hear from you!



Attendees closed out the week at the Closing Night Celebration, "Legends and Luminaries," a nod to the exceptional figures shaping the event and entertainment industries. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra/AGNYC Productions, Inc./SpotMyPhotos

Gala Awards Now Open

It's once again time to celebrate the best of the best! Submissions are now being accepted for the *Special Events 2026 Gala Awards*! We invite you to submit your best work from the past year. Join in the excitement and the spirit of our industry as we celebrate the hard work and exceptional accomplishments of our peers.

Head over to our website to see this year's [Gala Award finalists](#).

Stay Tuned!

Over the next few months, we'll be rolling out recaps of our 2025 conference and tradeshow on our blog and social media. Make sure you're signed up for our [newsletters](#) to stay up to date! [SE](#)



The ACE, Gala, and CATIE awards ceremony featured a performance by The Jewel Tones (Backbeat Entertainment), who threw it back with Motown classics. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra/AGNYC Productions, Inc./SpotMyPhotos



Opening Keynote Speaker Will Guidara spoke on the power of unreasonable hospitality. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra/AGNYC Productions, Inc./SpotMyPhotos

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The Digital Mirage: How Social Media Can Warp Event Planning Expectations



Trends have come such a long way in the world of events, but understandably, they aren't always communicated realistically on social media.

By Meghan Ely

Social media is arguably one of the best ways to grow your business, establish your brand, and connect with potential clients—you virtually (pun intended!) can't go without it to run a successful event company.

However, social media can also, in turn, work against event pros in the sense that it can spread misinformation and shape unrealistic expectations in the eyes of your target audience. Pinterest, Instagram, and TikTok are all wonderful for exposure, but rarely do they show the full picture of budgets, vendor capabilities, and attainable aspirations versus those AI creates.

Let's start with common misconceptions

The fact is that most event clients haven't planned a large-scale celebration, and social media is where their knowledge often begins and ends. It can be great for crafting a general idea of their preferences, but their perception of getting from point A to B will likely be skewed.

According to Brittany Branson of By Brittany Branson, a lot of the disconnect is due to budgeting. "I definitely believe the number one misconception is always about cost. There's quite a disconnect between cost education directed at couples

verses the caliber of events these platforms promote.

For example, so many major outlets continue to tell couples that the average wedding in the United States runs about \$33,000. However, you'll rarely see those same outlets share images from a wedding with that total cost, let alone take major differences in geography or regional culture into account. Understandably, it's frustrating for couples, and that frustration is then re-directed at us event professionals."

Another big misconception is that every wedding or event is extravagant and over-the-top, when in reality, clients are just seeing the highlights on social media.

Dominic Fournier of The Wedding Duo notes, "If a couple sees event highlights on social media, they might be misled into thinking their wedding is less than everyone else's event. When the truth is, wedding professionals tend to capture every aspect of the big, beautiful, high-end weddings, and that's what they post, but they probably do just as many weddings at the church hall, VFW, or local gym."

What happens when the budget and the vision don't match

So, let's say a client has pulled inspiration from social media for their event but doesn't necessarily have the budget or resources to achieve the vision. What can you do



to meet them where they are and pull off an event they'll love?

Kevin Dennis of Fantasy Sound Event Services shares, "Instagram and Pinterest can be a great source of inspiration for an event, but what you see online is not always realistic. Clients are often only exposed to large productions or celebrity-level events on these platforms. Therefore, it's our duty as creative partners to educate and provide our clients with alternative solutions. Asking for their budget and inspiration photos ahead of time will allow you to plan for those solutions that give a similar feel but fit within their budget. You never want to tell a client 'No,' but be transparent about what is achievable. Use this as an opportunity to highlight personal touches and unique highlights that will make their event special without replicating expensive trends."

Branson also suggests digging into the client's "why." "This is a lesson we delve deep into in the arts and humanities. People rarely often say they 'like' something just for the sake of liking it. There's always a deeper 'why.' They often just don't have the vocabulary (or were never taught) to describe their 'why.' For example, if a client pulls a picture of ceremony aisle florals and claims

they love it—why? By asking better questions, an event professional may discover the client loves that inspiration because of smaller, more tangible details (that may ultimately be within budget)."

The hard truth: when is someone just not a fit?

Unfortunately, despite your best efforts to educate a potential client and trying to blast some common misconceptions before they even arrive in your inbox, there are still going to be those that won't be a good fit. Here's the difference.

According to Dennis, "Clients who resist compromise or become too fixated on a specific idea can be a red flag. These clients may present high-budget inspiration without providing transparency about their actual budget. You may see unpractical expectations for décor and setup that a vendor cannot

accommodate or be too fixated on replicating a social media trend. It can be difficult to help a client who is dismissive of professional advice or creative alternatives. Recently, the popularity of AI-generated images has further fueled these unrealistic expectations, so assisting clients in understanding what works and what doesn't is beyond crucial."

Trends have come such a long way in the world of events, but understandably, they aren't always communicated realistically on social media. Planning is tricky enough from a professional perspective, so setting the record straight regarding expectations is an incredibly important step in the process! [SE](#)

Meghan Ely is the owner of wedding PR and wedding marketing firm [OFD Consulting](#). Ely is a sought-after speaker and a self-professed royal wedding enthusiast.

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How Smaller Weddings Are Reshaping the Event Marketing Funnel



Smaller weddings aren't a setback—they're an opportunity.

By Christie Osborne

The wedding market grew 4% this year, but couples are inviting fewer guests—and spending more on each one. According to [The Wedding Report](#), guest counts are trending down while per-guest spending is rising on attire, photography, and premium experiences.

This isn't about budget cuts. It's a shift in values.

[Smaller weddings](#) reflect a focus on quality, personalization, and meaning. And that shift is changing more than just the celebration—it's changing how couples shop for vendors, make decisions, and move toward booking.

Smart event pros are rethinking how they attract interest, follow up, and guide couples toward “yes,” because the path from “just looking” to “ready to book” isn't what it used to be.

Getting found is easy—getting chosen is harder

After years of uncertainty, attracting attention is getting easier. Ads are driving traffic. Social posts are getting engagement. Your website is showing up in search. In short, couples are finding you.

But being found isn't enough.

Today's couples are slower to reach out—and even slower to commit to a consultation. They want control, time to research, and space to decide at their own pace. That makes the step between inquiry and booking the most fragile part of your process.

From working with vendors across the industry, I've found these three numbers reveal the true health of your booking journey:

- *Awareness to Inquiry Rate:* If people are seeing you but not reaching out, then your message may not be clear, compelling, or relevant enough to inspire action.
- *Inquiry to Consult Rate:* If they're inquiring but not committing to a conversation, then your follow-up may need to build more trust, clarity, or urgency.
- *Sales Rate:* If the sale isn't happening, no amount of marketing can fix it.

Each step builds on the one before it.

Visibility only matters if it leads to action. Inquiries are just the beginning—you still need to turn interest into conversations, and conversations into bookings. When you know where things are working—or stalling—you can make smarter, more focused improvements that actually move the needle.



Fewer guests = higher stakes

When weddings averaged 150+ guests, there was more room to rely on standard packages and built-in margin. But with guest counts shrinking and spending focused on fewer, more meaningful elements, every decision feels weightier to the couple—and more valuable to you.

That means:

- Every inquiry matters
- Every follow-up must feel personal
- Every offer should be positioned as the right fit, not just a list of features

It's easy to assume you're losing bookings to competitors—but more often, the real issue is confusion, hesitation, or a lack of connection. To stand out:

- Speak to what couples care about—values, experience, emotional impact
- Make your details easy to understand—no vague pricing or buried FAQs
- Don't assume ghosting means indecision. Many couples book elsewhere and just don't say so. A kind, simple check-in can bring clarity and free up your time

When fewer people are reaching out, you can't afford to let strong leads fade without thoughtful follow-up.

What you can improve to book more clients

In product-based businesses, it's easy to test and measure results. But in the event industry, disconnected systems and human conversations often make clean data hard to come by.

Still, you can apply a mindset of continuous improvement. Even without perfect tools, you can:

- Track where inquiries come from
- Look for delays or drop-offs in your follow-up
- Test small changes—subject lines, form fields, or first replies

When you focus on turning interest into action—not just chasing more traffic—you build a business that's more reliable and resilient.

Focus on what's working—and do more of it

You don't have to offer everything. The smartest move is refining your services around what books consistently, feels good to deliver, and attracts the right clients.

Here's a simple gut check:

- If something books easily and runs smoothly, do more of it
- If something takes tons of effort and rarely sells, rethink or reposition it

- If you're getting lots of inquiries but not bookings, revisit how you're communicating value—it may not be as clear or aligned as you think

The better you understand what's working, the easier it is to shape your website, conversations, and offers around what actually moves people to book.

The way couples book is changing—are you keeping up?

Smaller weddings aren't a setback—they're an opportunity. A chance to work with couples who value meaning over excess and to build a business that's more sustainable, personal, and profitable.

But that only works if your process evolves alongside your clients.

Couples are more selective. They expect more clarity, trust, and alignment from the start. You don't need to chase more leads—you need to make the most of every inquiry, every reply, every conversation.

This isn't about doing more.

It's about doing what you already do—better. **SE**

Christie Osborne is the owner of *Mountainside Media*, a company that helps event industry professionals and brands develop scalable marketing strategies that bring in more inquiries and leads. Christie is a national educator with recent speaking engagements at NACE Experience, WIPA, ABC Conference, and *Catersource + The Special Event*. Christie regularly shares industry insight in her *Special Events* column, as well as on *Wed Altered*, *Rising Tide Society*, *WeddingIQ*, and NACE's industry blog.



ON TREND

A helium balloon performer lifts into the air at an event by MC&A DMC. Photo courtesy Brian Dennehy

A New Era

IN EVENT ENTERTAINMENT



Exciting new trends to incorporate into your events this year

By Amanda Nicklaus

If there's one word to sum up the way events changed after the pandemic, it's *immersive*. We've seen the ways that attendees crave exciting, interactive experiences that completely engulf them in another world for the duration of an event. Driving that immersive experience is event entertainment.

"Stand-alone live entertainment has become a bit passé," observes Sebastien Centner (Eatertainment Events & Catering), "and it is now moving toward live entertainment that is more interactive or has more elements like integration of food items or immersive environments. Guests no longer want to be passive observers—they want to engage, and they want to feel transported." Today's events are wrapped in a variety of eye-catching, total-sensory features, giving attendees an experience that engages them from the second they [step through the door](#) to the moment they pack up their [party favors](#). Here's how you can use the latest entertainment trends to delight your attendees.

Musical endeavors

One of the most obvious forms of event entertainment is music, but if you're imagining a simple DJ set in the background, think again. Live music is back in a big way, and today's entertainers provide unique, interactive experiences—stepping off the stage to interact with guests, roaming through the venue with instrument in hand, even customizing the playlist to fit



An electric violinist hyped up the crowd that gathered for the Opening General Session at Catersource + The Special Event 2025. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions/SpotMyPhotos

the guests' specific taste—which sometimes means adjusting the music on the fly.

"Customization is a big deal," says Craig Peterman (Craig Peterman Photography & Videography). "Couples want live bands to reflect their personalities, so you'll see a band transition from playing a classic Sinatra tune during cocktail

hour to a high-energy Bruno Mars dance set at the reception. The ability to adapt to the crowd has become a key selling point."

Many event planners even provide surprise and delight by bringing in top-tier headliners that remain secret until their performance begins. As far as the performers themselves? "I'm seeing an increase



ON TREND

in large bands with 10 to 15 members,” says Nicole Chan (Nicole Chan Photo & Video). Larger bands make a statement and increase the energy.

So do unexpected musical pairings. “Think electric violinists performing with house DJs or saxophonists adding a live element to a club-style atmosphere,” says Centner.

Classic music is also back in style. Vijay Goel (440 Elm) notes, “We are seeing more of a throwback to music that would have been played in the clubs in the 20s–50s—jazz, singers, bands—more acoustic and more of a focus on elegance and classics.”

It’s not just throwbacks, however; cultural fusion is also on the rise, combining musical styles from around the world. Finally, weddings commonly see officiants doing double duty as emcees, guiding the event from one portion of the night to the next.

As far as visual performances, aerial balloon dancers, who perform suspended in the sky lifted by helium balloons, are also on the rise (no pun intended).

Interactive music and stunning visual performances can bring the event to life and increase engagement with guests.

Captivating food & beverage

One aspect of events that has grown increasingly entertaining is food and beverage. Much of the general population identifies as a “foodie,” a term that these days largely has to do with being a “food hobbyist,” as an article from [Tasting Table](#) puts it. What this translates to in the world of events is attendees who expect to be [wowed at every turn](#), presented

with highly creative or even obscure food offerings, proffered in the most interactive ways.

Indeed, [immersive dining](#) is on every caterer’s mind, engaging all five senses of the diner. Menus are tied into larger event themes, catering staff costumed and playing the part. “We’re seeing more creative passed apps and station experiences, including smoke, dry ice, sparklers, and [sensory elements](#),” says Goel.

“Dining is no longer just about eating—it’s about experiencing,” says Centner. “Guests want meals to be an extension of the event theme, and interactive food stations, tableside presentations, and chef-led culinary experiences are taking center stage.

“At Eatertainment, we often incorporate performance elements into dining, whether it’s a chef smoking mushrooms in front of guests or a cocktail mixologist creating personalized drinks with molecular elements. People love food that engages their senses beyond taste alone.”





Roaming food stations and [theatrical action stations](#) incorporate F&B throughout the entirety of the event. "I photograph many multicultural Asian weddings, and I've seen bubble tea bars becoming increasingly popular," notes Chan. "Guests love the experience of making their own bubble tea and adding custom toppings like lychee jelly, coconut jelly, and black sesame boba. Custom fortune cookies have also been a fun and personal touch at these weddings."

(Clockwise starting at top left) A saxophone brought style to an 8-piece band at the 2025 Opening Night Party. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc/SpotMyPhotos; In their session *Pop Culture's Influence on the Industry*, Miro Diamanté, DMCP and Kate Patay noted the up-and-coming popularity of synchronized swimmers as event entertainment. In this photo: swimmers at an event by Cirque Berzerk. Photo courtesy Ptaufiq Photography; Glow-in-the-dark popcorn wowed attendees at the Opening Night Party. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc/SpotMyPhotos; A wine trike by Cirque Mechanics served attendees with dramatic flair at this year's Closing Night Celebration. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc/SpotMyPhotos



ON TREND



(Top and above) Foraging is a popular immersive form of entertainment that connects attendees to their food. Shown here: First Nature Tours brings attendees out on a forage and then makes a meal of the gathered ingredients. Photo courtesy First Nature Tours

Caterource + The Special Event featured some unique food and beverage stations this year, with Flavour Blaster bubble cocktails, Chinese takeout, deconstructed lobster BLTs—even a glow-in-the-dark popcorn station! Attendees loved the unique, photo-worthy F&B stations because they were micro-experiences within the larger events themselves.

Foraging is becoming popular, too, and even if the menu doesn't use foraged elements, it can allude to

them. "I had a couple who were passionate about mushrooms and foraging, and their salad course was designed to represent a nest of mushrooms with a tiny quail egg," says Chan. "Thoughtful and interactive dining experiences like this make the meal a memorable part of the event."

Eating and imbibing should provide active entertainment that threads through the whole of the event, making dining a chance to reinforce the larger event themes.

Amping up with tech

Technology largely contributes to entertainment in the modern event world. Whether a centerpiece of the soiree, like fireworks and drone shows, or a small feature threaded throughout the affair, tech is everywhere, bulking up event entertainment and pulling attendees into engaging moments.

"Technology is at the forefront, offering cutting-edge entertainment like virtual reality, augmented reality (AR), and interactive tech installations that engage guests in unique ways," says JC York (Classic Entertainment / Wise Guys InterACTIVE).

One form of installation is social media ops. According to Centner, "Events now feature entertainment designed to be shared—photo booths with unique backdrops, TikTok-friendly performance moments, and digital art installations."

Peterman agrees. "Photo booths with modern features like GIF creation or augmented reality offer creative take-homes for guests, while live streaming ensures loved ones who can't attend feel included."

Take, for example, the interactive photo booth at "The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience," an **immersive popup** themed after the hit Netflix show *Bridgerton*. Instead of using a simple photo booth, attendees posed for a photo which was edited by fast-acting tech to transform the picture with oil painting effects, directly tying into the event's theme and elevating the photo booth experience.

Indeed, AR, VR, and AI add flair to events. "Projection mapping transforms spaces instantly, AI-generated music adapts to the mood of an event ... Augmented



The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience let fans sit for a photo that was quickly edited to look like an oil painting. Photos courtesy Federico Imperiale

reality is also becoming more common, allowing guests to interact with digital elements in a real-world setting," observes Centner.

Holograms are gaining popularity as well and come in many forms—last year at Catersource + The Special Event, for instance, the Main Stage featured holograms of drummers performing in rhythm together. This year, they made an appearance at the Closing Night Celebration, projecting the *Special Events* Lifetime Achievement Award recipients of the past in a virtual hall of fame.

Combining tech elements can create even more intriguing entertainment. "We're seeing drones, robots, and computers syncing increasingly, joining what used to stop at AV or replace pyrotechnics," says Goel. "The increasing ability to coordinate and time elements is bringing in light, triggered sensations, and music."

Cold sparks are another popular touch added to events. "One exciting element I've seen is the use of cold sparks, which add a dramatic and visually stunning effect to key

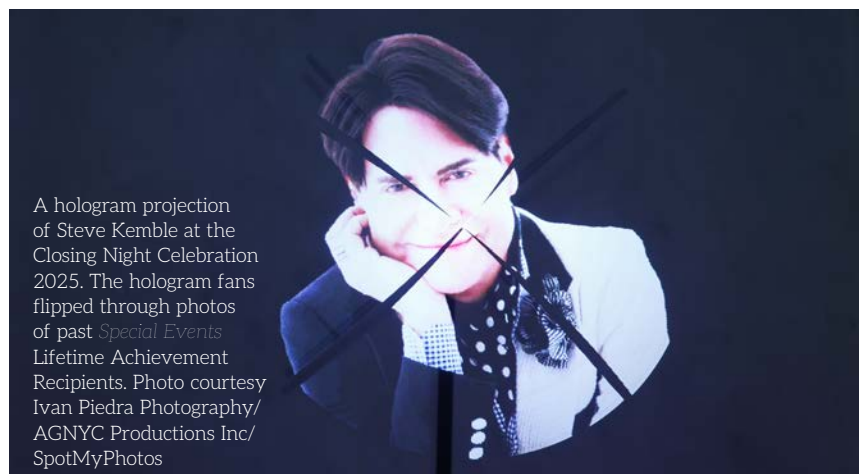
moments of an event," adds Chan.

Let's not forget that robots are on the rise, too. "Robots are becoming a staple at events, performing tasks like guiding guests, delivering food or drinks, and even participating in performances," says York. "These high-tech helpers bring an innovative and fun element to any event." The Closing Night Celebration featured a robotic arm cocktail server, adding a fun wow factor to the simple act of serving

beverages.

Attendees want to be wowed, and whether cutting-edge or simple yet effective, tech is the key to keeping eventgoers entertained.

"Technology is no longer just a tool—it's an integral part of entertainment," says Centner. One note: "The key is using technology to enhance, not overshadow, the human element of an event."



A hologram projection of Steve Kemble at the Closing Night Celebration 2025. The hologram fans flipped through photos of past *Special Events* Lifetime Achievement Recipients. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc/SpotMyPhotos



ON TREND

The cost of being entertained

Going all-out with entertainment is one thing, but your client's budget might be another. How much can you justify incorporating the latest and greatest entertainment? Turns out, a lot. Instead of viewing top-tier entertainment as a cost, it can be beneficial to view it as an investment into both the event and your brand.

"The return is in engagement. The right entertainment can make an event unforgettable, increase brand impact, and enhance guest satisfaction," Centner says. "The key is prioritizing entertainment that aligns with the event's goals and delivers the best value for the experience. These types of additional costs are sometimes offset by savings too."

For most planners, the benefits are worth the cost, and in today's climate, where clients want their event to be more memorable and photo-worthy than their neighbors', it's easy to see the ways that paying a little more has exponential impact on the event's outcome.

"Ultimately, these trends can be worth the extra cost if they align with the event's goals and the client's vision, enhancing the overall experience and leaving a lasting impression on attendees," says York. "However, it's important to plan and budget carefully to ensure the investment delivers the desired impact."

If, however, the budget really doesn't allow for the latest wow-factors, there are workarounds. "Not everything needs to be over-the-top or come with a high price tag," says York. "While the latest tech trends are exciting, there's also a resurgence of budget-friendly



Tianyu Arts & Culture is known for their installations of intricate lantern sculptures, which tell a story and engage event goers. Photo courtesy Melissa Blackall

options that are just as impactful. A single themed character, a talented DJ, or interactive activities like trivia can make a big difference without breaking the budget."

Do your research

Before you go and hire a 15-piece band, there are a few things to consider when incorporating these entertainment trends into your events.

First, make sure your audience will resonate with the trends. "Understand the event's goals and the client's expectations," says York. "Communicate this clearly to the performers or entertainment team to ensure everyone is on the same page."

"The future of event entertainment is all about engagement, personalization, and storytelling."

—Sebastien Centner



A show projected onto PG&E Substation J, a historic San Francisco landmark. Event by and photo courtesy A3 Visual

He also encourages asking plenty of questions when working with entertainment you're not totally familiar with. "It's important to gather as much information as possible to understand the entertainment thoroughly." This means identifying limitations early in the process. "Be sure to discuss any venue limitations, restrictions, or other factors that could affect the performance. Information is key to ensuring everything runs smoothly."

(Side note: [unique venues](#) are on the rise and can offer a form of entertainment in themselves!)

You don't have to do everything yourself, though. When adding in high-tech or unique entertainment, it's beneficial to bring in the experts.

"It's important to work with professionals who understand their craft and can guide you through the process," encourages Peterman. "If a live band is new territory, ask for a live demo or attend one of their public gigs to get a feel for their energy."

York agrees. "Whether it's performers, tech specialists, or

vendors—get the most accurate and relevant information. Their expertise can help you make informed decisions."

When bringing in extra vendors, you're going to need heightened transparency and communication. You'll also likely need to work together to run extra rehearsals.

"The more elaborate the entertainment the more important the preparation, rehearsing, and testing. You'll only get one chance once the performance starts," reminds Centner. This means making sure that the entertainment "aligns with the overall event flow; it should feel seamless, not forced."

Finally, stick to the [event theme](#). "We would generally suggest picking things that work into a major theme rather than trying to put together a grab bag of things," recommends Goel. "The most interesting entertainment we saw this past year was a wedding we did at the Hollywood Palladium, where the officiant was a magician and was paired with an event producer to create a production around the wedding vows. Vows

were lit on fire; vows triggered thunder and lightning; vows flew into the sky on a wire...it was really something that turned speeches into a performative experience that showed some fun interactions of the couple and shared their story in a dramatic experience. It was really next-level and authentic while being over the top!"

Keep it novel

Today's attendees want to be surprised, delighted, and wowed—meaning novelty and experimentation can go a long way in your events this year.

"Entertainment is becoming more experimental, mixing various art forms and performance styles in ways that surprise and engage," says York. "These performances often push boundaries and challenge expectations."

Gone are the days of one or two standard performances. In 2025, events offer a chance for attendees to experience culture, artforms, and technology they wouldn't otherwise experience. Events should leave them with more than memories; they should inspire conversation and critical thinking.

"Event entertainment is no longer just an add-on—it's a key component of the guest experience," says Centner. "Whether through live performances, immersive tech, or interactive food and beverage experiences, entertainment should create emotional connections.

"The most successful events are the ones where entertainment feels like an organic part of the experience, rather than just a scheduled segment. The future of event entertainment is all about engagement, personalization, and storytelling." [SE](#)



Tech Trends Spotted at Catersource + The Special Event



The future of events isn't just bright—it's beautifully designed, tech-forward, and deeply intentional.

By Katie Mast

If this year's Catersource + The Special Event conference taught us anything, it's this: the future of events isn't just bright—it's beautifully designed, tech-forward, and deeply intentional. From smarter tech to deeper client experiences, the evolution of how we work, serve, and scale is in full swing.

Our team had a wonderful time in Florida taking in the education, reconnecting with friends and Rock Paper Coin members, and meeting many new people as well! Here's a look at the top tech trends and takeaways we saw leading the conversation.

Client presentation decks that impress

Gone are the days of boring proposals and plain PDFs. Today's event pros are creating stunning, story-driven decks that showcase services with elevated design and amazing clarity. These decks aren't just a visual aid—they're a reflection of the brand's professionalism and creativity. Presentation tools are becoming just as essential as timelines and contracts, helping planners and vendors win clients by painting a beautiful, polished picture of what's possible.

The new visual design

Move over Pinterest boards—AI is quickly becoming a collaborative partner in the creative process, and event and wedding pros are using more tools to create quick visual concepts, floorplans, and style boards all while offering clients immediate inspiration and customization. The ability to show “what could be” in real time not only shortens the sales cycle—it enhances clarity and excitement with clients and other vendors during the planning process.

Tools should assist, not replace

Any automation tool is a powerful asset, but a recurring message throughout the conference was this: it's not a replacement for human connection. Tools like ChatGPT are helpful for brainstorming and drafting, but when it comes to client emails, proposals, or website copy, personalization is key. Always review, refine, and add your authentic voice—your brand is built on more than just automation.



Streamlined client experiences

Onboarding and offboarding workflows are getting a major upgrade. We saw professionals using platforms to guide clients through every phase of the planning journey—delivering personalized welcome materials, easy-to-navigate portals, and thoughtful post-event wrap-ups. These improved processes not only save time but also deliver a true one-of-a-kind white glove experience that clients rave about, setting you up for more repeat business.

Sustainability is taking center stage

The next generation of clients is setting new expectations, and

they have been crystal clear in one thing: they want events that are meaningful, environmentally conscious, and aligned with modern values. Lean into sustainability with your fellow vendor teams and think about how you can play a big role in helping rise to the occasion. Whether it's reducing paper waste, streamlining logistics to lower emissions, or leveraging digital tools, clients want to see your efforts and will support you wholeheartedly if they believe your intentions are true.

What we saw at this year's Catersource + The Special Event conference wasn't just innovation; it was thoughtful and purposeful, which is exactly the direction the industry is taking and what clients are looking for in pros.

As the industry evolves, we're proud here at Rock Paper Coin to stand alongside the planners,

caterers, venues, florists, photographers, and all other creatives who are shaping what's next. Here's to working smarter, serving better, and building an events industry we can all be proud of. [SE](#)

Katie Mast is the Director of Community at Rock Paper Coin and a highly respected leader in the wedding, event, and creative industries. She has worked with renowned brands such as HoneyBook, The Rising Tide Society, Aisle Planner, and Dreamworks Animation. Having spent almost a decade as a business owner of a destination wedding and event planning company, Katie now dedicates her time working with companies to help them grow and develop their genuine communities, promote ongoing education and diversity, and build strong and healthy brand partnerships.

CONFETTI

A WEDDING FIT FOR AN *Emperor*

Inside the Gala Award-receiving wedding that used theater trappings to create a grand scene

By Amanda Nicklaus

When your client is a blogger with five million fans, and they request a wedding that is a grand scene, “like the enthronement of an ancient emperor,” you need to get creative. Luckily, Wei Zhang is known for getting creative.

She is already the recipient of the [2024 Gala Award for Total Decor](#) and the [2022 Gala Award for Best Wedding](#), and this year, she took home Gala Awards for both Total Decor and Best Wedding.

This grand wedding was a spectacle of traditional Chinese wedding elements, multimedia technology, and artistic ceremony in the form of a custom-written wedding poem. Combined, these elements created

a performance-based wedding that was modeled like an opera.

The wedding set was constructed within an exhibition center, built eight meters high and included a 50-meter-long corridor. About 50 large trucks were used to transport all the material. The craziest part: the team only had one night and two days to complete the construction of the wedding scene. To pull this off, they coordinated with more than 20 suppliers a month in advance, relying on a staff of over 200 people to move quickly.

In the style of Wei Zhang event, there were custom sculptures crafted for the occasion, consisting of both 3D sculpture technology and traditional Chinese wooden mortise and tenon architecture. The team pre-made a 1:1 computer model in

the design deepening stage, striving to be as precise as possible to serve as a reference for the construction team. The irregular devices such as dragons and phoenixes required sculptors and craftsmen to bring them to life.

Finally, they used an ultra-wide screen (28 meters long and seven meters high) to project intricate imagery across the space. The team produced special effects videos of many fantasy-style scenes, including palaces in the clouds, flying dragons, phoenixes rising from a fire, large scrolls of poetry, lanterns floating in the sky, and wedding halls hung with red curtains, to name a few. There were also specific sound effects, such as the roar of a giant dragon, that produced the effect of being in a theater.



The dessert area was designed as a Chinese garden-style scene, with a specially customized fondant cake shaped like a pavilion as the highlight.



The multimedia screen behind the couple changed scenery throughout the ceremony.



The immersive entrance reception area welcomed guests and prepared them for what they were about to take part in.

“This grand wedding was a spectacle of traditional Chinese wedding elements, multimedia technology, and artistic ceremony.”

On the day of the wedding, everyone played a role by dressing in ancient costume. Not only the couple, but all the actors, staff, wedding party, parents of both families, and other participants wore traditional Chinese costumes, playing the parts of matchmakers, hosts, guards, dragon dancers, fairies, and other characters.

There was more than theater bringing this wedding to life; the whole event was threaded through with traditional Chinese cultural elements, such as red and gold coloring, tea ceremony performances, guzheng (a Chinese stringed instrument) playing, Chinese drums, burning incense, the offering

of sacrifices to heaven and earth, a fanning ceremony, and drinking gourd wedding wine.

The wedding opera was a beautiful nod to the cultural heritage and interests of the couple, welcoming them into their marriage through the use of theatrical performance, literary influence, and tradition. That’s a wedding fit for an ancient emperor!

Congratulations to Wei Zhang for receiving the 2025 Gala award for both Best Wedding and Total Decor for this wedding (titled *He Sheng Chao-Bo Yue Ge*)! [SE](#)

All photos courtesy NZ Production unless noted otherwise

Submissions Now Being Accepted for 2026 ACE and Gala Awards

Submissions are now being accepted for the *Special Events* 2026 Gala Awards! We invite you to submit your best work from the past year. Join in the excitement and the spirit of our industry as we celebrate the hard work and exceptional accomplishments of our peers.

Get your submission in now before the portal closes on October 31st!

To submit an entry to this year’s Gala Awards, please visit our [awards portal](#).

THE TOUGH SUBJECT OF TASTINGS

A look at the sticky points of this necessary but controversial event factor

By Amanda Nicklaus

There are plenty of event aspects that bring people together, but no topic is as divisive as [tastings](#). Tastings are controversial—industry pros have strong feelings about how they should be done, akin to how opinionated Southerners are about [the right way to barbecue](#). Rather than let the walls stay up on this topic, it's important to understand the complexities and mixed feelings of this necessary part of event success. Behold, the hot topic of tastings.

Who wants them

An opportunity for clients to taste a caterer's menu offerings before an event, tastings play a huge role in weddings, but they're not limited to this one type of affair.

"All events can benefit from a tasting experience, from weddings and social events to non-profit galas to conferences and expos," says Jamie Chang (Mango Muse Events).

Mango Muse Events' Southeast Asian fusion family-style meal. Photo courtesy Mango Muse Events

Event planner Penny Haas (Penny Haas, LLC) agrees. "I've sat in on tastings for holiday parties, nonprofit events with committees, and black-tie awards functions. At a certain level of experience and price point, a tasting is a great idea to understand style, presentation, and flavor."

Tastings allow the planner and caterer to lock in details of the event and sell the client on various offerings, giving both parties the chance to upsell services and minimize mistakes.

Indeed, the more intense the event, the more consequential a tasting will be. "It's often important for high-stakes corporate events that the items and presentation are a good fit with the other elements of the event," says Vijay Goel (Bite Catering Couture). "We tend to see them for branded experiential events, brand sampling, Michelin-level plated events for brand launches or VIPs, and sales/partner events for high-level producers."

The plus sides

No matter the event type, tastings can offer benefits that increase the event's success. They prepare the caterer for menu modifications, let the client in on the sustainability and service approaches, and give the planner a feel for the caterer's process. It's essentially a test run of the event's F&B portion, helping the client better visualize the details so they can make more certain decisions.

"As tastings usually take a few hours, it's also a great chance to speak with the catering team and discuss the goals of the event to see if or make sure you're on the same page," says Chang.

"Another great thing to do at the tasting is request that a beverage director or sommelier is available," adds Juls Sharpley (Juls Sharpley Events). "If the caterer does not have an in-house sommelier, then bringing in a sommelier advisor is strongly encouraged, especially for clients with sophisticated wine knowledge and discerning palates. This is a great opportunity to discuss the specific foods and any great pairings, as well as curate custom cocktails."

Tastings let event pros flesh out the event's F&B to a T, brainstorming and strategizing every option early on for better success later. Whether you're an event planner or a caterer, tastings are a way to improve your chances of achieving event goals.

The conflict: Planner POV

The benefits of tastings are easy to see—so what's the problem? There are a few factors that event pros

disagree on, and these disagreements often seem to pit planner against caterer. It's an intricate dance, and toes can easily get stepped on when caterers' and planners' perspectives clash.

Talk to any planner: they'll swap stories and share common frustrations about the way a caterer has handled a tasting in the past.

"Some common frustrations when discussing tastings will be if the chef changes, the menu changes, or special requests are not noted," says Haas. "I've worked with caterers who helped with this experience by adding notes to event orders, honoring the previous menu depending on the booking window, and helping by taking pictures from the tasting in case there is any update to the culinary team."

Another common occurrence: excluding the planner from the tasting. "I think one of the most frustrating parts of tastings (sometimes) is if they don't include feeding the planner," says Loni Peterson, MLS (LP Creative Events). "We are here to help guide, make suggestions, and use our years of experience to weigh in on food quality, taste, and event day large-scale execution. It is really hard for us to do that if we aren't also enjoying the meal."

This is especially true for luxury clients, who become extremely close with their planner during the planning process. During her keynote session *The Ol' Razzle Dazzle* at Catersource + The Special Event 2023, Marcy Blum (Marcy Blum Associates) discussed the reality of the luxury client-planner relationship, explaining how the client is often attached at the hip of the planner, sharing their goals and personality and trusting the planner to make the right decisions with that information. "Impress the planner first and foremost, we are the gatekeepers. Sorry, that's how it's going."

Other frustrations include when caterers don't provide printed menu offerings for the client to look at, don't check in with the client and planner at each course, or can't communicate well about customizing menus. "Some chefs are shy and uncomfortable chatting it up with clients," says Sharpley, "so when it comes to conversing about what they liked and what they might want to change, or what other ideas they could explore, if the chef isn't great at handling that, then we really like it when there is someone on their team who can be present to be the hype person and help communicate with the chef."

Planners know their client well, and they are the ultimate orchestrator of the event, so being out of the loop in any aspect of the tasting makes it difficult to work well.

"Planners often experience frustration when caterers are inflexible or unprepared, or when tastings run off track due to unclear goals," says Lisa Costantini, the Director



FOOD FOR FÊTES

of Events & Catering at Eatertainment Events & Catering. “A structured approach with a clear agenda, alignment on guest preferences, and open communication ensures everyone is on the same page and the tasting is efficient and productive.”

The conflict: Caterer POV

Likewise, caterers experience equal frustration with how some planners operate within tastings. From withholding important client information to placing unrealistic expectations upon the caterer, there can be major hesitation on the caterer’s side when it comes to working with a planner during a tasting.

“I am fortunate enough to have played both parts in a tasting, so I feel I have learned the dos and don’ts from both sides!” says Costantini. “Caterers can sometimes find planners overly involved in minor details or attempting to dictate the culinary process. While this is solely meant to help, it can actually hinder creativity and slow down the process.”

At Catersource + The Special Event 2024, Robin Selden (Marcia Selden Catering & Events*; Naked Fig Catering) shared a horror story of a high-profile luxury wedding she was doing a tasting for where the planner had withheld information about the couple’s dietary restrictions—leading to an alarming moment involving an EpiPen, and ultimately a lost deal. She insists that caterers need to have direct communication with clients, even if there are NDAs involved. Planners can act as a connector and advocate for both the client and the caterer, making sure the caterer is receiving all imperative information, and the client can ask all the questions and give all the input they need to set the caterer—and ultimately the entire event—up for success.

It’s not just micromanagement that irks caterers; often, planners don’t have a clear grasp of the logistics.

“Planners should know that tastings are substantially more resource-intensive than they look,” emphasizes Goel. “The preparation for a tasting of four people may not be too different from what would be required for a 30-person event due to the number of items on the menu, special techniques involved, and order minimums for specific items. Believing the work scales on a per-person basis can create unreasonable expectations.

“Planners should also make sure they refresh themselves on design limitations that have been incorporated. Sometimes, the requirements of the site or the guests will change the way the item is prepared or presented in a way that is less familiar to what they’re used to. Planners can make sure they check in with the caterer ahead of time, review the plan, make sure it makes



Group tastings are becoming increasingly popular among caterers (including The JDK Group). Photo courtesy Philter Photography



Black & White theme station at a winter tasting event by Chowgirls Catering. Photo courtesy Chowgirls Catering

“When planners and caterers collaborate, it creates a seamless experience for the client.”

—Lisa Costantini, Eatertainment Events & Catering



Sip, Savor, and Slice: Crafting Unforgettable Tastings for Wedding Catering
session from Catersource + The Special Event 2024



Courtesy Lucas Botz

sense given any other changes to the event, and help communicate with the caterer what they need to do to win the event, so expectations are aligned.”

Any good relationship relies on trust, and with tastings, it’s best for planners to step back and trust the caterer with the process, positioning themselves as moderators between the caterer and client.

This doesn’t necessarily mean that the planner should be passive. In fact, Jeffrey Selden (Marcia Selden Catering) said in the same CS+TSE 2024 session *Sip, Savor, and Slice: Crafting Unforgettable Tastings for Wedding Catering*, “A lot of planners, I don’t know how you feel about this, but I feel like there’s a right client for the right vendor... the best planners are the ones that can convince their clients of, ‘Hey you really need to be with this vendor, caterer, cake baker, if you decide that they’re the right match for you.’” Having no opinion as a planner and just shopping around with the client is not helpful. “Please, please be a planner with an opinion.”

Us vs. the problem, not me vs. you

From an objective perspective, what these frustrations boil down to is a lack of communication between planners and caterers regarding tastings.

Most planners and caterers do agree that it is more than beneficial to work together. The issue isn’t a lack of desire to collaborate as much as it is a problem of miscommunication.

“Transparency is probably the most important for good communication between the caterer and the planner,” says Chang. “Being honest about the goals, expectations, and challenges/concerns and discussing those between parties leads to better solutions and means no one is caught off guard.”

Costantini agrees. “Planners can foster success by facilitating clear communication between clients and caterers, managing expectations, and allowing the chef to present their expertise while ensuring the client’s vision is honored.” She adds, “Collaboration can include pre-tasting meetings to discuss goals and providing consolidated feedback afterward to avoid conflicting messages.”

When it comes to tastings, there is no such thing as overcommunication. “Both caterer and planner should take and compare detailed menu notes and photos,” says Haas. “Proper organization and communication will set each party up for success. Good communication with the client could include any special menu requests in advance, an idea of food allergies, and honest conversations about menu profiles, what you like/dislike, and what your favorite food items are.”



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Blum recommends having pre-tastings, where planners can bring in the clients' ideas ahead of time, working together with caterers before a tasting to get on the same page, so it will be exciting and seamless.

If you're working in luxury, planners should include client branding (such as monogrammed linens) for the tasting, along with floral arrangements, coasters, live music—everything you can do to make it feel like the event itself with a glimpse into the main event on the horizon. Blum encourages treating tastings not just as a selling event, but as selling a long-term relationship. Planners and caterers can even work together to create elegant, fun take-home gifts and thank you notes for the client, making them even more excited to be working with you.

Planners should also prep clients ahead of the tasting, making sure they know what to expect and how to behave. Goel says, "We would treat the tasting as an event with goals and a few priorities to ensure success. The planner needs to ensure that the client is committed to showing up on time so they can appropriately evaluate the event as planned."

Put everything in writing, share goals and expectations, and update each other constantly to ensure that both caterer and planner are on the same page and that nobody is left in the dark.

A sticky point—complimentary or charged?

A huge point of contention is [whether to charge for tastings](#). Many planners feel it should be a complimentary service, with the caveat that this depends on what stage of planning the client is at.

"It's hard to say as a planner, but a complimentary tasting is a service and an exciting part of the planning process for a couple," says Haas. "Catering is a big part of the budget, so couples and clients want to make sure they are satisfied with what they are eating. I do think if a complimentary tasting were offered, it should definitely be after a client books the caterer."

Most caterers feel that tastings are a service with a cost and should therefore be charged. "Generally, a tasting for a client-specific menu should be charged (potentially with a credit card on booking)," says Goel. "A free tasting often sets the wrong expectation; you're asking the caterer to put together a special event so that you can evaluate their capabilities, product, and service. It's not a casual night out."

It's a bit of a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma; do you offer a complimentary tasting to win over a client, or do you only

offer a complimentary tasting once the client has chosen the caterer and are therefore guaranteed money down the line? Most planners seem to agree that no caterer should be asked to provide a completely free service, footing the bill themselves, but that a complimentary tasting should only be considered once the client has signed on with the caterer.

If you do go the complimentary route, then it is necessary to place strong restrictions on what is provided, easing the burden on the caterer. Chang says, "There can be parameters around that (number of people, number of dishes, etc.), and anything requested outside of those parameters comes with an extra cost. But once again, if charging a reasonable price for a tasting is necessary for business reasons, I think that's fair."

Plus—who's to say that a complimentary tasting can't be made up to the caterer down the line? Sharpley offers a compromise: "This is totally up to the caterer But the caterer, if not 'charging' specifically for a tasting, should have a way that it is bundled into their pricing."

Blum is of the mindset that tasting on spec is necessary. "You have to spend money to make money." Even then, some caterers still insist that charging on spec is necessary.

Whatever route you take, make sure you, the caterer, and the client are all in agreement right away. "At Eatertainment we like to include tastings as a complimentary service for our clients; but speaking industry standard—it depends on the event size and client relationship," shares Costantini. "For large-scale weddings or corporate contracts, tastings are often complimentary or absorbed into the overall budget. For smaller or custom events, a tasting fee is reasonable. Transparency upfront is key to avoiding misunderstandings."

Opposite page, top row from left to right: Pancetta-wrapped sea bass on polenta Mango Muse Events. Photo courtesy Sabine Scherer Photography; A tasting plate from Daniel et Daniel. Photo courtesy Karen O'Connor; A sample menu from a group tasting. Photo courtesy The JDK Group

Middle row: Best Indian Weddings impresses with a peeled tomato stuffed with Italian burrata, served on a base of gazpacho, extra virgin olive oil, and fresh bitter herbs. Photo courtesy Francesco Garufi of Best Indian Weddings Italy; Winter Break and Cranberry Sauced cocktails by Chowgirls Catering. Photo courtesy Lucas Botz; A dessert by Best Indian Weddings made of coffee cream, eggnog, and crumbled biscuits. Photo courtesy Francesco Garufi of Best Indian Weddings Italy

Bottom row: Sweet Bite Tasting. Photo courtesy Blue Plate Catering; Watermelon salad with feta cheese, blackberries, and a balsamic reduction from Daniel et Daniel. Photo courtesy Karen O'Connor; A locally sourced Idaho farm-to-table summer salad by Mango Muse Events. Photo courtesy Christine Marie Photo





FOOD FOR FÊTES



Chowgirls Catering's field greens and fruit salad. Photo courtesy Lucas Botz

Seasonality

One thing to keep in mind when working through a tasting menu is [seasonality](#). Often, caterers use seasonal items, meaning a tasting in June will feature different produce than an event in November. This can also look like fluctuating pricing; the quote for rack of lamb at a tasting in spring will be different if the wedding takes place in any other season.

"Seasonality is generally best handled by tasting a seasonally appropriate subset of the items on the menu or the current season version," says Goel. "Great ingredients show through in the food, and having something out of season puts the item behind the 8-ball as it's not going to be particularly good, and the chef wouldn't have developed or served it that way. Skip it or substitute."

Clients might not understand the concept of seasonality right away, so it's important to educate them, helping them to see how fresh, in-season produce will elevate their food offerings more than out-of-season items.

You can also help prepare the client for those seasonal prices by educating them while working with the caterer to create contracts that account for price fluctuations. In an article for [Catersource](#), Jeffrey Miller (Jeffrey A. Miller Catering*) addressed the topic, saying, "We outline potential price increases in our contracts and review it with clients up front. If inflation hits across the board, the inflation clause kicks in. If only one item is affected, we often absorb the cost."



The JDK Group displays the various rental items they have available during a tasting. Photo courtesy The JDK Group

"Seasonality should be part of the menu planning discussion from the outset," says Costantini. "Caterers can present alternatives or mockups if an exact dish is not available out of season. Educating clients on seasonal substitutions helps set realistic expectations while maintaining quality and minimizing costs."

Head to [page 31](#) in *Catersource* in the adjoining magazine to learn more about trends in seasonal catering.

Meet in the middle

You may not agree on every point with your caterer and client, but strategic and open communication about a tasting is better than no tasting at all. While the prickly points might tempt you to avoid tastings, flexing your professional muscles and leaning into relationship building will make them easier, leading to better events for everyone involved.

"When planners and caterers collaborate, it creates a seamless experience for the client. Planners understand the event vision and guest needs, while caterers bring culinary expertise," says Costantini. "Together, they ensure the menu aligns with the overall event design."

Eventually, you and your preferred catering partners can figure out a systematic approach to tastings that benefits you both. Together, you can make tastings as memorable as the event itself.

"When a caterer turns to me and says 'I made so much money on that gig' I'm like 'Yes! That's what I wanted,' because I want you to be happy too," said Blum. "It's not one pie, not a zero-sum game; you make money, I make money, everyone does well." [SE](#)

* *Jeffrey A. Miller Catering and Marcia Selden Catering & Events are members of the Leading Caterers of America. [Click here](#) for additional information on this consortium of top caterers from throughout the United States and Canada.*

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Top 5 Trends

Seen at Catersource + The Special Event 2025

A guide to the most
in-demand aspects of
the event world today

By Amanda Nicklaus

*All photos courtesy Ivan Piedra/AGNYC Productions, Inc./
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Each winter issue, we at *Special Events* put together **trend forecasts and industry predictions**, reflecting on the previous year and peering into the future. Then, every spring, we head to Catersource + The Special Event to watch event leaders share their observations and bring their expertise to life in a week of top-tier education, engaging demonstrations, and trendy gatherings.

This year, the best of the industry's trends appeared at every turn. Grab a pen and get inspired: here's a look at what's popular in events today.

1.

Cutting-edge technology

There's no way to talk about trends without mentioning all of the advanced tech spreading through the industry. While this wasn't the first year we've seen **AI, robots**, or AR/VR, each year sees these developments progress further, and at this point it's safe to say that these tech forms have taken root and are growing rapidly.

Even last year, there was still major hesitancy around the use of AI. Today's event pros are far less fearful—many have incorporated this tech into their businesses (think streamlined platforms and customer service chatbots, such as the one on the CS+TSE show app this year), as well as into events themselves (such as attendee data analytics for higher engagement, real-time social media monitoring, and elevated security processing).

In her session *Elevate & Scale: Crafting Precision Job Descriptions & AI-Powered Templates for Luxury Event Mastery*, Zohe Felici (Mentor + Coach Wedding + Event Biz Owners) took a quick poll of the room to see who had dabbled in AI, and about 90% of the room had at the very least experimented with some form of AI—showing that the majority of event pros are at least curious enough to see for themselves.

Robots are increasingly mainstream as well: while last year's conference saw robots in sessions and on the tradeshow floor, this year's Closing Night Celebration incorporated a robotic bartender arm to serve beverages to attendees. VR goggles and AR activations are still growing across industry use as well.

"Event planners automatically like anything that draws attention to a moment," said Kevin Bilida (TLC Creative) during David Merrell's (AOC Events) annual session *David Merrell Presents: Current Trends in the Event Industry*. He shared that his company uses



Elaborate LED walls and projection mapping transformed the venue for the Closing Night Celebration.



As part of the theme to honor past event leaders, the Closing Night Celebration featured hologram fans with images of *Special Events* Lifetime Achievement Award recipients.

robotic bartenders, robot chess, and robot drawings to entertain eventgoers, increasing engagement, providing photo ops, and creating that sense of surprise and delight.

LED video walls and signage are gaining traction as well, along with increased use of holograms, like the ones spotted at the [Closing Night Celebration](#).

One thing to note is that as these forms of technology become more popular, they will continue becoming more accessible and affordable, making them easier to obtain and incorporate into your events, no matter the size of your budget.

2.

The scene is the theme

Unique venues are growing in popularity due to their ability to shape one-of-a-kind events. Rather than trying to spice up everyday venues, event pros are seeking out interesting sites that offer creative opportunities from the core.

Interesting venues can even inspire the theme, the way Connect Social's "Old Florida Oasis" theme was inspired by its location in Fort Lauderdale's Bonnet House Museum & Gardens, a whimsical 20th century style estate on U.S. National Register of Historic Places, or the Opening Night Party's three connected venues that offered themselves to clear cut past-, present-, and future-themed sections of the event.

"Some venues are so iconic that they basically speak for themselves," said Merrell. Iconic venues do a lot of the heavy lifting, and they can increase an event's sense of ephemerality by creating a feeling of exclusivity and rarity.

The next best thing? 3D projection mapping can transform a simple venue into a unique one, immersing guests in cultivated art and sensory detail. As Brittany Branson pointed out in her session *Conceptual Canvases: Exploring the Latest Artistic Trends in Weddings & Events*, some designers have taken unique architectural aspects of historic venues and reproduced the specific design elements across plainer spaces throughout the venue, or even used iconic elements of the venue as a motif across stationery.

"The inspiration is the environment," said Branson, "and the trend is creating a sense of place."



"Event planners automatically choose a venue that draws attention."

—Kevin

3.

Next steps in sustainability

Sustainability will likely stay on trend lists for quite some time due to the evolving steps in tackling long-term event health. The scale has tipped from dialogue about the benefits of sustainability and theorizing how to accomplish it; this year, speakers at CS+TSE were committed to offering practical solutions for event pros to implement real change.

In her session *Back to the Future: Sustainable Event Trends*, Suzanne Morrell (Creating Environments) revisited events of the past to see how our forebearers created events before convenience and luxury led to wasteful practices. Morrell offered three practical steps forward: designing with purpose to eliminate waste; innovating events with responsibility in mind; and creating elegance that doesn't rely on excess.



The tropical garden foliage of the Bonnet House Museum & Gardens set the tone for Connect Social's "Old Florida Oasis" theme—and provided sustainable decor.



The Opening Night Party's past-themed segment was inspired by the venue's speakeasy-style design. It was easy to feel old-timey in a themed venue.

atically like anything
ion to a moment."

n Bilida



This year the SEARCH Foundation's Annual Signature Event was held on a yacht-turned-event-venue, which inspired the theme "Yacht Chic: Naturals and Neutrals."

"Take that historical wisdom, couple it with modern technology that we have today, that's how we can create more sustainable events in the future," said Morrell. She predicted that the sustainable event trends will revolve around resourcefulness, durability, local sourcing, and functional food.

Merrell and Anil Pacheco (AOO Events | AOO Floral) also offered sustainability trends in their session *David Merrell Presents: Current Trends in the Event Industry*. Biophilic design is popular right now, they pointed out, due to the use of natural elements to decorate indoor spaces.

The conversation has also evolved to a more comprehensive view of sustainability. During their session *Floral Mindset 2025*, Liza Roeser (FiftyFlowers) and Darin Bahl (Tailored Twig) discussed overall business sustainability, analyzing sustainability beyond the environment and diving into sustainability as it affects people, operations, technology, finances, and community.

Of course, Catersource + The Special Event is committed to working toward a sustainable future as well through the Informa (the show's parent company) [Fasterforward To Zero](#) plan.

Sustainability is an ever-changing subject, but the trend was still at the forefront of Catersource + The Special Event, a sign that event pros are committed to making real changes in the industry.

4.

Boundaries are BIG

Mental health has been a trending topic for a few years, but this year, the resounding focus was on setting

boundaries. Event pros are realizing that without protecting time, energy, and resources, mental health is impossible to achieve.

In his session *Boundary Bootcamp: Practical Tips & Techniques for Establishing & Maintaining Boundaries in Your Business*, Brian Green (By BrianGreen) honed in on four [major areas for boundary setting](#): physical, time, emotional, and intellectual.

"We teach people how to treat us," said Green. Placing limits on how much people can access your physical space, time, emotions, and intellect allows you to better cultivate these areas of life and business, preventing burnout and giving you more energy to create successful events.

Of course, it can be uncomfortable saying "no," but Green insisted that saying "no" to non-essentials is really saying "yes" to the essentials—which is saying "yes" to yourself.



Setting her own boundary, Charessa Sawyer, LMSW, CEP (SC Visionary Planning and Production) started her session *Burn-Out & Mental Safety: Why Healthy Boundaries, Delegation & Time Management is Not All You Need* with a brief meditation.

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Revisiting Catersource + The Special Event 2025

Check out the following recaps from the conference, and make sure to stay tuned to specialevents.com for more post-conference coverage.

- [That's a Wrap on CS+TSE Ft. Lauderdale; Next Up, LA](#)
- [Special Events Announces the 2025 Gala Award Finalists](#)
- [Connect Social Kicks Off Catersource + The Special Event 2025](#)
- [Attendees Transport Through the Years at the 2025 CS+TSE Opening Night Party](#)
- [Catersource + The Special Event Honors Industry Legends at Closing Night Celebration](#)
- [Among the Action: A Look at the 2025 CS+TSE Trade Show Floor](#)

Thank you to every speaker, sponsor, attendee, volunteer, exhibitor, and more who made this show such a thrilling success.

Likewise, Jen Trotter (Lip Service Makeup) talked about communication boundaries in her session *Sorry, Not Sorry - Learn to Master Apology-Free Communication*. Avoiding apologizing when you're not at fault and avoiding using the word "unfortunately" when something isn't actually unfortunate (your prices, for instance) empowers your language by setting expectations and creating ownership around your time and energy.

"Having boundaries and saying no is not mean," said Trotter. "You cannot give people your best or be in business for a long time or support your family if you're constantly caving to everybody. You just can't."

In her session *Burn-Out & Mental Safety: Why Healthy Boundaries, Delegation & Time Management is Not All You Need*, Charessa Sawyer, LMSW, CEP (SC Visionary Planning and Production) pointed out that boundaries are important for individuals to protect time and energy and manage client expectations, but the industry still has a ways to go when it comes to shifting systemic issues like overwork culture and industry expectations—not to mention the guilt and pushback event pros often face when they do set boundaries.

Event professionals have time and again faced the difficult issues of the industry, and these days, more pros are empowering themselves by setting boundaries and working toward what Sawyer calls "mental safety"—"honoring your own energy, reclaiming your joy, and creating a life that supports your well-being, not just your productivity."

5.

Taking notes from larger culture

The best [event inspiration](#) has always come from a variety of spaces—magazines, architecture, fashion, social media—but pop culture and major international events at large are playing a dominant role in popular event themes.

Attendees got a taste of this trend when Pzazz Productions put on a thrilling *Wizard of Oz/Wicked*-themed performance for the Opening General Session, with intricately costumed stilt walkers, electric violinists, and dancers, and a mic-drop grand finale that featured Christine Dwyer, who has played Elphaba (the show's main character) on Broadway.

Miro Diamanté, DMCP (Accent Indy, a DMC Network Company) and Kate Patay (Terramar, A DMC Network Company) dove into some of the major trending pop inspirations in their session *Pop Culture's Influence on*



Pzazz Productions was seen on the trade show floor and during the Opening General Session with a timely *Wizard of Oz/Wicked* theme.



Christine Dwyer, who played Elphaba on Broadway, sang a performance of "Defying Gravity" in a mic-drop finale of Pzazz Production's *Wizard of Oz/Wicked*-themed performance for the Opening General Session.



Two years ago, the movie *Barbie* inspired shades of pink across events. The effects are still seen today, like in the costumes of the Closing General Session performers.

the Industry. From musical influences like Beyonce and Sabrina Carpenter, to film influences like *Gladiator II* and *Nosferatu*, well-branded artists and their work offer go-to theme inspiration in today's events.

That doesn't mean copy-and-pasting, however. "There's ways to dissect that and distill it," said Diamanté, meaning you don't need to blindly make every part of your event pink and green (à la *Wicked* for example). The best event pros are pulling from these themes and reinventing them into something new and personal.

For example, Sophia Kanno (Access DMC) shared about a floating buffet her team created that was inspired by Rihanna's floating stage from Super Bowl LVII Halftime Show during the session *Design Roulette: Influence of Major International Events on Design & Themes*. Major events like the Super Bowl, Grammys, Olympics, or Oscars are huge influences on the culture and what clients look to for inspiration.

"The reality is that when we draw inspiration, we truly

can just take bits and pieces," said Kanno. Whether taking tennis-chic inspiration from *Challengers* or coordinating a performance on a barge à la the Olympic 2024 Opening Ceremony, it's important to take pieces of the cultural moment you're referencing and scale it to fit your event. Today's event attendees want to recreate what they see but in an original, unique way.

We know everyone at CS+TSE left recharged and inspired, already calculating ways to incorporate these trends into their events. We can't wait to see the ways these trends develop and manifest throughout the year as event pros put their creativity to work. [SE](#)

Want more trends?

For food and beverage trends, turn to [page 26](#) of *Catersource* in the adjoining issue.

For entertainment trends, turn to [page 12](#).

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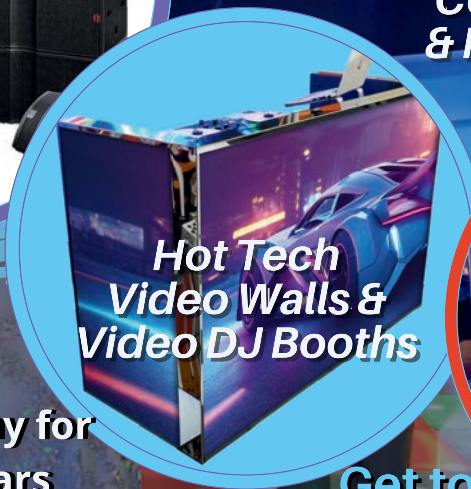
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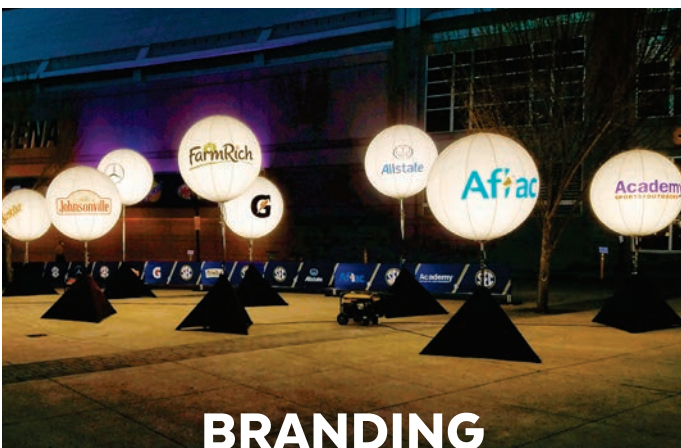
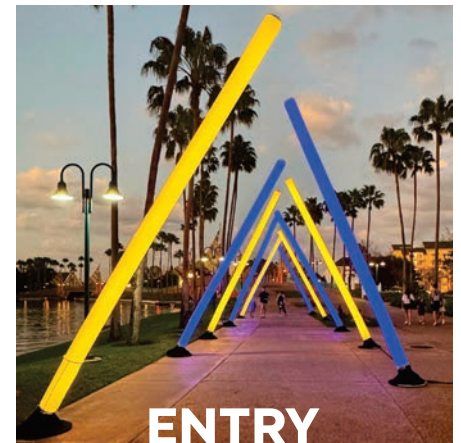
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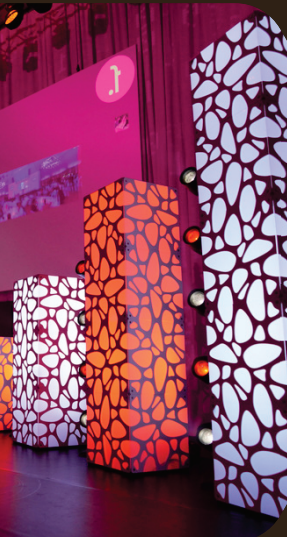
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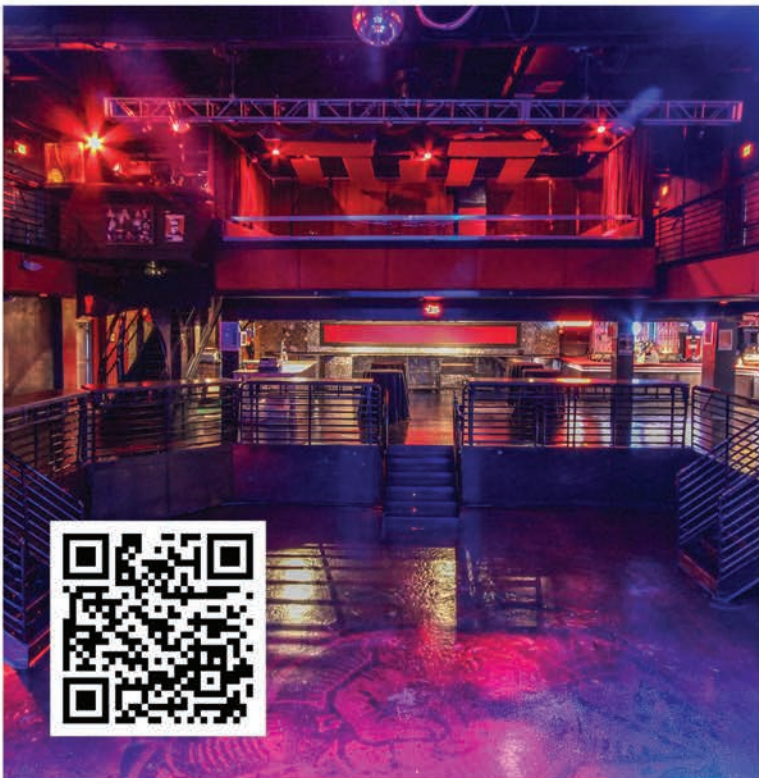
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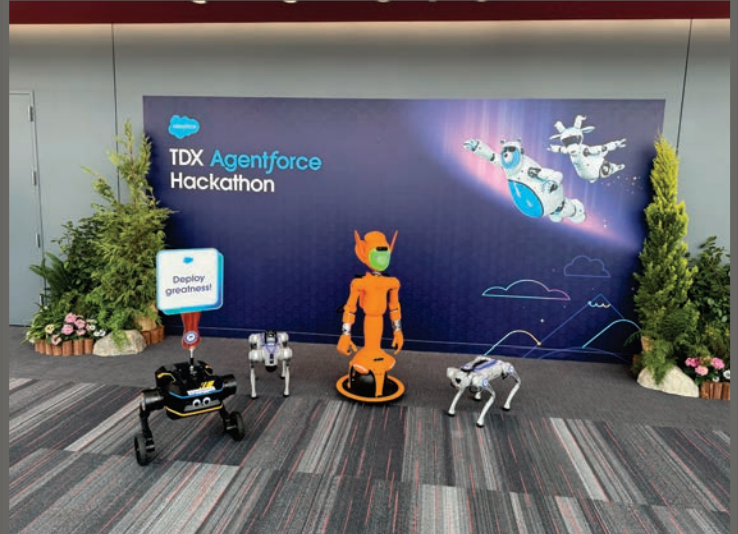
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He Can Definitely Top That!

A behind-the-scenes look at how the event pros of Catersource + The Special Event pulled together when disaster struck

By Scott Frankel



If you surround yourself with good people, it is amazing what can be accomplished and overcome.

Editor's Note: When Scott Frankel led the session "I Can Top That" at the 2024 Catersource + The Special Event Leadership Lunch—which covered stories from those who have experienced event disasters but overcame and learned from them—he couldn't have foreseen this nerve-racking story in his future.

When attendees walked into Hall A and saw the Main Stage for the Opening General Session at February's Catersource + The Special Event, they saw glitz, glamour, and everything as grand as the months of planning would want you to see and feel.

What they didn't know was that just 48 hours prior to load-in, I had received a call in the middle of the night that our semi, full of gear heading to Fort Lauderdale, was involved in a horrible accident on a Mississippi highway. The result? Millions of dollars of video, audio, computers, and lighting equipment spread all over the road.

I've been producing events for over three decades. In those 30 years, I cannot remember having my stomach in such knots. Aside from the obvious concern for the driver who survived the accident—with some broken ribs and a broken

leg that needed surgery—the thought of such a large-scale show being put in jeopardy had my full attention.

A ticking clock

Aside from the size of this general session, thoughts of the months of planning, and the incorporation of our videos and graphics on uniquely shaped screens and aspect ratios—was the pressure of who this audience is. Thousands of event professionals, the most critical audience you could think of, were going to be in those chairs watching a production with Animatic Media's name all over it. The clock was ticking.

Like most "Type-A" personality thinkers, my mind immediately began to go through checklists, priorities, contingency plans, etc. What seemed like a 20-minute conversation in my own head was probably no longer than 30 seconds. It was surreal.

As a matter of fact, it was not just this event that was put in jeopardy. Two days after CS+TSE was to end, we were traveling to Orlando to produce another conference using a lot of the same gear.

I must also mention that, at this time, I was also thinking about how this same event was honoring me with the *Special Events* Lifetime Achievement award—which of



The aftermath of the truck incident on the road. Photo courtesy Scott Frankel



The Animatic team found workarounds to intricately set the stage in time for the show. Photo courtesy Scott Frankel

course awkwardly added a wild card to my panic.

The person on the other end of the phone was a member of my team whose voice seemed to come back into focus, like emerging from being underwater after those 30 seconds. It was at that point I realized what an amazing team we had built. Had I focused on what he was saying to me, I wouldn't have needed to run through those 30 seconds of internal panic. My team had already figured out 80% of what we needed to have happen, so we would not miss a beat. And with my entire team on board, overcoming the other 20% would never stand in our way.

The key here was to source the equipment locally with as many other vendors as needed to replace the gear. By leveraging a deep and trustworthy network of partners, resources—and even competitors—we were able to source almost every piece of equipment needed.

Team pride

A day went by and I hadn't mentioned the disaster to our good friends at Catersource + The Special Event, but it wasn't more than a day later that I received a text saying that they had heard something happened with the truck and was everything okay for the event. I had decided early on not to worry the client about this incident. If you think about that—and the level of confidence it takes to do that—you must appreciate how good it made me feel, so proud of my people. In other cases, my policy has always been if something goes wrong, be honest and upfront with the clients and bring them into the problem, telling them how you're going to try to solve it.

Over the first few days of set up, people approached me saying they heard the rumors, and I would show them some pictures and tell them what happened. Everybody

was encouraging me to share this story with the audience.

I thought about it for two days while we were on site, and I decided that they were right. We have a lot of new people in this industry, especially since the end of the pandemic. As part of my lifetime acceptance speech, I thought that it was appropriate to let everybody understand that even though I was lucky enough to receive that award, we are all human. Things will go wrong in this business and you can't run from it, but this was the lesson: if you have a plan and you stick to it, thinking through all of the things that could possibly happen, you still can't be prepared for every single scenario.

Here is the key: If you surround yourself with good people, it is amazing what can be accomplished and overcome. I received a lot of praise that week for pulling it off, but to be perfectly honest I kept telling people I was the least important person in terms of recovering from that situation. All I did was bring the right people in to support me, as I tried to do with every event we'd done for almost 30 years.

I am so thankful to my team not only for overcoming the truck accident but also for once again exceeding expectations and wowing such a critical audience in our industry. [SE](#)

Scott Frankel is the President of Animatic Media, an industry leader in event production and sought-after speaker at industry events. Since 1996, Scott and his team have produced events for clients of all sizes, from Fortune 500 conferences with thousands of attendees to smaller road shows and events. Scott is an innovator in the event technology space is also the [2025 Special Events Gala Lifetime Achievement Award](#) recipient.



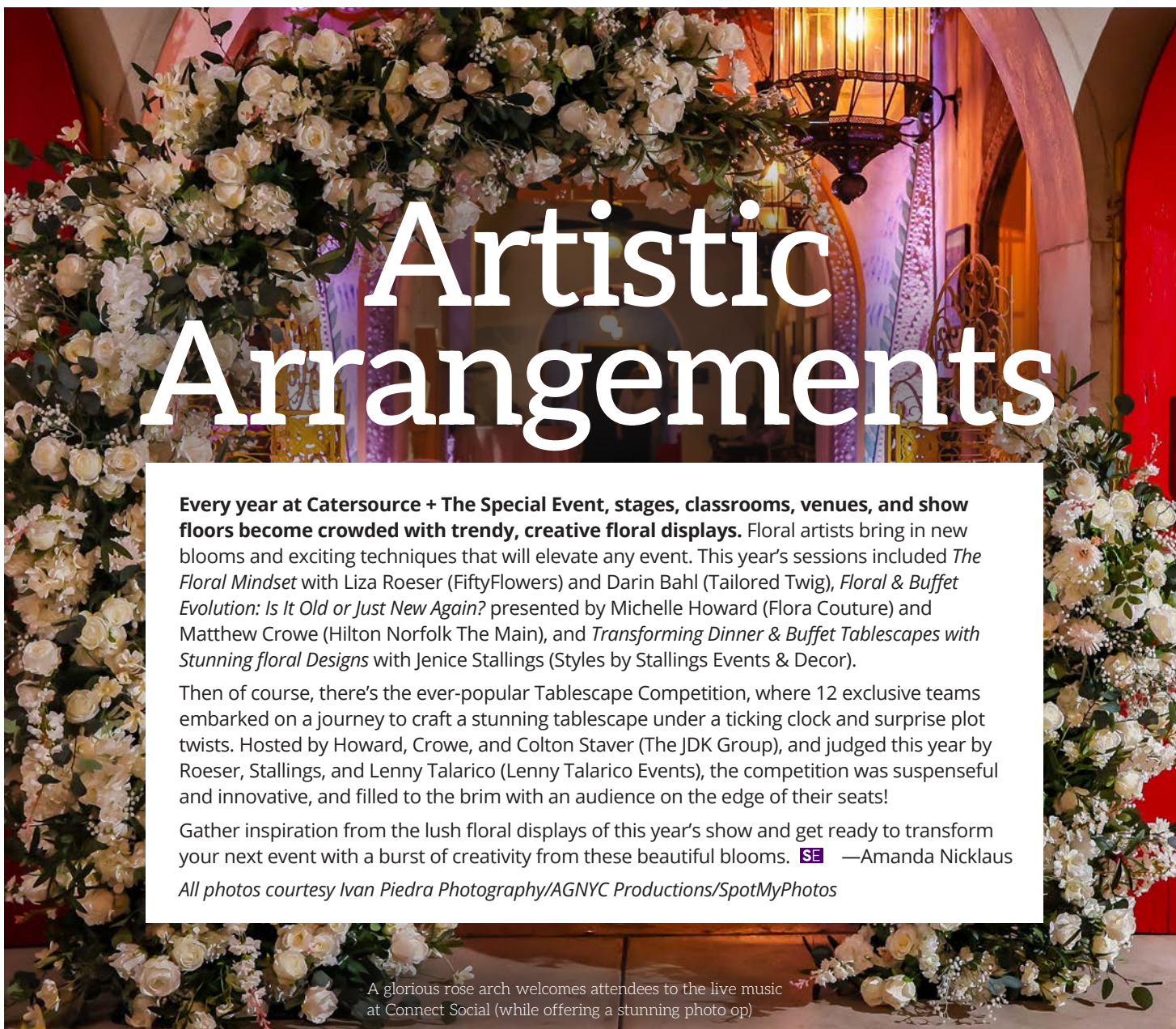
STEAL THIS



Jenice Stallings offers stunning designs for buffet tablescapes



Tropical florals seen at the Closing Night Celebration



Artistic Arrangements

Every year at Catersource + The Special Event, stages, classrooms, venues, and show floors become crowded with trendy, creative floral displays. Floral artists bring in new blooms and exciting techniques that will elevate any event. This year's sessions included *The Floral Mindset* with Liza Roeser (FiftyFlowers) and Darin Bahl (Tailored Twig), *Floral & Buffet Evolution: Is It Old or Just New Again?* presented by Michelle Howard (Flora Couture) and Matthew Crowe (Hilton Norfolk The Main), and *Transforming Dinner & Buffet Tablescapes with Stunning floral Designs* with Jenice Stallings (Styles by Stallings Events & Decor).

Then of course, there's the ever-popular TablescapE Competition, where 12 exclusive teams embarked on a journey to craft a stunning tablescapE under a ticking clock and surprise plot twists. Hosted by Howard, Crowe, and Colton Staver (The JDK Group), and judged this year by Roeser, Stallings, and Lenny Talarico (Lenny Talarico Events), the competition was suspenseful and innovative, and filled to the brim with an audience on the edge of their seats!

Gather inspiration from the lush floral displays of this year's show and get ready to transform your next event with a burst of creativity from these beautiful blooms. **SE** —Amanda Nicklaus

All photos courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions/SpotMyPhotos

A glorious rose arch welcomes attendees to the live music at Connect Social (while offering a stunning photo op)



(Left) Attendees race to gather supplies for creating their design at the Tablescape Competition; (Below) Unique structures and bold colors were seen gracing tables at the Tablescape Competition



A pastel array from Roeser and Bahl's session *The Floral Mindset*



(Left) Matthew Crowe and Michelle Howard talk floral trends over time; (Above) Bright magenta florals complement the magenta floral print tablecloth at Connect Social



"Your business can only grow as far as you're willing to grow yourself."

From Stage to Strategy: Why Transformation Is My Favorite Takeaway

By Chris Weinberg

I've always believed that when we gather, whether for a wedding, a gala, or a professional summit, something powerful can happen. Ideas can spark. Connections can deepen. And sometimes, transformation takes root.

That's what Catersource + The Special Event has become for me over the years. Yes, it's where trends are unveiled and innovation takes center stage. But more than that, it's where leaders are made. Where we sharpen our thinking, question old patterns, and leave, not just with notebooks full of ideas, but with a fire lit inside of us to grow into the next version of who we're meant to be.

This year, I had the privilege of speaking about the CEO mindset and mastering leadership for business growth. It's a topic that feels deeply personal. As the founder and CEO of a company I built from the ground up over the past 20 years, I've lived the evolution firsthand, from doer to delegator, from event planner to visionary leader. I've made the mistakes, taken the risks, and learned, sometimes the hard way, what it takes to scale a business that not only succeeds, but sustains.

And if there's one thing I know for sure, it's this: you can't scale what you don't own. Your mindset. Your leadership. Your time. Your decisions. These are the roots of a business that grows with purpose.

That's why I show up at events like this, to pay it forward. To share what I've learned, not because I have all the answers, but because I remember exactly what it felt like not to. I remember bootstrapping a seasonal business in a competitive market. I remember navigating how to price my value, lead a team, and let go of control in order to grow. And I remember looking around the room at events like TSE, wondering if anyone else felt the same kind of hunger to do more and to do it better.

That's why I'm so passionate about education, not just formal education, but the

kind that happens in spaces like this. The conversations in the hallways. The questions during Q&A. The shared vulnerability of saying, "I'm still figuring this out." That's where real learning happens. That's where community begins.

Because here's the truth: our industry isn't for the faint of heart. It's fast-paced, demanding, and deeply personal. We don't just produce events; we hold space for people's most meaningful moments. We turn visions into reality, often under pressure, always with grace. But we can't pour from an empty cup. We need spaces that fill us back up. That's what CS+TSE is for me.

My hope is that each of us left this year's event with more than just business cards and brochure samples. I hope we left with clarity on who we want to become, as leaders, as creators, as business owners. That we left asking better questions. That we gave ourselves permission to evolve.

Because transformation doesn't happen all at once. It's a mindset shift. A new hire. A hard boundary. A decision to prioritize our health, our teams, or our systems. It's seeing ourselves not just as service providers, but as CEOs of thriving, intentional businesses.

And if there's one message I want to leave you with, it's this: your business can only grow as far as you're willing to grow yourself. The workshops, keynotes, and connections are the beginning, but the real work happens when you go home. When you get quiet and ask, "What needs to change?" And then, with courage, you start.

So, as this issue wraps up and we all go back to our busy seasons, I challenge you to hold onto the energy of transformation. To take one insight, one tool, one connection—and use it. To share what you've learned with someone who's a few steps behind you. And to trust that the more we grow individually, the stronger we become collectively.

Here's to building better businesses. To leading with purpose. And to meeting again next year, even more transformed than the last. **SE**

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