

WHAT'S COOKING?

BY SARA PEREZ WEBBER

Caterers share menu items that are winning raves, and the culinary techniques that are rocking their worlds



For *Catering Magazine's* annual food-and-beverage issue, we wanted to find out what caterers are serving on their menus that have guests cheering, and the techniques that chefs are favoring now to get clients talking—and keep them coming back for more. So we asked a handful of catering companies to share their current favorites. “What’s cooking?” we asked. Their interesting answers demonstrate innovation and creativity, as well as a commitment to stick with what works.

DECONSTRUCTING CLASSICS

Classic Catering People, Owings Mills, Md.
 ●●● classiccatering.com

At Classic Catering People in Owings Mills, Md., “what we really like to focus on is to create a fad, a new style, something that may have been around for some time, but look at it in a different way,” says Chef John Walsh, vice president of culinary. “We may decide to deconstruct the recipe and put it back together in stages, or serve it with a twist. Cooking to us really is technique; we try to develop different techniques to classic ideas.”

For example, Classic Catering’s elegant Yankee Pot Roast Deconstructed (see recipe, right) substitutes boneless short ribs for the standard chuck roast, grapeseed oil for vegetable oil, rich veal stock for beef stock, and rice flour for wheat flour. In all its recipes, Classic Catering utilizes fresh, local produce, showing up in the recipe’s new crop carrots and Vidalia onions. “Sustainability is very important,” says Walsh. “It’s hard work, but the benefits are tremendous when it comes to flavor.”

The result is clearly not your grandma’s pot roast—a sophisticated dish served with a demitasse cup of Chinese celery-stick garnish and vegetable batons topped with chopped parsley. Another popular updated classic is the company’s Lobster BLT (see recipe on p. 38). This upscale version of the traditional favorite features fresh basil leaves, pureed avocados mixed with mayonnaise, thick-sliced bacon, heirloom tomatoes (when available), Boston Bibb lettuce leaves and butter-poached lobster tail meat.

“What we do to food is like a sentence,” says Walsh. “We don’t try to change the sentence; we just add an exclamation point to make it more powerful.”

YANKEE POT ROAST DECONSTRUCTED (pictured left)

By Chef John Walsh of *The Classic Catering People*

YIELD

Serves 16

INGREDIENTS

- 4 pounds boneless short ribs
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 3 tablespoons grapeseed oil
- 6 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 medium-size Vidalia onion, finely chopped
- 1 medium-size new crop carrot, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons rice flour
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup rich veal stock
- 1 cup dry red wine (American; it is Yankee Pot Roast)
- Leaves from four sprigs of fresh thyme
- 2 California bay leaves
- ½ pound unsalted butter
- 4 carrots, peeled and cut into 2-inch sticks, ½ -inch thick
- 1 celery root, peeled and cut into 2-inch sticks, ½ -inch thick
- 4 ribs of celery cut into 2-inch sticks, ½ -inch thick
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 16 Chinese celery sticks

METHOD

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Season the meat with salt and pepper. Place a deep, heavy roasting pan or casserole on top of stove. Add oil, and when it is hot, add meat, fat side down, and sear it. Then turn meat and brown on all sides. Remove meat from pan and set aside.
2. Add the garlic, chopped onion and carrot to the pan and cook for 1 minute. Sprinkle with flour, and cook for 1 minute longer, stirring constantly. Gradually add the water, veal stock and the wine, allowing the sauce to thicken. Bring to a boil, and add the thyme and bay leaves. Return the meat to the pan, season lightly with salt and pepper, and place in the oven, covered.
3. Braised covered for two hours, turning the meat every 30 minutes. The sauce should bubble gently. Lower the heat if it cooks too fast. If the sauce becomes too thick, add water.
4. Poach the carrots, celery root and ribs of celery in butter (I add a little water so it does not separate) for a few minutes until tender. Remove, and keep in a warm place.
5. Remove meat from the sauce and slice it into ½ -inch-thick slices. Skim sauce of any excess fat, and season with salt and pepper. Remove bay leaves.

PRESENTATION (ON A PLATE)

- On the left side of the plate:** demitasse cup with sauce and Chinese celery stick garnish.
- In the middle:** vegetable batons topped with chopped parsley.
- On the right side of the plate:** short ribs.



LOBSTER BLT & AVOCADO

(pictured below)

By Chef John Walsh of The Classic Catering People

YIELD

6 sandwiches

INGREDIENTS

- 2 ½ cups fresh basil leaves (lightly packed)
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 2 pureed avocados
- ¼ cup butter, room temperature
- 12 thick-sliced bacon strips (about 1 pound); applewood smoked works well
- 12 ½-inch-thick slices fresh country-style white bread, baguette or brioche roll
- 3 large tomatoes, cut into ¼-inch-thick rounds (heirloom, if in season)
- Salt and pepper
- 6 large leaves of lettuce (Boston Bibb)
- 18 ounces butter-poached lobster tail meat, sliced thin

METHOD

Mix basil, mayonnaise, avocado and butter in processor until basil is finely chopped and mixture is well blended. Season to taste with sea salt and pepper (can be made one day ahead). Cover and refrigerate.

Cook bacon in heavy large skillet over medium-high heat until crisp, about 8 minutes. Transfer to paper towels; drain.

Spread half of mayonnaise mixture over one side of six bread slices. Top each with two tomato slices. Sprinkle tomatoes with salt and pepper. Top with lobster, bacon strips and lettuce. Spread remaining mayonnaise mixture over remaining six bread slices. Place bread slices atop lettuce. Cut sandwiches in half, and serve.



FROMAGE BLANC ROAMING CART BRINING AND BITTERS

Culinary Capers combines two culinary trends—brining and bitters—in its brined wild salmon with Seville orange bitters (above, right); the company's Fromage Blanc Roaming Cart (above three photos) has been booked for many fall and holiday events.

Culinary Capers Catering and Special Events, Vancouver, British Columbia

●●● culinarycapers.com

This summer, Culinary Capers created and launched a Fromage Blanc Roaming Cart that corporate clients immediately started booking for fall and holiday events.

The cart includes house-made fromage blanc, olive oils and vinegars from Vancouver Olive Oil Co., basil crystals, roasted red and yellow beets, brioche croutons, slow-roasted cherry tomatoes, and smoked and regular Maldon sea salts. Guests can customize their own appetizers at the cart.

"This works well in a cocktail reception setting that includes passed hors d'oeuvres and food stations," says Debra Lykkemark, CEO and owner of Culinary Capers. "It's healthy, colorful, and bursting with local flavors and ingredients, which appeals to our West Coast clientele. We can switch the house-made fromage blanc with burrata cheese, and we can also change out the ingredients depending on the season. It's

another opportunity for our event chef to create a fun, interactive energy with guests as they design their own plate."

Another new Culinary Capers dish combines an increasingly popular kitchen method, brining, with a trending ingredient—bitters. Its brined wild sockeye salmon with Seville orange bitters glaze, ancient grains salad with fresh herbs, roasted cauliflower and tarragon mousse can be served as either a small plate or entrée.

For the dish, fresh salmon is soaked for 30 minutes in a sugar- and salt-seasoned water brine that allows it to retain its moisture, amplifying its flavors. "The cooked fish is extremely moist and doesn't need much seasoning," says Lykkemark.

The glaze features house-made Seville orange bitters, made by taking the peel of fresh Seville oranges and infusing it with savory spices in vodka for four weeks. "We then add a dark caramel to intensify the flavor," says Lykkemark. "When ready, we use the bitters in vinaigrettes and finishing glazes, and in our handcrafted Culinary Cocktails. It adds a delicate yet complex flavor and depth to our dishes and cocktails."

SMOKED FOODS

David's Soundview Catering, Stamford, Conn.

●●● davidscatering.com

"Smoked foods are really hot right now," says Chef David Cingari, owner of David's Soundview Catering in Stamford, Conn. To stay on trend and keep up with demand, the company recently purchased a large-volume smoker.

Now, David's Soundview is smoking all of its ribs, brisket, pulled pork, filet mignon, rib-eyes and chicken. "The hundreds of pounds of barbecue chicken we sell each week for private and corporate barbecues is all smoked first, and then grilled and either sauced or served with a variety of barbecue sauces on the side," says Cingari. Clients enjoy having the smoked meats presented un-sauced, adds Cingari; the company will serve them alongside sauces representing a variety of regional types of barbecue, including Carolina, Chicago, Memphis, Korean and Chinese.

"This cooking method is extremely versatile," adds Chef Francois Kwaku-Dongo, executive chef. The company has incorporated it into such menu items as smoked chicken tamales with roasted tomatillo sauce, smoked brisket tacos with chipotle cream, and smoked shrimp with grits.

"Quite often our customers have a flavor experience that they can't quite identify," says Kwaku-Dongo. "The addition of that smoky flavor elevates even the most simplistic of dishes and adds a subtle flavor profile."



Chef Francois Kwaku-Dongo (above), who joined David's Soundview Catering in May, has been working with Chef David Cingari to incorporate smoked meats into a variety of dishes, including smoked chicken tamale (above right) and smoked brisket (right).





Blue Plate Catering's crostini varieties include (clockwise from above) fresh ricotta crostini with eggplant caponata; black truffle crostini; and white bean crostini with grilled radicchio.



CROSTINI

Blue Plate Catering, Chicago
 ●●● blueplatechicago.com

An old favorite is back at Blue Plate Catering in Chicago. Out of favor for a while, crostini have customers clamoring for more.

"We like to create a mini version of something absolutely mouthwatering," explains Paul Larson, executive chef. "It's easy to carry around, and you get a little bit of everything in one bite. It's also a great way to get just a taste of something decadent."

Blue Plate's Bruschetta Bar is a popular option. It presents guests with crispy garlic baked crostini and assorted toppings, including roasted eggplant and caper caponata; tomato chutney, mozzarella and basil; and roasted wild mushrooms with fresh thyme and crumbled goat cheese.

"Customers absolutely love this trend," says Larson. "From catered affairs, to Direct by Blue Plate [the company's drop-off service], crostini are a huge request and always satisfy."

PICKLING AND CANDYING

MOSAIC Catering & Events, Richmond, Va.
 ●●● mosaiccateringevents.com

To present a different look and feel for its displays and menu items, MOSAIC started pickling up a storm this summer.

"We have been pickling shrimp and placing that with fresh cilantro on deviled eggs to create new ways to present Southern staples for clients," says Maggie Millan Padron, senior catering and event producer.

To mix up and embellish vegetable displays, MOSAIC has been pickling local produce, sometimes using exotic spices such as cardamom, cumin and turmeric. It's also pickling hot peppers, such as jalapeños, to add spice without the heat.



Right, top to bottom: Zilli Hospitality's flaming doughnut station; guests enjoying popcorn balls; a chef cooks popcorn balls in liquid nitrogen. Below, clockwise from top left: MOSAIC Catering's candied pork belly; a platter of pickled foods; the pickling process.

"Pickling is an ideal way to add that spiciness to a dish while eliminating overpowering heat," says Ian McGrory, catering executive sous chef. "Our house-made pickles have been a big hit with our guests."

Candying is another technique that's been showing up on MOSAIC menus recently, utilized to enhance flavors on commonly used ingredients.

For example, this summer MOSAIC chefs topped grilled summer corn and edamame succotash with candied pork belly and poblano barbecue sauce. The company also served up hors d'oeuvres made of thick-cut candied bacon on skewers.

"Candying is a great way to enhance a flavor of any commonly used ingredient," says Ken Bender, MOSAIC's executive catering and event chef. "Guests are pleasantly surprised with a twist when they bite into something that is candied and savory at the same time."



PHOTOS BY JAMIE HAYES, HAYES & FISK PHOTOGRAPHY (HAYESANDFISK.COM)



FLAMING DOUGHNUTS AND POPCORN BALLS

Zilli Hospitality Group, Milwaukee
 ●●● zillihospitalitygroup.com

Zilli introduced two action stations as part of a "fire and ice" theme at a recent event that have clients raving. At its flaming doughnuts action station, the chef entertains the crowd by setting the doughnut glaze afire. The guest then receives a warm, tasty doughnut alongside ice cream. "The most requested flavor is red velvet, but any doughnut and ice cream flavor is possible," says Steph Zilli, principal at Zilli Hospitality Group. "Flambé has always been a popular item for catering events with fruit and ice cream, but doughnuts take it to the next level."

The second action station, particularly well suited for the fall, features popcorn balls cooked in liquid nitrogen. Any sort of salt can flavor the popcorn, and while most guests choose traditional popcorn balls, Zilli can also serve caramel popcorn and cheese popcorn balls at the station.

"Liquid nitrogen is something new to the Midwest in the cooking/catering scene, and something guests can't experience at any restaurant," says Zilli. "They typically react in amazement. Both action stations allow the guests to interact with the chefs, and bring some dimension to the rooms by adding movement and action, rather than everyone sitting at their tables eating a plated meal." ●