

On Today's Menu: Creativity

Five Ways to your Attendees' Hearts through their Stomachs

Guest Advice
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We all know the food-and-beverage standard drill: Start your attendees off with a continental breakfast featuring a few pastries and some slices of cantaloupe. Then move them on to a midmorning snack of more breakfast breads and coffee. For lunch, it's the old standard "build your own deli sandwich" platter, followed by a midafternoon snack of candy bars and apples. If you're doing a buffet dinner, it probably consists of pasta and more pasta, with maybe a little artichoke salad to add some flair.

A good event planner knows that it's easy for food-and-beverage costs to get out of hand, and to try to please the tastes of the general public, we tend to stick to standard, "safe" selections on our menus. But we also know that in post-event surveys, there will inevitably be comments on the quality and presentation of the meals — and a little bit of creativity will ensure that you get high marks in this area!

1 To start with, get to know your banquet contacts at the venue, and most importantly, get to know the chef. He or she is your resident expert and will enjoy helping you come up with some creative menu suggestions and presentations. The menus that the venue provides are usually suggestions to make it easier for meeting planners to make quick selections. However, don't be afraid to take an existing menu and approach the catering manager about ways to shake it up. Be honest about your budget

guidelines, and he or she will often be able to come up with novel ideas that make your meals more interesting.

2 It's amazing how serving up an old standard in a creative manner will help make a meal memorable. To help prevent long lines at buffets for large groups, try serving most of the meal "family-style." Have each dish set in a pretty vessel on a large lazy Susan in the center of the table. Or have desserts arranged on a tiered serving tree in the middle of each table, which will also give you a creative and tasty centerpiece design.

3 Uncommon serving arrangements will always add a touch of class and interest. If you're having an Asian-themed meal, see if your caterer will provide the traditional white cardboard "Chinese take-out" containers in small sizes. Serve cold noodle dishes or salads in them, and provide wooden chopsticks for authenticity. Additionally, martini glasses can be used for more than just drinks: Try using them to serve everything from whipped potatoes with colorful toppings to gazpacho.



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4 Taking a traditional dish and making it a little more

creative and gourmet is also a good way to liven up a meal. For example, try serving a selection of gourmet burgers, such as salmon burgers and mini-cheeseburgers with caramelized onions and high-quality cheese on brioches. If you're serving a selection of sandwiches, try taking old favorites to new levels: Add grilled shrimp on a BLT, or have a PB&J made with freshly baked French baguette (and served with a glass of cold milk, of course!).

Sushi rolls are another possibility — they can be made with a variety of fillings, besides just raw fish. Talk to your chef about creating sushi with strips of filet mignon, or exotic vegetables and cooked shrimp. Drizzle the rolls with a variety of tasty and colorful sauces, and you have a visual spectacle that should appeal to everyone.

5 For breakfasts and snack breaks, think fresh and unexpected. Try adding freshly made fruit smoothies, or instead of just your standard fruit platter, have the chef prepare fruit "kabobs" with alternating cubes of fresh fruit and



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Courtesy: Photo-Tech

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► cheese on skewers. Or talk to the catering manager about using more exotic fruits such as star fruit, cherries, nectarines and other options not generally found on a standard buffet. If you're in a hot season or region, try offering iced-coffee drinks and flavored iced tea, or freshly made lemonade.

Small but surprising changes to a menu or the presentation of a meal will always make your attendees enjoy themselves just a bit more



Courtesy: Photo-Tech

Get to know your banquet contacts at the venue, and most importantly, get to know the chef.

at mealtime. Together with your catering team, you can find ways to create memorable and delicious banquets that will earn you a "10" on every survey!



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