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A World of Culinary Adventures

Kicking it up a notch with F&B.

By Regina Baraban

Who among us doesn't talk about food? Unquestionably, delicious food puts a meeting on the map. It not only gives event attendees an enjoyable multi-sensory experience, but it can also connect them with the local community and with each other. Plus, "if attendee ROI is measured in the social media buzz of Instagrammable pictures or videos, then I think planners can hit the jackpot with food events," says Steffi Kordy, owner of Miami-based **Cocoon Incentives**.

How to create the culinary wow? It involves detailed planning that is curated for the attendees and the specific meal, says Kordy. "For one incentive, we booked a hotel suite and offered 'breakfast in bed.' The group met in the suite, with the buffet set out on its king-sized bed. This was a breakfast setting that would not be forgotten. It tweaked the idea of breakfast in

bed to something different than attendees had expected, and it led to informal talks among them." Lunch, says Kordy, tends to be an informal event, and she will often tie it in with a local activity, such as fishing or gardening, to create a hands-on lunch with the chef using the local bounty. For an atypical happy hour, she recently offered a mixology class using edible flowers, where incentive participants learned about the flowers' nutritional benefits and how to use them to create picturesque drinks.

Dinner, Kordy notes, is where event planners get most creative. "I think a big part of a spectacular dinner is in the presentation. This ranges from live entertainers serving food or drinks to using robots to deliver food. There are many ways to present food in spectacular fashion. Attendees can create instant custom ice cream with much fog

fanfare using dry ice, for example. And if the group appreciates a multi-sensory culinary experience, and the budget allows, a meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant is definitely a big draw for attendees."

Food always tells a story, says Anastasia Nisenbaum and Thomas Serrano of luxury event management company **Exclamation Group**. One way of communicating that story to attendees is by connecting them with the chef. For one event, Nisenbaum and Serrano had the Michelin-starred chef attend and take the time to visit each table to speak directly with attendees. However, "when preparing a menu, it's important to keep in mind that not all attendees have the same level of sophistication when it comes to food. You don't want to make the menu overly complex and therefore inaccessible to



"Michelin-starred restaurants in Taiwan showcase traditional cuisine using locally sourced ingredients, reflecting a commitment to health and sustainability."

Cathy Hung, Deputy Director,
Taiwan Tourism Bureau

Clockwise from top: Bear Restaurant, Stanly Ranch, Napa Valley; Te Pui Rotorua's Te Whakarewarewa, New Zealand (photo credit: Matt Crawford); DiNics Roast Beef, Reading Terminal Market, Philadelphia





Above: Stanton Social Prime, Caesars Palace

some of the group. It can be luxurious and entertaining without feeling alienating."

Read on to learn about local good eats in Austin, chef-driven dining in Las Vegas, innovative food and wine pairings in Napa Valley, acclaimed and authentic cuisine in New Zealand, the diverse, sustainable food scene in Philadelphia, and Taiwan's singular blend of modernity with culinary traditions.

LAS VEGAS: CELEBRITY CHEFS TO FOOD HALLS

"There is no other destination in the world that combines the variety, caliber and convenience of the Las Vegas food scene," says Lisa Messina, chief sales officer, **Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (LVCVA)**. "From celebrity chefs and Michelin-starred restaurants to unique concepts that combine entertainment with mouth-watering menus, groups have an endless list of options suited to satisfy even the pickiest of palates, all within an easy-to-navigate stretch of the famous Las Vegas Strip."

Top meeting and incentive hotels under the **Caesars** and **MGM Resorts** umbrellas in Las Vegas recently introduced hot new chef-driven dining spots, with more in the pipeline. The 200-seat **Stanton Social Prime** at **Caesars Palace**, with iconic offerings ranging from dry-rubbed steaks to a "strawberry blonde milkshake" (strawberry mousse, vanilla sponge cake, Chantilly cream and an edible white

chocolate cup and straw), is already a top culinary experience since opening this spring. Due to open later this year at Caesars Palace, **Brasserie B by Bobby Flay** will serve up French-inspired fare inspired by Flay's extensive travels to the Amalfi Coast. At Caesars' **Horseshoe Las Vegas**, James Beard award winner **Chef Martin Yan's M.Y. Asia** opened in March, and **Guy Fieri's Flavortown Sports Kitchen** will open this summer. Here, up to 279 diners can enjoy Fieri's signature American-style cuisine in a variety of spaces and groups can reserve the MVP Lounge for exclusive dining and viewing. In other Caesars' news, the **DiscoShow** at the new **Spiegelworld Glitterloft** in the **LINQ Hotel + Experience** is due to open summer 2024 with a diner and bars as well as experiential live entertainment.

At **MGM Resorts**, new culinary adventures abound. In May, **Retro by Volaggio**, the first Las Vegas restaurant from celeb chefs Michael and Bryan Volaggio, opened at **Mandalay Bay** for a 1-year culinary residency experience featuring the brothers' modern take on classic American dishes. Also opened in May, **Cathedrale** at **ARIA** offers a menu featuring coastal cuisine influenced by the regions of France, Spain, Italy and Greece. At Bellagio, chef Julian Serrano has introduced new dinner, lunch and brunch menus at the acclaimed **LAGO**

overlooking the resort's famous fountains, with food that celebrates Italians' passion for scratch-made pastas, slow-aged steaks and fresh seafood within the larger-than-life style that fuels Las Vegas. Coming this fall to **The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas** is the heralded **LPM Restaurant and Bar**, with its signature French Riviera-inspired cuisine.

"One of the biggest trends we are seeing in Vegas right now is food halls," says Messina. "**Proper Eats** at **ARIA** and **Famous Foods** at **Resorts World Las Vegas**, for example, boast dozens of cuisines ranging from well-known brands and chefs to under-the-radar finds," she says. At the same time, celebrity chef restaurants continue to proliferate. "From Martha Stewart to Giada De Laurentiis and from Gordon Ramsey to Bobby Flay, chefs love to have a presence in Las Vegas, and that speaks volumes to the allure and longevity of the dining scene," notes Messina.

For group culinary adventures, Messina recommends touring the local food scene with **Lip Smacking Foodie Tours**: "They offer several experiences including taking guests to the up-and-coming arts district or downtown Las Vegas to explore locally focused culinary hotspots." She also recommends **XPot** at **Grand Canal Shoppes** at **The Venetian Resort**. "This is a unique venue for groups due to its impressive private dining room. The restaurant utilizes '5D' mapping that produces designs covering the walls, tables and even the glassware. The experience can be customized with personal photos or company logos." And, she says, "as Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world, planners should definitely consider dinner and a show for a group event. Incredible restaurants that offer live performances alongside their amazing menus including **Mayfair Supper Club** at **Bellagio** and **Delilah** at **Wynn Las Vegas**."

NAPA VALLEY: BOUNDARY-BUSTING CUISINE

Located 50 miles northeast of San Francisco, 30 mile-long Napa Valley is known for its picturesque tapestry of vineyards, with 400 wineries and tasting rooms. More than that, "Napa Valley has



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Linsey Gallagher, President and CEO, Visit Napa Valley

always been at the forefront of farm-to-table cuisine,” says Linsey Gallagher, president and CEO of **Visit Napa Valley**. “Many chefs and restaurant owners prioritize forging partnerships with local farmers and purveyors—not only to ensure the freshness and quality of their dishes, but to also give a taste of what makes Napa Valley such an important agricultural region.”

It’s only natural, Gallagher adds, that Napa’s wineries and restaurants work together on innovative food and wine pairings. “We’re also lucky that, year after year, new cohorts of talented chefs graduate from **The Culinary Institute of America** and start their careers in Napa Valley. These new minds bring fresh ideas and continue to push the boundaries of cuisine at restaurants and food purveyors up and down Napa Valley.”

There is increasing demand from MICE groups for food and wine pairings, says Gallagher. “Wineries offer a variety of unique and stunning group venues, from the tasting room itself to wine caves, vineyards and outdoor terraces.” **Cakebread Cellars**, notes Gallagher, was one of the first wineries in Napa Valley to offer a culinary pairing with a wine tasting experience. “Today, groups can enjoy curated wine and food pairings, multi-course meals and even private cooking classes with Cakebread’s in-house professional chefs.”

Among Gallagher’s other recommendations for singular group experiences is The Culinary Institute of America at **Copia**, with one of the largest test kitchens in Napa. “Planners can have private cooking classes here that are completely curated to each group’s specific interests and skill levels,” she notes. “It is also home to the **Chuck Williams Culinary Arts Museum**, with more than 4,000 artifacts of specialty cookware.” She also recommends the **Cooking with Comedians** dinner at **The Meritage Resort and Spa**, where chefs and comedians work together to create a 3-course farm-to-fork meal. And for an authentic Napa Valley meal picked fresh from the garden, she suggests **Chandon’s** classic family-style meal called “Togetherness at Heart.”

Asked about Napa’s hot new restaurants, Gallagher gives a shout-out to **Farmstead** at **Long Meadow Ranch** and **Brasswood Bar + Kitchen** in **St. Helena**, “offering impressive views from indoor/outdoor spaces with flexible capacities for different sizes of groups.” Also in St. Helena, **PRESS Restaurant** was recently awarded its first Michelin star and welcomes small groups in a variety of private and semi-private spaces. The food

here features fresh, local ingredients and includes such entrees as black cod, cordyceps mushrooms, green asparagus and abalone consomme. In **Calistoga, Truss Restaurant + Bar** at the **Four Seasons Resort and Residences** features farm-to-table cuisine and majestic vineyard views. At **Stanly Ranch**, “**The Grange** is a private event space located in the chef’s garden that is perfect for larger groups seeking their own culinary oasis,” says Gallagher.

NEW ZEALAND: IMMERSIVE AND ACCLAIMED

The basis of New Zealand cuisine, says **Tourism New Zealand** general manager NZ & Business Events, Bjoern Spreitzer, is “fresh, sustainably produced and locally sourced food, which is authentic to its roots yet speaks to New Zealand’s great diversity, from our indigenous Maori culture to other influences from our Asian and Pasifika communities and beyond.”

New Zealand has always been a great destination for foodies, but its F&B has recently been the focus of international acclaim, notes Spreitzer. “In May, **Hawke’s Bay** was announced as the 12th Great Wine Capital of the World. With 125 wine producers and more than 30 cellar doors [tasting rooms], the area offers wonderful experiences for groups, from long vineyard lunches to bike tours between cellar doors.”

Food website *Eater* included Auckland in its guide of the 11 best cities in the world to eat in 2023, citing 38 “essential” restaurants. “*Eater* said when picking 2023 dining destinations they thought not just about must-try dishes, but aspects of meals that made them feel immersive—‘the people, environment, culture and history behind foods.’ I think that’s representative of New Zealand’s culinary scene overall,” says Spreitzer. “The act of sharing food, called *kai*, is very important in Maori culture as a means of connection and providing an authentic experience of our place and our culture.”

For a traditional Maori feast, Spreitzer recommends that groups take in a Maori cultural experience at **Te Pui Rotorua’s Te Whakarewarewa** geothermal valley, followed by food cooked in a traditional *hangi* (pit oven) and a steamed pudding cooked in a natural steam vent. Or, for a modern experience, the award-winning **Hiakai** restaurant in Wellington serves a sophisticated spin on traditional Maori cuisine.

New Zealand cities offer varied and vibrant dining options, and food is never far from the source, says Spreitzer. “This