

Restaurant Forum



Think Outside the Ballroom

Universal Orlando Resort

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By Alicia Callanan Mandigo

Forget the crystal chandeliers, the multicolored carpets and the podium. Focus instead on the peals of laughter, the shrieks of excitement and the thundering motion you hear outside the confines of the ballroom walls. It can make a conventioner feel restless and edgy, anxious to burn off some steam.

“We like to think they come for our food and beverage,” says Universal Orlando Resort Catering Director Robert Ivey, “but we know they come for the attractions. So we like to match the food and beverage experience to the attraction experience. We’re telling every one to think outside the ballroom.”

In 2006, Orlando surpassed Chicago to become the country’s number two destination for conventions and trade shows. And as

Orlando continues to attract new events, event planners look for new and exciting ways to entertain their attendees. In increasing numbers, they’re booking at Universal Orlando, which has seen a more than 40 percent increase in its catering business over the past couple of years.

“Corporate America is doing well right now, which means they can be more ambitious about getting their message across. But instead of spending thousands to theme a ballroom, we have everything they could want right here,” says Ivey.

Universal’s stunningly accurate depiction of the streets of New York provide the backdrop as “street vendors” dish up plates of steaming Asian dim sum displayed in Chinese-style baskets atop

Executive Sous Chef Tom Danboise attends a carving station in Islands of Adventure's Jurassic Park.



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Chef Dee Hatsady attends a sauté station at Dueling Dragons at Islands of Adventure.



giant woks. Steam billows towards the clouds, as fragrant ginger entices a guest to reach for a plate. In the background are the excited screams and howls bursting forth from the Revenge of the Mummy thrill ride. It's the ultimate in special events, which have been evolving for the past 16 years that Universal has been open in Orlando.

"Some years ago, we took a look at what we had, which was millions of dollars in built-in props, and it was clear we could put together fantastic parties with food, entertainment and theming, and we wouldn't have to charge the client extra to bring it in, we have it all here," says Universal Resort Executive Chef Steve Jayson.

The events can range from gritty street festival offerings like hotdogs and pizzas, to upscale plated dinners featuring wild mushroom risotto and sea bass in a port wine sauce. Marilyn Monroe can stroll Park Avenue as the Blues Brothers perform on Delancey Street. The food can be themed toward the event, and the menu item names can be themed for the hosting com-



Above: Director of Catering Bob Ivey; Pastry Chef Mike Harman; and Vice President of Revenue Operations Fran Dowd with pastries in front of Revenge of the Mummy, one of the hip, new attractions at Universal Studios.



Left: Seuss Landing: Executive Sous Chef Ed Colleran displays kid-friendly banquet foods at Seuss Landing.

pany through the use of little name signs on the food stands. The catering team is finding there are few limits.

Visions of a party in the streets of San Francisco become real with sidewalk fajita stations. Huge grills with big, flat metal tops sizzle as cooks searing fajitas hit them with a squeeze of lime juice before folding them into a fresh tortilla. Napa Valley's finest wines are passed around in front of Fisherman's Warf as the ground suddenly begins to shake. It's Earthquake — The Big One, the popular attraction simulating an earthquake of 8.3 magnitude. On the other side of the resort, a group of 5,000 might set their sights on the upper level of CityWalk, where New Orleans comes to life with the help of Pat

O'Brien's and Bob Marley's, allowing for an event that is as easy and relaxed as a mojito from CityWalk's Latin Quarter. Guests can listen to a little reggae and then stroll outside where a cigar roller awaits.

"We get requests for a cigar roller, it's something we have on our menu of services now because people want that. Years ago nobody would even think of something like that," says Jayson.

The numbers can sometimes be amazing. While Universal Resort catering frequently handles small events of 20 or 30 people, it also does groups of up to 18,000, and that's on top of daily park attendance. There can be as many as 25 chefs overseeing up to 50 banquet stations, and events can be scheduled as frequently as four or five nights a week. "We have the largest, most complete catering staff anywhere in Central Florida," says Ivey, "and their level of talent is remarkable."

The increase in convention space along with the growth in

Right: Bob Marley's: CityWalk's Executive Sous Chef Joe Alfano proudly displays authentic Jamaican cuisine outside of Bob Marley's venue at Universal Orlando Citywalk.

Below: Robert Martinez, Chefs Bob Burdick, Milan Bjelajac and Yogi Thompson create banquets for thousands in Universal Orlando's production kitchen.



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Chef Garde Manger Raffy Pambuan constructs a sushi ice bar amid the backdrop of Islands of Adventure.

luxury hotels in the area has brought on a demand for more upscale catering offerings. But even those with sophisticated tastes need some after hours relief from the meeting rooms, and an evening at Universal Resort can be just the thing. The goal is to meet the expectations someone would have of a luxury resort, but at the same time, match the excitement of the attractions. Universal is a little edgier than other resorts. It's a place where you can walk around with a cocktail and have a great time in a little more of an adult atmosphere.

“Our brands are much more hip and much more relevant to professional adults, we're very adventurous,” says Ivey. Meaning that through the years, the catering department has done a little bit of everything. There's been no specific trend in what event planners would like to see. Some clients want a pure theme park experience, complete with fried Oreos and chicken fritters, while other groups demand something more along the lines of a sophisticated cocktail party.

And all the while, they are completely immersed in the Shrek experience, or Men in Black, or whatever theme has been chosen for their event. “We are very proud of the success of our catering

team here at Universal Orlando,” says Fran Dowd, Vice President of Revenue Operations. “Our special event guests enjoy a unique experience, which compels them to return to our number one destination for family vacations.” It is a complete package of smells and sights and sounds that create an experience that can only be found outside the ballroom.

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MEETINGS & EVENTS

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