



Not Another Boring Plated Lunch

Adding some life to the average plated meal

by Matthew Stone, CMP
Hilton Arlington
Publications Committee

Salad, entrée, cake. Salad, entrée, cake. After serving hundreds of plated meals, they can all start to sound (and taste) the same. How can you add a little variety? Many executive chefs and catering directors read about the latest food trends, but they only change their banquet menus once or twice a year. If you want to offer your attendees variety, it may be up to you to suggest something different.

Here, I've incorporated some of the hot trends with some old favorites to help you spice up the average three-course plated meal.

Think Eastern

Asian and Indian dishes are gaining in popularity at restaurants. But how do you incorporate them into a menu that needs to please a variety of attendees? You can use them

as a side dish or as a portion of a course. Try adding a fresh Vietnamese spring roll with peanut sauce or a samosa to accompany a salad. Noodle bowls are so popular that some restaurants serve only noodle dishes. Your entree could be a beef skewer with vegetables on a bed of rice noodles. When dealing with ethnic foods, take care to avoid overly fragrant foods or strange garnishes like seaweed, which may turn off your attendees.

Try Appetizers Instead of Salads

When you go out to eat with colleagues, you probably opt for appetizers instead of a green salad. Why not do the same for a plated dinner? Appetizers create a sense of energy at a table and are a natural starter for conversation. Just think about what you enjoy,

and you can bet somebody else likes it, too. Bruschetta, quesadillas and southwestern egg rolls are favorites. This is the perfect occasion to put some ethnic foods into play: Indonesian satays, Indian samosas or Lebanese hummus with pitas.

Say No to Surf & Turf

Each of the last five formal dinners I attended served some combination of steak and seafood. The 1980s are over, but many catering menus still present this as the classiest plated entrée. Challenge the chef to try something new.

Yes, Virginia, There are Alternate Proteins

Countries across the world live with vegetarian diets. I'm not suggesting tofu or a garden burger for your entrée; simply add





a falafel to a green salad, or serve a chef's salad with vegetarian turkey. There are wonderful proteins that taste just like seasoned chicken or beef, but are lower in fat. Your vegetarian guests will appreciate something other than a vegetable plate.

Life is More Than Potatoes and Rice

Different starches can add a little life to a plated meal. Couscous, polenta, quinoa and yucca are alternatives. As a side, it is a great

way to introduce a new item without alienating those who may not be gung-ho about trying something new.

Think Seasonal

Catering menus are not usually updated often, so ask the chef what is in season or what is freshest. Seasonal foods add to vibrant, colorful plates. Think of what you have seen in restaurants. In the fall, how about pumpkin ravioli or acorn squash?

Shrink Your Desserts

They have been hot for a couple of years, but they are just now making the transition from the restaurant to the ballroom. The variety increases the guest experience and can be more appealing to either a sweet or tart tooth. Offer each diner a plate with three mini desserts instead of a tray for the table to share. Nothing is worse than watching your neighbor take the last piece of chocolate before it gets to you.

Serve a Softer Dessert

Sorbets and gelatos are extremely popular, especially if they're fresh. This is also one of the few "healthy" options for sweets since they are often made without a lot of artificial ingredients or additives, and many are fat-free. Although you may not have tried a mousse in a while, I still enjoy serving them, and there are never many left over to take back to the kitchen. Go beyond the usual chocolate and strawberry. Instead, try something like white chocolate or raspberry.

Every course can be taken one step above the ordinary. Although I wouldn't try doing all of them at once, incorporating one or two of these ideas can take the meal from mundane to memorable.

Matthew Stone, CMP, is director of sales at the Hilton Arlington. He has served (and eaten) more catered meals than he cares to count, but he can still be impressed by a chef willing to try something new.

Yes you, Ken.

Ken Fitzpatrick
MEETING PLANNER

When Ken planned the meeting in Norfolk, Virginia, people said, "Where?" Now they know. High-style in a small city? Yes you can.

Contact the NCVB today and start planning your next meeting.

NORFOLK VIRGINIA
Convention & Visitors Bureau
Life. Celebrated Daily.

1-800-368-3097 • www.norfolkcvb.com