



by Deborah Carver

Prepared to Think Differently

Embracing culinary innovation

When clients are on the hunt for something fresh and innovative, Robin Selden and her staff will be ready. As executive chef of Marcia Selden Catering and Events in Stamford, CT, her culinary team developed this month's cover dish for an adventurous client's private dinner party.

Japanese soba noodles, which aren't as starchy as traditional pasta, create a nest for a bowl of caviar. The presentation hides a lemon crème fraiche center, a surprise that guests then swirl together with the noodles and the caviar. "It looks very cool, and then you have to play with it to eat it. The crème fraiche gives the appetizer a big burst of flavor," says Selden.




Amanda Gentile

TRAINING FOR CREATIVITY

Selden makes time for the culinary staff to create and innovate to keep their menus as fresh as the soba-caviar appetizer. Every month, the culinary team of 12 is given a Chef's Challenge. Selden makes the announcements via poster: chefs have three days to create a brand new menu item from scratch and provide the recipe. Selden bases the challenges on what her sales team is asking for: "For instance, they'll say, 'Robin, I'm so sick of the chicken dishes that we have; we really need to work on chicken.'" The Chef's Challenge is then given a chicken theme.

Selden orders a wish list of ingredients—cost is no object—for her team's entries. After a tasting and presentation, staff members rate and photograph the dishes. The top three are guaranteed places on the menu, although sales typically uses at least 6 of the 12 creations from each challenge. In addition to the satisfaction of winning, the chefs who created the champion entrees are given American Express gift cards. Selden loves the originality that comes out of these training exercises: "I don't care where the recipes come from; a chef can make it up or be inspired by a restaurant, cookbook or a magazine, but it has to be something we've never had on our menus."

Overall, it's not just about the creativity and innovation. The challenges give employees a reason to feel like owners of the company. "Even if it's just creating something as simple as a salad dressing, I just want them to be coming up with what we put on our menus and contributing to the company's success." 

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