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FOOD FOR FETES



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Savoring summer: Chicken sausage rolls (left) and house-made chips (right) from Kensington Caterers. Photos by Carol Dickson of Kensington Caterers.

Oh, Those Summer Bites!

Light and fresh, smoky and piquant, vibrant summer-inspired appetizers and hors d'oeuvre celebrate the fun, easy feel of the sun-drenched season
By Susan Cuadrado

GRILLED AND SMOKED

As far as smoked meats go, bacon's cousin cut—pork belly—is getting some major play on the appetizer tray. “Pork belly is a huge trend in the culinary world, and this flavorful, sumptuously fatty cut is a huge hit among our clients this season,” say Meryl Snow, president of Philadelphia-based Feastivities. “Whether prepared in a French style with white wine and thyme, or with a sticky, anise-flavored Chinese marinade, pork belly's crispy skin is ambrosia for meat-eaters.” Los Angeles-based Kensington Caterers does a riff on pancakes and bacon with its corn and chive mini-pancakes topped with crispy pork belly and caramelized shallot jam.

PICKLED AND PLUCKED

And what's a barbecue without pickles? L.A.-based Wolfgang Puck Catering adds the requisite pucker to an assortment of tray-passed appetizers, including a pickled strawberry compote with mascarpone and basil on black pepper biscotti, Texas toast with bone marrow butter and pickled onion, and duck rillettes with peach hoisin,



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Country come to town: From Feastivities, johnnycake with lump crab (top) and two bites with pork belly, including a pork belly BLT (bottom). Photo at top by Jackie Bayne; pork belly photos by Joe Pulcinella.



pickled peach and watermelon radish. For the salad course, pickled beets combine with sorrel, toasted red quinoa is paired with a strawberry vinaigrette, and fresh beets are tossed with pickled watermelon rind, plums, hazelnuts and ricotta salata, with a berry vinaigrette.

Kensington Caterers pays homage to the pickle with its lemon basil burrata topped with pickled vegetables and granola crumbs, while Athens, Ga.-based Epting Events tops a Tunisian harissa-laced beet salad with German-style pickled squash, a bite often served alongside pulled short ribs over a butternut puree in a canapé shell. “There is a strong desire among our clientele to experience a small bite of various cultures at one event,” says director of sales Russel Stalvey. “It's not quite fusion, but not quite discordant either.”

At Stamford, Conn.-based Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning, the salad course is literally and figuratively elevated to great heights. “We like to turn the traditional food station on its head and do some creative storytelling through food,” says executive chef



Dig in: From Wolfgang Puck Catering, duck rillettes (left) and vegetable crudités (right). Photos by Trevor Pearson.



Pop hit: From Thomas Caterers of Distinction, orange balsamic-glazed chicken lollipops with Pop Rocks candy. Photo by Erin Hession.

Robin Selden. Case in point: At a recent event, the caterer hung a tree with small crystal orbs filled with two types of salad—a fruit and kale salad with shaved coconut, and a wheat berry salad with forest mushrooms, caramelized shallots and roasted fennel. “We had to ‘cut’ the salads down for each guest—like plucking fruit from a tree,” Selden says. “The guests’ reaction was incredible.”

SIPPED AND DIPPED

Soup sips, paired with bread sticks, dips and fresh crudités, can be an inexpensive yet elegant appetizer option, especially when artfully prepared and presented. “We do a next-level version of a bread stick bar we call a ‘Soup, Sip + Sticks’ station,” Selden says. “It’s a less expensive option, but guests would never know because of the abundance of food on the table and flavorful options for dipping and sipping.” Assorted sips—carrot and ginger soup, curried cauliflower and ginger bisque, and a truffled wild mushroom soup—are served in shooters, while hand-rolled bread sticks are served with various flavored dips such as spiced butternut squash, curried cream, and ricotta and fava bean.

At Wolfgang Puck Catering, vibrant crudités creations serve as



edible decor in the form of centerpieces comprising fresh vegetables arranged in beet hummus with pumpernickel “soil” planted in galvanized steel buckets. At the bar, freshly potted herbs are part of the *mise en place*, which guests can add to drinks such as watermelon-rosemary lemonade and tarragon-spiked Lady Grey iced tea.

Indianapolis-based Thomas Caterers of Distinction adds an explosive edge to DIY dipping with its orange balsamic-glazed chicken lollipops dipped in orange-flavored Pop Rocks candy. “The guests dip the chicken themselves so it is fun and interactive, as well as delicious,” says executive chef Rach Keovorabouth.

TRIED AND TRUE

As the saying goes, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it—but maybe give it a tweak. At Kensington Caterers, this means certain standbys turn up, albeit

with a twist, on almost all appetizer menus. “Who can resist house-made potato chips with sea salt and caramelized onion crème fraiche, house-made chicken sausage-in-a-blanket, or mini grass-fed meatloaf discs with potato cake and heirloom ketchup?” asks owner Richard Mooney. Best guess? Not many.

“Old staples or comfort foods with a twist are always favored,” agrees Keovorabouth, citing Thai peanut chicken with zucchini fritters and cucumber salad as a go-to. “Also, we are using more modern methods to revitalize some classic yet budget-friendly items, such as our carbonated cantaloupe and prosciutto. Clients love the innovation while still being comfortable with a dish they recognize.” Cream cheese-stuffed olive skewers are elevated from ordinary to extraordinary with vodka-infused black radish and coppa.

For Wolfgang Puck Catering, tried and true means sliders—of all shapes and varieties. “Mini versions of almost any comfort food item are most often requested, so we are now offering mini French



Help yourself: From Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning, the ‘Soup, Sip + Sticks’ station (top) and salad ‘orbs’ (right). Photos by Robin Selden.



dips, mini bacon-wrapped hot dogs, and mini lobster rolls,” says executive chef Matt Bencivenga. “And to make Wolfgang’s famous potato latkes with dill cream and caviar more budget-friendly and lighter for summer, we have created zucchini latkes with lemon thyme yogurt and cherry tomato.” ●



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