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BY DEANNE MOSKOWITZ

Healthy PROFITS

How the trend toward **healthier eating** is revamping catered events

Recently, Robin Selden, managing partner and executive chef of Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning in Stamford, Conn., took a smart step to “keep up with the times.” She assigned a chef the role of developing recipes weekly that are healthy, “sexy and exciting,” and, since the chef herself is gluten-intolerant, every dish is designed with a gluten-free and vegan twist. Selden sees demand for “a much healthier way of eating,” so lately she’s “always thinking about that person who has a dietary concern and/or wants to eat healthier.”

Selden is not alone in this preoccupation. The trend toward healthier eating and the epidemic of dietary restrictions are impacting catering menus nationwide.

“I think a lot about this, because we’re asked often to incorporate either healthy or dietary-restrictive items in our menus,” admits Alison Awerbuch, partner and chef at Abigail Kirsch in New York. The company has become proactive in providing alternatives, even when clients don’t request them.

The makeovers are most obvious at multiday business meetings, caterers concur, while

delectable “free-from” dishes (those without gluten, dairy or meat, among them) have become readily available at events of all kinds.

Noelle Salinas, chef and owner at Fresh from the Kitchen in Phoenix, proclaims lighter, healthier fare is “definitely trending” for corporate lunches.

And, while the Milwaukee region mostly values meat and potatoes, according to Rachael Flood, executive chef for Zilli Hospitality Group at the Boerner Botanical Gardens in Waukesha, Wis., she reports “an immense” increase in “free-from” food requests that she feels has resulted in healthier menus there.

Meanwhile, celebratory occasions remain more indulgent, these caterers agree, but a “new way of cooking,” as Selden calls it, is beginning to re-shape social menus, too. Striving for a healthier cuisine, chefs are leaning more on vegetables, lightening sauces, switching to lower-fat preparations and swapping sensitive ingredients for cleaner or allergen-free ones. But even when chefs are cutting back on calories and cholesterol, they are doing it without sacrificing taste.





**BREAK SESSIONS, ONCE
JUNK-FOOD FESTS,
ARE OPPORTUNITIES
FOR HEALTHFUL
REFUELING.**



Above: A vegan salad from Fresh from the Kitchen includes radicchio, haricot vert, butter lettuce and toasted walnut vinaigrette. Right: Root vegetable tacos from Abigail Kirsch.



Serious Change

Meeting menus have been transformed, because people don't want to abandon healthy regimes during the week, and sponsors object to the soporific effect of starches and sweets. Most apparent is the move away from carb-loaded breakfasts and salt- and sugar-laden snacks, and the growth in gluten-free options.

Responding to requests, Abigail Kirsch has beefed up breakfast protein offerings. While previously selections of four or five homemade breads, fruit and yogurt may have been served, now the standard is a variety of egg dishes, including egg-white frittatas or burritos in gluten-free wraps; and whole-grain goodies, from waffles to an oatmeal bar.

Marcia Selden is substituting higher protein items for muffins and bagels, and emphasizing gluten-free choices. Possibilities include a breakfast burrito bar, offering scrambled eggs and egg whites, turkey bacon and sausages, and corn and wheat tortillas, with toppings such as healthy-fat mashed avocado; and protein-packed, gluten-free quinoa served with coconut milk, chia, blueberries and toasted almonds.

Break sessions, once junk-food fests, are opportunities for healthful refueling. A monthly meeting that Selden caters features such sustaining snack fare as popcorn with dehydrated kale crisps.

Among better break choices from Abigail Kirsch is the legume station, which might include Moroccan-spiced chickpeas and lentils layered with salsas. There also may be avocado toast on whole-grain bread or gluten-free crackers, and pizza with cauliflower crust.

At Zilli, fruit is filling a bigger role at breakfast and breaks. Grapes lightly coated with cream

cheese and almonds, a Zilli classic, and strawberries are popular, as are trail mixes customized to guest requirements.

Lunches are lighter, too—and, finally, there is such a thing as a “free” lunch.

At Zilli, entree salads capped with grilled meat or poultry, and grilled chicken or veggie wraps are successors to once-ubiquitous roast beef, ham and bacon-stuffed club sandwiches.

At Fresh from the Kitchen, a grilled chicken and Cobb salad with ranch dressing is one healthy, gluten-free addition. Another is a roasted vegetarian Greek salad with red wine vinaigrette.

Countering carb-heavy sandwich buffets and fat-rich pastas, Abigail Kirsch invented a deconstructed takeout station, where compostable to-go boxes are packed with low-carb walk-away meals that are entirely or nearly dairy-free. One filling is seared Asian tuna slices on brown rice salad with wasabi, ginger and pickled asparagus.

Beverages also belong to today's healthy lifestyles. Flood finds that soda is being outlawed by certain corporate clients, because of its “crash-and-burn” effect. Awerbuch says health-infused waters (such as cucumber, lime and basil) and all-natural juice blends (such as pomegranate, black currant and ginger) are contenders; juice bars are up-and-coming, and she's quenching the low- or no-alcohol thirst with mixology mocktails and cocktails containing only a half-ounce of liquor.

Counting on Restrictions

Dietary concerns crop up at every occasion now, but often guests wait to divulge their needs until dinner is being served. So Awerbuch and Selden educate clients about the importance of having free-from options ready, and develop delicious free-from alternatives, bringing some to every event.

Abigail Kirsch puts considerable effort into preparing special meals. Guests “are always blown away,” Awerbuch reports. Among the exceptional possibilities are a taco hors d'oeuvre made with pumpkin guacamole, black quinoa and candied ginger dust; a gluten-, dairy- and nut-free vegan plated entree of green vegetable risotto with charred tomato coulis and white-bean-filled baby bell peppers with ratatouille and grilled artichokes; and a nut-free caramelized roasted d'Anjou pear dessert with lavender honey and red wine, filled with maple ginger frozen yogurt, spiced cider broth with floating sundried fruits and brandy snap tuile.

Selden also is adamant about designing free-from dishes that will astound guests in taste and presentation, such as the company's newly developed vegan and gluten-free wild mushroom lasagna, made with garlic chips, crispy shiitakes, and cashew béchamel and Madeira mushroom sauce.



Zilli Hospitality Group's grilled salmon with a basil and mango puree, celeriac puree and North Shore vegetable medley.

Dietary demands these days can be dauntingly diverse, but caterers are rising to the challenge. Flood made the New Orleans-themed menu for a children's hospital dinner almost entirely vegan, not to mention gluten-free, rather than force the many Muslim and Hindu employees attending it to constantly inquire what the dishes contained. Her clever takes on classics included grilled Creole tofu po' boy; vegetarian chipotle gumbo with jalapeño cornbread croutons; red beans and rice served with blackened cod or blackened tofu; and gluten-free bananas Foster.

For a vegetarian, gluten- and dairy-free wedding buffet with hors d'oeuvres that tested Flood's creativity, she paired a vegan blood orange tofu stir-fry with green tea soba noodles instead of wheat-based ones. For dessert, she created watermelon towers, scooping out the melon cubes and filling half of them with a goat cheese mixture and the other half with pistachios, and finishing with a pomegranate glaze.

Until Salinas planned a menu for a bride who is allergic to corn, she never realized how many products contain cornstarch. She ended up hand-making the pasta for the butternut ravioli with puttanesca sauce that accompanied the surf 'n' turf main, since cornstarch is one of the four ingredients in her usual commercial pasta brand. Passed appetizers included deviled eggs with pancetta and caviar, and vegetarian vanilla bean poached lobster tart, both of them gluten-free.

Awerbuch takes advantage of the millennial generation's affection for customizable dishes to deal with their many dietary requests. Whereas boomers might be happy with a breakfast yogurt parfait prepared in the kitchen, for millennials she'll set up a yogurt bar offering vegan soy, fat-free and whole milk yogurts with an array of healthy mix-ins and toppings.

Investing in Vegetables

Deemed to be better than meat for the body and the planet, vegetables are earning more respect. They grab a bigger percentage of hors d'oeuvre assortments, earn more entree space and appear proudly on Meatless Monday menus, which are gaining acceptance at corporate conferences, according to The Monday Campaigns, the nonprofit public health organization that launched the movement (see sidebar, “Meatless Meetings: Trending Up”).

When Selden was asked to appear at a food industry product introduction recently, she demonstrated a vegan hors d'oeuvre. The nori roll filled with beet vermicelli, grilled roasted asparagus and cashew cream enraptured guests, she reports, marveling that people didn't even realize that it was healthy.

Vegetables sometimes are more prominent than proteins on dinner plates at Abigail Kirsch. Awerbuch prefers heartier vegetables for the purpose, perhaps cauliflower steak, thickly sliced grilled broccoli or whole grilled Portobello mushroom.

Between 35 and 40 percent of appetizers are vegetarian now, and 10 percent more are vegan at Zilli. The list includes roasted tomato, pickled mushroom and grilled zucchini fork, and cucumber cup with Kalamata hummus and candied lemon zest.

Meatless Monday is a regular feature for one of Fresh from the Kitchen's weekly drop-off corporate customers. The menu may star vegan butternut squash and wild mushroom enchiladas, or vegetarian three-cheese tortellini in a red bell pepper cream sauce.

Awerbuch believes Meatless Monday works best when a vegetarian protein replaces the meat, poultry or fish, and vegetable dishes are hearty and substantial—for example, individual root vegetable pies. The concept has been most



A Mediterranean salad (above) and fruit and sorbet (opposite bottom) from Abigail Kirsch. From Marcia Selden (below left), pan-seared cod with cauliflower couscous and heirloom tomato fondue.

successful with millennials, she notes, cautioning that it's critical to know the group's demographics.

Culinary Currency

The healthy eating movement has led to the adoption of lighter preparation methods and spurred assimilation of "super" ingredients, notably quinoa. Awerbuch calls quinoa "a staple," and Selden estimates that it appears in place of starch at least half the time.

Chefs are cashing in on quinoa as a pasta replacement. One example is Fresh from the Kitchen's Tuscan quinoa salad, tossed with cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, steamed broccoli and red onions in Italian dressing. Another is Zilli's quinoa salad with light vinaigrette, a substitute for the pasta salad on one of the company's menu packages.

Selden thinks that people want "cleaner" food now and is cooking accordingly. "It doesn't have to have 20 ingredients or be so complex," she insists. Once inclined to sauce grilled meat with "a naughty Bordelaise sauce or amazing demi," now she's likely to simply grill a well-seasoned steak and drizzle with a mixture of garlic, parsley, olive oil, lemon juice and lemon zest.

Using less dairy, Awerbuch sometimes sauces with vegetable purees or coulis but is especially enthusiastic about the "burst of flavor" possible with gastrique, made by reducing citrus juice or vinegars until almost syrupy.

Healthier preparations are built into Zilli's menu packages, with grilled chicken offered as one of four poultry preparations, and clients asking for salsas instead of cream sauces. At Fresh from the Kitchen, Salinas sees growing interest in steamed dishes at corporate events and is using less butter, oil and cream.

Positive Futures

Interest in eating healthfully is such a draw that caterers are promoting healthy eating initiatives. Free-from options are identified on proposals and menus, and Awerbuch has



taken to identifying gluten-free buffet dishes using stone markers.

People appreciate knowing that Salinas cares about allergens and avoids additives, antibiotics and GMOs, she claims. Recently, one wedding client told her that they chose her proposal over a competitor's because it clearly stated that she uses hormone-free meats exclusively.

The millennial generation with its "clean" eating convictions is likely to continue to drive the trend toward healthier eating. Flood sees millennials "straying away" from the Midwestern meat-potatoes-vegetable model and often opting for the company's multi-ethnic packaged menus, which she is happy to customize according to their frequent dietary requests. Selden says millennials feel justified in splurging at social events, because they live so stringently during the week. And while Awerbuch admits that every generation is "thinking a little more healthfully," generally millennials are doing so "to the nth degree."

Different parts of the country may adopt healthier eating habits at different rates, but the movement is likely to be long-lived.

"We're getting on the healthy food train," asserts Selden. "It's not going away. It's just not." ●



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