

Catering & Foodservice Events



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Bringing the Party Home

How two New York-area caterers are making virtual events entertaining and delicious

BY SARA PEREZ WEBBER

Hopefully we're seeing the light at the end of the tunnel when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic and its transformative effect on catered events. Yet even during the strictest days of lockdown, innovative caterers found ways to help clients celebrate events from home. And according to the two top caterers profiled here, clients will continue to book similar events even when society emerges from the COVID-19 danger zone—and the loyalty earned during these trying times will pay off for years to come.

Marcia Selden Catering

marciaselden.com

At-home Dinner Parties are the newest concept debuted by Marcia Selden Catering, with locations in Stamford, Conn., and New York City. "Specifically, we will provide a turn-key 'Dinner Party,' complete with unique and curated menus, custom printed menu cards, tabletop rentals that are designed based on the menu theme, florals to complement the tabletop, awesome wines and specialty crafted cocktails," says Robin Selden, managing partner and executive chef. "Our thought was to take the stress and the work out of entertaining and to provide our clients with everything that they need to host just the perfect dinner party at home. We deliver these to

several families so that they can party and enjoy the same meal 'together' but just virtually."

Since the arrival of COVID-19 and the subsequent stay-at-home measures, Marcia Selden Catering has gone from being a "luxury, restaurant-experience caterer" to one that specializes in catering that's socially distant and safely served, says Robin.

In fact, the company began pivoting to virtual events right at the beginning of the pandemic. Robin and her brother, managing partner Jeffrey Selden, started brainstorming ideas for drop-off, contact-free menus on the red-eye flight home to New York from Las Vegas on March 13, 2020, after the Catersource conference. While many clients were canceling and postponing events in those days, the company convinced one of its favorite nonprofit

clients, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, to transform their gala scheduled for mid-April into a virtual one.

"They loved the idea, and we were off to the races, crafting really fun, custom-branded boxes that would be delivered to all of the attendees so that they would enjoy the experience in a really creative and special way," says Robin. "This was the beginning of our virtual event journey, and since then, we have done dozens of them," even shipping the boxes nationally.

Not only has the company catered virtual galas, they've done virtual cooking classes, wine-tastings, beer-and-cheese tastings, kids' birthday parties and "Chopped"-style cooking competitions, featuring celebrity judges and emcees, with mystery baskets delivered to attendees. They've created picnics in a box to sell at Greenwich Polo matches; and upscale to-go boxes for boating and private plane clients—encouraging repeat business with a loyalty program that offers discounts as incentives.

"Some of our favorite events involved drive-up movie birthday celebrations and mitzvahs, outdoor tailgating parties—complete with custom chairs, blankets and firepits—and outdoor weddings in tents the size of Texas, so that guests had tons of room to socially distance and even dance safely," says Robin.

The company's innovative virtual and socially distanced events have been so popular that they're generating a lot of repeat business, says Robin. "If you make something super-memorable and delicious, people will never forget that," she says. "And when we are on the other side of this pandemic, they will party with you and hire you to create their celebrations."



Opposite page: Two examples of Marcia Selden Catering's turn-key, at-home Dinner Parties. Clockwise from below: A drive-up movie celebration; a picnic box for a Greenwich Polo match; and a virtual cooking class with Robin and Jeffrey Selden.





Abigail Kirsch

●●● abigailkirsch.com

At a virtual wedding catered by New York-based Abigail Kirsch, guests watched remotely as a bride and groom wed on a rooftop in New York City. The guests then dined on the same three-course meal the couple were enjoying at their beautifully embellished table—including wine, prosecco for a toast and individual versions of the same wedding cake—before joining the couple virtually in their first dance.

Abigail Kirsch has also created memorable virtual events for corporate clients. At a holiday-themed DIY party, a host of Abigail Kirsch team members participated, “so that the guest experience would be captivating and entertaining,” says Alison Awerbuch, chef and partner.

Armed with a tool kit sent in advance, the 100 guests made candied cranberry mini baked brie, three types of popcorn and cheddar cayenne crackers; hand-decorated gingerbread cookies and snowflake cupcakes; and mixed their own decadent hot chocolate to sip out of mugs sporting the client’s logo.

“We are trying to replicate our high-end catered events, even though they are served in a box or a tote,” says Awerbuch. “We have worked hard to incorporate all the unique nuances that guests would expect at an event, and based on the extremely positive feedback, I’d say we’ve succeeded.”

In August, the company launched Prepped by Abigail Kirsch, a variety of custom-branded boxed and bagged menus, ranging from reception snacks to multi-course meals. The food is freshly delivered to virtual event guests in separate locations throughout the New York tri-state area.

“We have done many versions of the snack box package for corporate clients who have sent these to their teams during team-building calls and/or day meetings,” says Awerbuch, adding that the snack boxes—which can be personalized—were also popular during the holiday season, as customers bought them as gifts for clients, friends and family.

“In addition, we’ve done equal amounts of our three-course and bento box meals, both of which are delivered in branded cooler totes,” she says. “In most cases, our clients have added fun enhancements to elevate the menus, such as hors d’oeuvres, branded custom cookies, baked items for the next morning and mix-your-own craft cocktail kits.”

Awerbuch says the company sees virtual events and packaged, hand-delivered menu packages continuing to sell even after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. She points to predictions that many will continue to work remotely and conduct meetings virtually, due to cost savings.

“In addition, we are starting to pivot and think of hybrid catering packages for delivery that will take us well into post-COVID times,” says Awerbuch. “These will include unique concepts that will create excitement and make our clients enthusiastic about entertaining in non-traditional ways... but you’ll have to wait to hear about the details since our concepts are just being formulated.” ●



Items offered on the Prepped by Abigail Kirsch virtual events menu include (clockwise from above) a reception sampler; a snack box; ingredients for house-crafted cranberry rum mojitos; ingredients for house-crafted mango mule mocktails; an hors d’oeuvre sampler; and a DIY cupcake kit.