

THE MONTHLY

The East Bay's Premier Magazine of Culture and Commerce

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Shopping Around

Feeding the (Holiday) Masses |

'Tis the season for a party and to consider a caterer when the holiday stress runs high. |

By Andrea Pflaumer

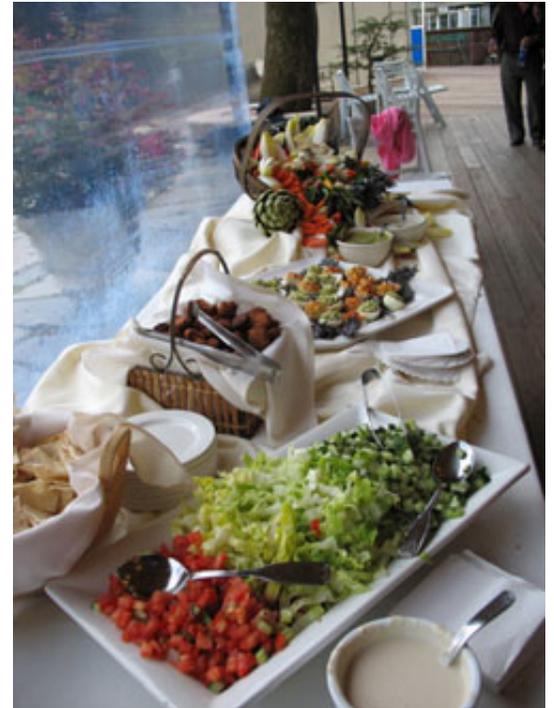
In our courting days, my now-husband informed me that his parents held an annual Christmas Eve champagne and dessert party for their "orphan" friends. Eager to show my can-do attitude (and credentials as a potential daughter-in-law), I suggested we do the same. Starting the week before Christmas I began baking: Twenty dozen assorted cookies and gingerbread men, two dozen brownies, two ginger cakes and a Russian teacake. This madness continued every Christmas for 18 years until, gradually (and mercifully), many of our friends gave up carbs, fat or dairy. Now I serve food made by somebody else. Thank goodness for caterers.

With holiday party invitations already sent and stress levels mounting over the prospects of cleaning, organizing and cooking, it might be time for you to call in the experts, too. This month we pay tribute to those intrepid souls who eschew the comforts of family and friends around the holidays to make our lives easier and our social events less stressful by nourishing our—and our guests'—bellies and souls with their culinary creations.

Serve Me, Please

Anyone who has thrown a wedding or a bar mitzvah in the past few years knows that most caterers are now full-service operations, capable of providing everything from food and flowers to valet parking.

Just as the price of eating out varies, depending upon your desire for deli food or haute cuisine, so does the price of catering. Higher-end caterers charge from \$55 to \$170 per person, depending upon the type of food, amount of service and the number of guests. But a no-frills cold-cut buffet might run just \$15 per person. Because of the amount of time and labor required for even the simplest



Cater to me: Berkeley's Poulet offers homestyle food served more elegantly than most hosts can do themselves. Photo courtesy Poulet.



affair, most caterers usually have a minimum charge.

Donna Weinberg, owner of Good and Plenty Catering, says she knows that most people and nonprofits are on a budget. In order to reduce costs, she meets with clients to find out what they can do for themselves: pick up bagels, buy paper products or find the wine. (Of course she gives clients a list because she's found that all too often, they'll forget something a pro wouldn't forget.)

Weinberg says these days party givers are alleviating pressure and some costs by providing heavy hors d'oeuvres instead of full meals. "It's more fun," says Weinberg. "When you have that many guests, people can't seat everyone with a knife and fork and plate."

Caterers say timing is everything. Formal events, like weddings or large corporate holiday parties, require contacting a caterer at least two months ahead of time. Fortunately, some are still available on a three- to four-week notice. Saturday is the preferred night for holiday parties, with Friday coming in a close second, but if you can be flexible, everything goes more smoothly on a Sunday or Thursday, according to caterers.

Although you can find temporary help for private parties through Craigslist, there is an important legal benefit to going with a caterer. Many are insured against property damage and liquor liability (in case someone leaves your party inebriated and gets into an accident). Hiring a pro is a way to avoid exposure to such headaches.

A Matter of Taste

Perusing the mouth-watering menus on caterers' Web sites is a delightful exercise, but there's nothing like actually sampling the food. Many caterers invite prospective clients for a private tasting to make sure everyone is happy with the menu. Marcie and Matt Wyss, co-owners of Serves You Right catering, host a bi-monthly tasting, usually at the Brazilian Room at Tilden Park. "It's a way to find out what food tastes like that's been prepared for large numbers of people," Marcie says. "Sometimes we invite clients to come to other events we cater for a 'back door' tasting."

For their daughters' weddings, Berkeley residents Nancy and Jerry Falk chose a full-service caterer. "They were wonderful to work with," Nancy says, "because they know what you need. They have a really nice selection of tableware and linens . . . and they'll take the responsibility for serving everything at the right time."

For 25th and 40th anniversary parties in their home, Nancy hired caterer Patti Sally with whom she has worked for years, largely because of Sally's willingness to be flexible. "We like 'retro'



Pretty Platters: Rockridge's Market Hall serves up a Pacific Rim crudité platter sure to please the guests. Photo courtesy Market Hall Caterers.

Party Favors

CATERING AND CHEF SERVICES

(check with individual chefs and caterers about organic options)

Back-to-Earth Catering, (510) 652-2000; www.organiccatering.com.

Barbara Llewellyn, (510) 832-1967; www.barbarallewellyn.com.

Blue Sage Catering Company, (925) 577-7493; www.bluesagecatering.com.

Bubi's Catering, (510) 549-2070.

Cynthia Washburn Chef Services and Catering, (510) 590-8729; www.cynthiawashburn.com.

parties," Nancy says. "Jerry never outgrew that food from the '50s and '60s—avocado and crab cocktails, pigs-in-a-blanket . . . His favorite thing is rumaki. I think [Sally] even made us a Jell-O mold," she laughs.

Oakland resident and Chabot Space and Science Center benefactor Amy Slater, who does a lot of entertaining for business associates and friends, says, "I look for delicious but simple food that I might have cooked, were I not thoroughly intimidated by cooking for large groups. I've used one caterer, Lucy Aghadjian, for the last several years. She comes closest to making me, and our guests, feel like we're having a home-cooked meal in our house and not a restaurant meal in a makeshift location." Slater also loves having the house cleaned up and things put away at the end of the evening.

Seeing Stars

If you aspire to the kind of hors d'oeuvres and entrées that resemble the winning entries on an Iron Chefs competition, a number of cooks on the local catering scene come with credentials from some of the finest restaurants here and around the country.

Longtime Berkeleyans remember Lance Dean Velasquez from his restaurants LDV and Bendean, both on Solano. Formerly the executive chef for San Francisco's Home, Velasquez signed on this year with Grace Street Catering in Alameda. He describes his style as "simple, straightforward, more 'peasant' cuisine . . . I refine certain classical dishes and bring them up-to-date." His take on "peasant food" happens to be "a roasted beet salad with chives and a little dollop of goat cheese dressing served on a spoon—an amazing shot of salad," he says. Velasquez's favorite vegetarian entrée is roasted butternut squash with red curry and goat cheese turned into a galette and baked. For an appetizer, he offers a brandade, which is a traditional Spanish salt cod and potato spread, wonderful over a crostini, served warm, presented in a reuseable oven-proof porcelain crock. Even his dessert choices are out of the ordinary: quince cheesecake with almond crust and sage honey.

Matthew Box, formerly the training chef for Marriott Hotels, founded Blue Sage Catering in Livermore. Blue Sage's nearly staggering menu options run the gamut from casual buffets, like his award-winning Western-style barbecue fare, to the most formal wedding banquets. Box can customize a menu to meet the needs of his clients, many of whom are some of the best-known corporations in the Bay Area. Some of his more unique appetizers include whiskey-fried hot wings with buttermilk dipping sauce and bay scallops ceviche with jalapeño-lime salsa. Box says his success is about more than the food. "We're known for our phenomenal

Eden Benavides or Luis Herrera, (415) 563-1292;
www.organicchefcatering.com.

Grace Street Catering, (510) 523-1600;
www.gracestreetcatering.com.

Good & Plenty Catering, (510) 548-1694; www.goodandplentycatering.com.

Hugh Groman Catering and Greenleaf Platter, (510) 647-5165;
www.hughgromancatering.com.

La Bonne Cuisine, (510) 549-3760;
www.labonnecuisine.com.

Lucy Aghadjian Catering, (510) 843-4056.

Market Hall Caterers, (510) 547-4066;
www.markethallcaterers.com. (Takeout platters also available.)

Patti Sally Catering, (510) 658-5922.
Serves You Right Catering, (510) 527-8809; www.servesyourightcatering.com.

Soup to Nuts, (510) 528-3332.
Trumpet Vine Catering, (510) 848-7268.

PARTY PLATTERS/TAKEOUT

Ajanta, (510) 526-4373;
www.ajantarestaurant.com.

Market Hall Caterers, (510) 547-4066;
www.markethallcaterers.com.

Epicurious Garden—Berkeley, (includes Kirala, Soop and Picoso);
www.epicuriousgarden.com.

Poulet, (510) 845-5932;
www.pouletdeli.com.

Pomegranate Mediterranean Cuisine, (510) 665-5567.

and flawless service,” he says. “Ninety percent of our customers are either repeat or referral customers.”

Eleventh-Hour Fare

A popular alternative for less-formal events are party platters from otherwise full-service caterers like Rockridge’s Market Hall and North Berkeley’s Poulet. The advantage for procrastinators is that these businesses often require just a few days’ notice and many will deliver for a small fee. Prices range from about \$25 per platter for some 20 guests for something simple like crostini with goat cheese and olive tapenade, to as much as \$85 for more elaborate fare. Lisa Quaid, catering director of Market Hall, says people tend to want wintry, slightly rich foods like tri-tip or roasted ham with apple chutney, Dijon mustard and rolls in December. A Market Hall platter of this sort will cost around \$75.

Some of Poulet’s favorite appetizers include corn madeleines with chive crème fraîche, “one bite” lamb chops with mint yogurt, and shredded-duck quesadilla wedges with guacamole. In addition to traditional holiday roasted (or barbecued) turkeys, Ver Brugge Meat, Fish and Poultry in Oakland’s Elmwood district offers a whole poached salmon, decorated with either cucumbers or limes, for around \$120, that serves 20-30 people and makes a lovely centerpiece for finger foods.

Pomegranate restaurant in Berkeley will suggest a menu and then provide combination platters that include sandwiches or dinners. Pomegranate’s Mediterranean cuisine—dolmas, baba ghanoush, tabbouleh, spanakopita, Greek salads and baklava—is popular for open-house holiday parties.

Lachu Moorjani, owner of Ajanta Indian restaurant in Berkeley, finds that a lot of his regular customers like to balance the heaviness of holiday fare with a little spice: “People order entire dinners including appetizers for a party of 8 to 12 and serve them at home,” he says. He says favorite appetizers include samosas, chicken tenders or wings, tandoori portobello mushrooms, chicken chaat and papadams.

Eat Your Greens

Party-givers often come up against the fact that their party-goers are on restricted diets of one kind or another. Living at the epicenter of the food revolution has its advantages and East Bay residents have their pick of the finest in gourmet, vegetarian, vegan, ethnic and organic fare, and, for the ultimate purists, food that is prepared in a “green” kitchen. Because of local demand, most local caterers try to use organic ingredients, but for some it’s the law. An organization called Om Organics, funded by the San Francisco Foundation Community Initiative, has a list of organic-friendly caterers and personal chefs that serve the entire Bay Area.

Saul’s Restaurant and Deli, (510) 848-DELI.

Ver Brugge Meat, Fish and Poultry, (510) 658-6854.

COFFEE SERVICES

Cafe Elegante Espresso, (510) 323-3167; www.cafeelegante.com.

Espresso Subito, (510) 527-7330; www.espressosubito.com.

Hugh Groman, another Bay Area native who served as a chef at Gramercy Tavern in Manhattan, returned to the area and founded both Hugh Groman Catering and Greenleaf Platter, where they make everything in a kitchen designed for maximum ecological efficiency.

“We’ve had the lighting redesigned, use low-flow water sprayers, compost and recycle everything possible and our oil is recycled into biodiesel for vehicles,” he says. For parties, he uses nothing disposable. If you don’t need fine china, you can even order compostable platters and plates that his company will pick up and compost for you. His cuisine is a combination of influences including French, Italian and Spanish, drawing upon the bounty in the Bay Area to produce delicacies like wild mushroom ravioli with baby spinach, roasted sweet peppers, tomato-garlic sauce and parmesan, or for a wintertime appetizer, warm sweet-potato pancakes with caramelized onions and bacon, topped with maple mascarpone.

For Ari Derfel and Eric Fenster, self-described food activists and co-founders of Back to Earth Catering in Emeryville, the words “sustainable” and “organic” are more than just popular buzzwords. They are part and parcel of the company’s cultural ethos. Back to Earth is “entirely principle-driven,” Ari says. “We take the concept of sustainable and organic [beyond the] food. . . . We run and operate the business on the principles of yoga—using right thought, right speech and action, always coming from a place of honesty and integrity.” The duo, whose company has been featured on the Today show and in the New York Times, presents not only an ethical business sense but a refined menu: pomegranate and goat cheese-filled endive with balsamic reduction, pistachio-crusting albacore with Satsuma chervil glaze, beef skewers with Peruvian salsa aji, and pear tartlets.

Café Vous

If you’re having a dessert party, a coffee and tea service presented on an Old World-style cappuccino cart adds an elegant touch. For fewer guests, expect to pay about \$10 per guest, the price decreasing per person with more guests.

Gary Goldstein of Espresso Subito says, “I use a signature blend [of coffee] that people love—very fresh, fair trade, organic and shade-grown.” His drinks include flavored coffees, cappuccinos, macchiatos, regional teas such as Indian darjeelings and assams, Pellegrino waters and even non-alcoholic drinks, like the one Goldstein created for a Carlos Santana event at Macy’s. “We called it the faux-jito,” he says.

A beverage caterer not only adds an elegant coda to a party, but can be a real lifesaver. As Ena Everett of Cafe Elegante Espresso says, “It’s warm way to sober up your guests before they drive

home.”

Here’s to a safe, stress-free and delicious holiday season. Bon
appétit!

Andrea Pflaumer is a frequent contributor to *The Monthly*.

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