

Chefs in ACTION.

Taking the standard outdoor event to new heights

by Suzy Feine

Ever since the Food Network hit the culinary scene in the mid-1990s, people have gained a newfound affinity for watching chefs cook and perform on the fly. Viewed in more than 91 million U.S. households, the Food Network is thriving under the simple premise that celebrity chefs can engage viewers with new, different and interesting ways to approach and prepare food.

On a local level, some chefs are recreating the Food Network concept through live cooking demonstrations. Found everywhere today, from grocery stores and restaurants to corporate teambuilding retreats, these live-action cooking displays are a proven way to intrigue onlookers and, oftentimes, garner local publicity for the chef. The general public, it seems, just can't get enough of watching chefs perform their culinary magic live.

Live-action cooking is infiltrating the outdoor catering sector as well, and these creative caterers are taking outdoor cooking up a notch with custom cooking

utensils, specialized recipes and chefs with a flair for the dramatic.

Service with Style

Since 1938, Lawry's The Prime Rib has been synonymous with exceptional prime rib of beef throughout Beverly Hills. "The founders, Lawrence L. Frank and Walter Van de Kamp, decided to make it a one-entrée restaurant, and they wanted to present that one entrée with such style and fanfare that it would be a true dining experience," says Summer Stearns, catering sales manager for Lawry's. *



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In years past, catered events outside the restaurant were reserved for Lawry's VIP guests only; however, the owners soon realized that this fanfare that brought droves of guests to the restaurant was also conducive to parties and events. "The strength of the brand in the eyes of the public translated well to the catering business," Stearns says.

To recreate the same elaborate food service demonstrations found inside the restaurant outdoors, special stainless-steel serving carts, weighing in at 500 pounds each, were designed specifically for the catering side of the business. Each cart was custom built to hold one 16–18 pound prime rib plus a number of hot side dishes at the optimum temperature, all the way from the restaurant kitchen to the event site, thus eliminating the need for an onsite kitchen.

The classic Lawry's catered event begins with the spinning bowl salads. Servers place the spinning bowls, which contain a mix of romaine, iceberg lettuce, baby spinach, chopped eggs, shredded beets and homemade croutons, on beds of ice and give them a whirl. While the salad bowls spin on the ice, the servers pour Lawry's Vintage dressing into the bowls from arms length above their heads. Served on chilled salad plates with two teardrop tomatoes on the side, the spinning bowl salad presentation sets the stage for the master carver's introduction.

Once guests finish the salad course, the server calls the carver, who rolls his silver serving cart tableside. "The server introduces the carver, and the carver asks the guests what cut they would like, how they want it prepared, and which sides they would like. Everything is pulled straight from the cart," says Stearns.

Each carver at Lawry's must train for six months prior to performing in front of a crowd. "Our carvers carve from a vertical position, not the traditional way, which is a much more skilled position to carve from," says Stearns. "Once the carvers can cut and serve consistently within a half ounce, then they get their gold medallion." All Lawry's carvers wear a white chef's coat, white gloves, white chef's hat, white shoes and a medallion. Master carvers receive gold buttons for their chef's coat and have their name embroidered on the coat.

"For Lawry's, it's about the experience, not just having a meal," says Stearns. "We're really interactive, and when you're entertaining guests they want a show because catering is about the full entertaining experience."

Fiestas with Flair

As a dedicated off-site caterer, David Paquet, owner of Niagara Gourmet in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, says that requests for the extraordinary are ordinary for his catering business. "We're so happy when people call looking for something different," says Paquet. "We don't do traditional

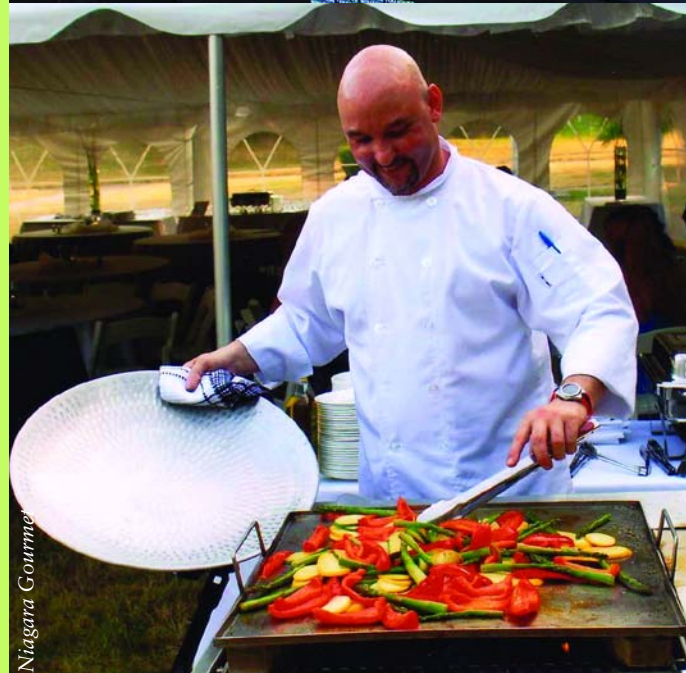
barbeques, so if we can take people in a new direction, we can all have more fun."

Known for their live-action cooking and chef stations, Niagara Gourmet caters up to 100 events per year, and everything is prepared on site from scratch with authentic ingredients. "I was fortunate to have traveled to Spain many times and sampled many kinds of Spanish dishes, and then I came home and created my own versions with the best ingredients," says Paquet.

One dish that he is particularly proud of, and that gets rave reviews from customers, is his authentic paella that is cooked on site in a 36-inch steel paella pan from Spain. "We slather the pan with olive oil and then add the onions, garlic and peppers," says Paquet. "As we begin to cook, people walk up and ask about it, so it becomes an interactive cooking demonstration." Paquet stirs the ingredients with a large Italian pasta shovel, and then adds the rice. A nearby turkey fryer holds saffron-infused chicken stock. "As we ladled the stock into the paella pan, it begins to steam and creates a great visual," he says. The paella steams and simmers as the rice cooks, and then Paquet adds the final touches to this recipe: chorizo, chicken, shrimp, mussels, artichoke hearts and peas.

The paella, which easily serves 100 guests, is dished up by the staff as guests look on and inhale the ✨

Niagara Gourmet



Niagara Gourmet



Lawry's



Lawry's



Perfect Tastes

wonderful aromas of saffron, chorizo and seafood. Just one of several food stations in Paquet's authentic Spanish-themed event menu, the paella goes well with the variety of authentic tapas trays he also prepares.

"We are used to guests seeking us out and then later thanking us for a fabulous experience," Paquet says. "Because we're putting on a show, it's perceived as being something different and something special."

High-Society Sizzle

In California, wedged between San Francisco and San Jose, Perfect Taste Inc. Catering & Events indulges high-tech, Silicon Valley executives and venture capitalists with outdoor corporate events and parties that dazzle this high-society area.

"We recently did an event for a venture capital company at the president's home in Palo Alto," says Vicki Vaughn, owner of Perfect Taste Inc. Catering & Events. "The president invited all the CEOs and their spouses from local companies they funded so he wanted it very nice and very upscale." Vaughn served an Asian buffet featuring Coconut Curry Chicken with steamed rice, Rice Paper Spring Rolls, edamame and other fresh Asian dishes. To entertain the guests and add action to the buffet, Vaughn's chef cooked pot stickers atop an Evo grill at the end of the buffet.

"We have four Evo grills and all of our guests love them; they've never seen anything like it before and many people want to know where they can get a grill like ours," says Vaughn. "But what the guests really respond to is the fact that they see the food cooking, they hear it sizzling, they smell it and it's an all-



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Vicki Vaughn, owner of Perfect Taste Inc. Catering & Events

around experience. You have all these ways to experience it when it's cooked outside."

Vaughn's team continues to experiment with different types of food to cook outdoors that will impress her guests. "Sometimes we look at a food we're already making and then we realize we could do this on the Evo, even breakfast," she says. At another event, Vaughn's chefs developed a crab cake station using the Evo grill to cook Indian fish cakes, Thai chicken cakes, Dungeness crab cakes, shrimp and salmon cakes, and

fresh corn cakes served with a variety of dipping sauces.

An added benefit to this type of live-action cooking that Vaughn has discovered is the impact it has on her staff. "As off-premise caterers, the culinary staff is usually in the back and not interacting with guests," she says. "When the chefs have a chance to come out and perform in front of the guest, it gives them an entirely new perspective. My chefs love interacting with clients because they don't get a lot of that, and they get to feel like the celebrity chefs on TV." **CS**