

Food for thought

Varied menu of corporate catering options

By Sherri Dauskurdas

If bread is the staff of life, then the box lunch might well be the staff of meeting life.

And as the big expensive business lunch gives way to the working lunch, caterers are finding themselves preparing light and casual lunch spreads for corporate clients.

"Corporate catering is more than just food. There is an emotional component a client feels. Service is what separates good caterers from great caterers," said Ellen Harte of Tasty Catering in Elk Grove Village, which specializes in corporate events.

At My Chef Catering in Naperville, Bill and Karen Garlough have built their business from a gourmet delicatessen that offered catering to a full-service catering and event planning company. Its business is 55 percent corporate, feeding 850 corporate accounts, said Bill Garlough.

"We aren't unique, but we are very broad," he said. The company provides corporate clients with everything from business lunches to full event services.

"Catering is a very broad term," said Karen Garlough. "All of our core things are done in house." But My Chef does work with outside partners to plan events. Businesses like photographers and valet services round out the company's own staff of 20 full-time and 75 on-call employees.

"It works for us," said Garlough, "but it's not the only way."

In fact, simpler fare has paved the way for smaller event planners and restaurants to get into the catering game. Sometimes, the kitchen isn't even necessary.

Chicago-area based Solomon's Cookies bakes up its specialty homemade cookies for clients across the country. Some of them are caterers and planners that don't do any of their own baking or food preparation, said Adam Tenenbaum.

"The caterers and event planners we work with do not usually make any of their own products, he said. "Our wholesalers tend to be more like catalog companies and caterers or event planners that do not do any baking."

And even full-service caterers are recognizing the competition of a price-oriented caterer.

"There are just so many ready-made foods out there," said Karen Garlough.

But if a company is willing to take the time to evaluate the type of event it is hosting, a good caterer can fit the needs with a variety of choices.

"You can have a simple breakfast or lunch and still offer a variety," Karen Garlough said. "Of course, it has to be nutritious if it's a working meal. It has to be healthy brain food."

But while lunch fare is moving from simply elegant to simple and healthy,



Karen and Bill Garlough, vice president and president of My Chef Catering in Naperville, manage 850 corporate accounts, which make up 55 percent of their business. (Photo by Dietrich Wolfgramm)

corporate event fare is growing wilder. Even in this season of corporate picnics, many businesses are opting away from the traditional grill fare of burgers and dogs for something more exotic.

"Corporate budgets are recovering and businesses are hosting more events and booking more parties," said Karen Garlough. "Along with that, customers have more sophisticated palates today. They are more adventurous."

Also feeding the frenzy for creative cuisine are shifting demographics in the suburban area. The Garloughs find they are producing many ethnic-centered menus for events—everything from Cuban fare to Asian-inspired barbecue.

This is where companies can really benefit from a full-service caterer, said Bill Garlough.

"Ready-made foods tend to be behind the trends," he said.

But even if the food is fabulous, service means success, said Harte.

"The truly successful caterer recognizes their abilities and their limitations," she said. "They don't take on more than they can handle. In catering and event planning, experience counts. Even the best food and most inventive menus can't make up for the important details that can make or break a meeting or event."

And it's events like these when choosing a caterer with its own equipment and know-how is most important, the Garloughs said. So whomever you choose to provide your food and beverages, know as much as you can. Inspect

the facilities, taste the foods, check safety and sanitation, Bill Garlough advises.

"Do they have the equipment at hand to manage an outdoor event if the weather turns as hot as it did Memorial Day weekend? Will the food be safe?"

Partnership is key to that kind of success, said Harte of the corporate catering relationship.

"When choosing a caterer, keep in mind that when the caterer and business both share a sense of ownership and pride in the outcome, it's a win-win situation," said Harte.

"In the end, you are responsible for your guests," Bill Garlough added.