

One-Hit Wonders

When a one-time event or seasonal happening comes to town, is your venue up to the task?

By Clare Leschin-Hoar

For a few months every four years, chef/owner George Formaro can count on a tidal wave of business flooding his restaurant, Centro, located in the heart of downtown Des Moines, Iowa. A crowd of presidential hopefuls, political staffers and media elite routinely jam the see-and-be-seen restaurant during the months leading up to the nationally watched Iowa caucuses.

But just how does Formaro ride that wave, rather than being caught in the undertow? “We treat every shift like it’s game seven, every single day,” he says.

That means juggling some highly visible presidential candidates and nationally recognized media stars next to flocks of locals who stop in for a dose of political

stargazing. And while Formaro doesn’t specifically train his front-of-the-house staff to immediately recognize the political who’s who coming through the door, the restaurant will work with well-known political figures who request to sit in a certain part of the 200-seat restaurant for security reasons. Formaro also makes sure to keep his closing time flexible, which often adds meaningful income to his daily totals.

“Our philosophy is, when people stop coming, we stop serving. We don’t ever close early, but if customers keep coming, we’ll stay open late. We don’t want someone to make the trip only to get turned away, especially when there’s a full house,” he says.

That national spotlight meant a 15% increase in Centro’s business in the six months before the caucuses. Whether he has 100 people on the books or 200, Formaro says the key to keeping the night flowing smoothly is to be prepared. “There’s nothing worse than thinking it’s going to be slow and being caught blindsided. You can’t recover from that. But you can recover from being too ready, that’s not a problem. Your prep can follow into the next day.”

A yearlong celebration

Capturing the crowds during Québec City’s 400-year anniversary in 2008 turned out to be easy pickings for François Blais, executive chef of Panache in the Auberge Saint-Antoine, thanks, in part, to his strong relationship with the Québec City Tourism office. The city welcomed nearly 4.7 million tourists for its anniversary (up 207,000 from the previous year), which meant the Old City, where Panache is located, was in constant bustle.

The crowds who come to town for the Iowa caucuses bring an increase in business to Centro, where the key to accommodating them is to be prepared, says chef/owner George Formaro.



Tobin Bennett

To help snag some of that business, Blais worked closely with the tourism office in several ways. Panache became a member of Quebec City Tourism, which meant descriptions of the restaurant were printed on brochures and on the official Web site and were available on informational kiosks located throughout the city. Blais also worked with the tourism office by opening his doors for visiting media well before the anniversary celebrations began. And while his nod as Chef of the Year from the Société des Chefs Cuisiniers et Pâtisseries du Québec (2007 and 2008) helped attract in-the-know gourmards, the city's heavily marketed 400-year anniversary celebration meant the tourists came earlier and spent more, allowing Panache to keep a full house.

How did he handle the increase? Blais specifically chose not to make drastic changes to the menus or operations, which is exactly the advice he would offer to his Vancouver counterparts who are readying for the 2010 Winter Olympics.

"If you stay true to yourself and your food, people will want to come back, and by keeping things the same [during peaks of large crowds], it makes it easier on the staff," he says.

Spotlight on sports

Unlike the Iowa caucuses or a yearlong city celebration, many tourist-drawing events have only a brief window of opportunity. Nationally spotlighted events such as the Democratic or

Republican national convention can mean a full week of bookings, private parties and catering opportunities, while a major sporting event, such as the Super Bowl or World Series, might mean two or three nights of hoopla, instead.

Randi Sirkin, director of creative services for Starr Restaurants in Philadelphia, says sporting events such as the World Series can be both hurtful and helpful. "When they're at the game, they're not out dining," she says.

But pregame buzz certainly has its benefits. Owners and players from both the Yankees and the Phillies dined in Starr restaurants Barclay Prime, Parc, Buddakan and Morimoto during the 2009 World Series, while savvy staff made the most of it. "We maximize those opportunities," Sirkin says. "When a VIP is in the restaurant, a director or Stephen [Starr Restaurants' owner Stephen Starr] gets a call. We'll greet them and thank them for coming in. And the next day, we'll send a note to local media and we'll tweet about it, but we do that after the fact to respect the privacy of our guests."

Longstanding relationships with the city's key concierges are important, too. Sirkin says the restaurant group works with them throughout the year so they're familiar with its 12 restaurants. And while the company doesn't do a lot of advertising, it does make sure the restaurants are listed in visitor guides that get distributed at conventions and hotels.



Although Québec City's 400-year anniversary attracted huge crowds, it was business as usual at Panache in the Auberge Saint-Antoine, where executive chef François Blais continued to serve outstanding cuisine.

"If a convention of doctors is coming to town, you can predict what they like and ramp up for it in advance," says Sirkin. "I input every convention coming to town in our shared calendar, which helps the managers know and refer back to their history so they can prepare in terms of food purchases, staffing levels and so on. We're always looking at a snapshot down the road a few months, and make sure we're set to go."

For Laurent Géroli, executive chef of the historic Brown Hotel, Louisville, Ky., the fact that the Kentucky Derby is an annual event means he's mastered the crush of visitors. Most of the rush happens during the three-day weekend, when

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he'll serve more than 1,000 meals to guests and visitors. Low staff turnover, carefully crafted checklists and a large organizational chart means it's not just the food that is *mise en place*.

"We have detailed pre-shift meetings to explain to the staff what's going to happen, how we will expedite, and things like that," says Géroli. "And we don't go overboard. We keep it simple, but make a great product. My advice is to think about the execution. Guests don't want to wait two hours for dinner."

And they don't like messing with tradition. The hotel's signature Hot Brown sandwich? Géroli churns out 500 during the Derby, compared with 200 during a normal week. "That's a master sandwich," he says. "We don't touch it."

Once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

But not every event allows for years of perfecting food orders and staff scheduling. For Denver, the five-day Democratic National Convention in August 2008 meant the single largest event in the city's history. According to the city's economic impact study, the event generated approximately \$266 million in direct and indirect spending, far above the \$150 million that was predicted. The biggest winners of that flood of cash? Hotels, restaurants and related services.

According to the *Denver Post*, two of Richard Sandoval's Modern Mexican Restaurant Group venues, Tamayo and Zengo in downtown Denver, were

Andrew Meade



Meat Market is just one Miami restaurant welcoming Super Bowl crowds this month, and diners can enjoy such dishes as this grouper with browned goat butter and bacon/chipotle/conch broth from executive chef Sean Brasel.

booked for 21 private events. The restaurants saw a revenue increase of 150% during the convention, which included sales from private parties that ran from \$15,000 to \$22,000 per restaurant, per day. The restaurants also launched an off-site catering business as a direct result of the DNC event.

In February, the 2010 Super Bowl will hit Miami, which means restaurants are already busy making plans. "When you put an extra 100,000 people in the city, everyone is busy," says Sean Brasel, executive chef of Meat Market in Miami Beach, which has a reputation as a see-and-be-seen spot. "We're not big enough to do the [large] private parties, but we work with the concierges to book those 30-40 person parties, and we put in RFPs [requests for proposals] for catering, as well."

For John Critchley, executive chef of Area 31, Miami, tapping into the Super Bowl crowd meant partnering with Taste of the Tropics, which will hold Taste of the Game Miami for more than 400 guests on the lawn of Critchley's Epic Hotel-based restaurant the day before the big game.

Marilyn Hopkins, co-producer of Taste of the Tropics, says partnering directly with the National Football League (NFL) host committee has been critical in promoting ticket sales, which run \$250 per person for the afternoon event. "The NFL will lead you in the right direction of do's and don'ts for producing an event. They want the events to be as professional and responsible as possible," says Hopkins.

In addition to the Taste of the Tropics event, Critchley says he and his staff are working up special menus and preparing for the private-dining side of the hotel's 400-plus rooms and condos. Local culinary schools, such as Johnson & Wales University, North Miami, Fla., and Florida International University's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management in North Miami will provide additional staffing.

"Basically, we're going to try and forecast, as best we can, to prepare ourselves and make sure we stay ahead," says Critchley. "Good forecasting based on reservations and hotel occupancy is hands-down the best way to do that."

Mansfield, Mass.-based freelance writer Clare Leschin-Hoar's work has appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe and The Christian Science Monitor, among other publications.