

Food for Thought



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Somehow the words “Hilton” and “beans ‘n wieners” don’t seem to match. But, once a year, at the Saint John Trade & Convention Centre, the Hilton dishes out buckets of B&Ws to raise funds for the United Way. Starting back in 1983, it was billed as a “Poor Boy’s Luncheon” and has continued to grow into a major money-maker. Last year, approximately 800 people attended, raising \$9,000 toward the annual campaign.

The Hilton is not alone in its gastronomic philanthropy. Meet Margret and Axel Begner, owners of Opera Bistro in the downtown core. While Axel performs culinary magic in the kitchen, Margret cooks up ways to give “value-added” experiences to her customers. She’s hosted food and wine pairings and dished out musical interludes and literary events alongside countless tasty morsels. Many of these foodie events raise money for organizations associated with health, education, the arts or children.

At the Fundy Food Festival which showcases a variety of food booths and cuisine from many cultures, Margret helped organize a food auction to raise funds for the Boys & Girls club. Prior to the event, several well known chefs were filmed making their signature dish. Then the video was played at the festival. People bid on the chefs. The highest bidder took home a raincheck for the same dinner for four-to-six people, including an appetizer, desert and bottle of wine. Margret’s husband’s salmon dish pulled in \$750.

Using food as a fundraiser is a familiar concept to Laura Muise, general manager of Rudders Seafood Restaurant & Brew Pub in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. Muise co-chaired a committee to raise funds for the local hospital. Setting up a dinner auction was central to the event but the auction consisted of several decorated trees on display throughout the restaurant, donated by local merchants. “Over the course of four years, we raised over \$70,000,” she says. Not bad for a small town.

Money-wise, the deal is this: Rudders recoups direct food costs while planning and staff time

is swallowed by the restaurant. Organizations can usually count on getting 50-75 per cent of what’s charged for dinner, along with the proceeds of the auction. Bottom line: worthy causes end up with a wad of money, the restaurant gets good PR, and patrons are well fed.

Of course, figuring out what food to provide is always a challenge. Jane Davies, executive producer with ZedEvents in Halifax says that beef is a tough choice (no pun intended) as you can’t serve it rare, and well done would be equally gauche. Fish? Too many allergies. Pork? Not culturally considerate. Veal? Never. “So you may switch to rubber chicken—but how do you disguise it? What exciting vegetables can you find that will distract folks from the forsaken meat it shares the plate with? Aha! You remember the chocolate desert you’ve chosen,” Davies says, “and all is right with the world.”

Food events need not be confined to hotels, restaurants and convention centres. Chef Michael Smith and businessman Alan MacPhee from PEI staged a gourmet BBQ in a huge field this past July. One thousand people paid \$29 each to gobble up 75 gallons of seafood chowder, 1,000 hand-cut strip loin steaks, 500 pounds of potatoes, and the million calories that oozed from the strawberry/rhubarb short-cakes served with real whipped cream.

Called “The Village Feast”, it was organized in partnership with Farmers Helping Farmers. The event raised funds for the local food bank and to build a cookhouse in a Kenyan village. Smith and his colleagues schemed, begged, borrowed and ran hard with their great idea. Asked for a few success tips, Smith says: “Pre-sell to companies and offer them a one-stop charity fundraiser and summer picnic for employees; benefit a local charity and a global one; and, serve local products exclusively.” He adds that a web-based template is being developed for The Village Feast which can be used by communities across Canada. “It’s all about people helping people help people.”

Great food. Great causes. And a great excuse to jump on the fundraising chuck wagon. It’s as satisfying as the food. ■

Sandra Phinney has penned hundreds of business articles. She also writes a culinary column for *The Atlantic Co-operator* and is a regular food columnist for *Living Healthfully* in Atlantic Canada. “Addendum” covers topics like food trends for meetings and conventions, wine etiquette, and where to find laptop-friendly eateries. If you have any ideas, comments or suggestions about this article or future articles, send them to Sandra at: s.phinney@ns.sympatico.ca