

Special Event Buffet Madness?

Plated Station Buffets Are The Answer!

A chef's nightmare, the Fourth of July fireworks night has 400 reservations and 1200 people pour into the buffets like a wave of hungry cattle!

I'm at the other end of the club manning two buffets, what seems like miles from the kitchen and I watch the lines get longer and longer. They don't seem to be moving at all. I watch them herd through slowly and as the buffet is disappearing, I call the kitchen over the walkie-talkie, "I need more beef."

Silence from the kitchen. One minute later, "I need more beef and chicken. I need more beef, chicken and fish. I need more beef, chicken, fish and shrimp." All the while silence from the kitchen. I need everything!!!

The kitchen calls, "Chef, we are out of food." I run to the kitchen and start throwing anything into the Swiss kettle, stir-frying my way out of this mess. The buffet is full, the fireworks are over and the members are exiting laughing and heckling the staff that they will hit "Mickey D's" on the way home.

Not a fun night – four entirely full buffets filled three times completely wiped out! Not only did a few members get discouraged and leave hungry, but also they had to wait in line forever just to reach the head of the line to see the bottom of an empty chafing dish!

the station. I created the prototype "Plated Station Buffet" for the following year's Memorial Day weekend dinner for 600 and it worked beautifully.

The members sailed in and out with the greatest of ease with no more than a two minute wait while they watched the cooks create a restaurant-style, picture perfect plate. Six weeks later on the fireworks night the herd of 1200 was back again and this time the "Plated Station Buffet" made me a star, in the eyes of the members...a super chef.



Whitney Werner
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The nuts and bolts

In the 90's, we saw stations with cooking – the new millennium brought us the "small bite" or "tapas" style grazing buffets but the "Plated Station Buffet" is completely different. It's a formula for efficient service for big numbers that hit the buffet all at once.

By doubling stations in the food arena you can handle all 1200 in that one area without setting up a separate buffet on the opposite side of the club keeping the food closer to the kitchen. The chef needs to be in the center of the arena with a walkie-talkie to relay the needs of the stations to the kitchen and greeting the members.

Choose starters and entrees from your restaurant menu and scale down the entrees to five ounces so that



When the weekend was over I was at my favorite café, sipping on an Arnold Palmer, debriefing the nightmare event in my head. I realized the problem was the members were taking way too long and way too much food.

Then it came to me, "Plated Station Buffets." A buffet arena set with stations that serve soup, salads, entrees and desserts that are plated for the members as they walk up to



a light eater will come only once for a salad and entrée whereas the big eater will come back to try another entrée or a couple of salads. The stations do require extra manpower so your labor cost may increase although the food is easily controlled so you save on food cost.

Items can be cooked in the kitchen in batches and fed to the stations so that unused food is kept as raw as possible.

This not only keeps down the over production, it makes it possible to have items that would not normally be desirable for a buffet like a rare steak. Usually buffets have carved meats to ensure it doesn't overcook in a chafing dish.

As for the set-up, the salad station has a pick-up table in front and all the salad components on a table in the back. The hot entrées have the same set-up. Chafers in the back and on the front table, instead of the pre-made lines of plates, I use a cake stand or other display mechanism with a sample plate. As the members arrive a plate is prepared for them.

How can I mitigate the effect on my labor cost? It's definitely a factor because you need a crew in the kitchen feeding the food to the stations and a somewhat larger crew at the buffet to assemble plates. I try to mitigate the cost by using one high-priced, knowledgeable kitchen cook with one lower cost employee from another department or outside help paid cash for the day. I also try to recruit a waiter or two to run the dessert stations since the workload in the dining room is much less for buffets than a la carte.

What about the food cost? Beside hot, fresh restaurant plates for the masses, this is one of the best ways to prevent over-production and use items like IQF shrimp that can be defrosted or other raw backup in case the herd grows. Items such as salmon filet may be frozen for future use in a salmon cake or seafood soup or smoke roasted for a salad special the next day. Additionally, unlike a traditional buffet where you often see unruly, heaping plates of food, the amount of food on the plates is controlled.

How do I choose the menu items? First of all, this is a perfect chance to showcase some of your new exciting creations because you have a large portion of the membership attending. The salad stations work best with wedges of iceberg or romaine hearts that can be plated, topped with interesting goodies like a classic crumbled bleu wedge or a trendy southwestern romaine heart with chipotle ranch dressing.

These types of whole lettuce salads may sit for a moment, dished up in perfect rows ready to take without wilting or compromising quality. Use your standard buffet guidelines for entrees: oily fishes like salmon and Chilean sea bass, chicken breast with skin and meats that hold well in chafers. I have found that flat iron steaks hold well because of the natural marbling and affordable cost. For desserts, I recommend tartuffo and cookies. The Italian ice cream balls work well because they prevent the need for time-consuming scooping.

Do I need to purchase new equipment or china? No, the portions are only slightly smaller so use your house china or even paper for an outside buffet.

In the club environment there is a constant need for new and exciting dining experiences because our audience is finite, people who return frequently, even daily. This is why a club chef must be a super chef. We must constantly think outside the box, try something new or take a chance. Try it. It might just pay off! **BR**

Chef Whitney Werner, CEC, is executive chef at The Beach Club in Santa Monica, Calif. and president and co-founder of Club Culinary. He is president of the American Culinary Federation's "Chefs de Cuisine of Ca Los Angeles" chapter and president of Les Amis de Escoffier Society of California. Chef Whitney can be reached at: chefwhitney@clubculinary.com



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