

Chef's CHOICE: Fifteen FAVES!

Leading caterers from coast to coast share their menu favorites, from inventive intros to fun finales

BY DEANNE MOSKOWITZ

For *Catering's* food and beverage issue, we wanted to dish up what's hot on catering menus across the country. So we asked leading caterers from throughout North America to tell us about their most beloved, best-selling dishes.

By their mouth-watering responses, we discovered that many of these chefs' favorites share similar characteristics. Common themes include the insistence on seasonal ingredients in both sweet and savory dishes; the playfulness of appetizers and desserts; and the pervasiveness of alternative proteins, offering inspired substitutes for beef tenderloin and chicken. Read on to discover what's spicing up catering menus from coast to coast.

1 Playing on the "still wildly popular" dessert craze, **Abigail Kirsch Catering Relationships** in Tarrytown, N.Y., created this **Savory Lasagna "Cupcake"** appetizer, a layering of homemade basil black peppercorn pasta rounds, leeks, spinach and a custard of homemade goat ricotta cheese. The "cupcake" is served with a truffled mushroom sauce, and garnished with a piping of whipped ricotta mousse and confetti of primavera vegetables, among them shiitake, cremini and morel mushroom mix, snap peas, asparagus and pea shoots. Alison Awerbuch, partner and chef, credits the appetizer's success partly to its great eye appeal and kitschy name, but mostly to its upscale comfort food taste.

PHOTO BY ANDRE MAIER PHOTOGRAPHY



2 The Surreal Salad at Culinary Capers Catering and Special Events in Vancouver, British Columbia, sparks lots of fun interaction among guests as they contemplate its wonderfully weird elements. Creating it for a blindfolded “Dinner in the Dark” event, Margaret Chisholm, executive chef, turned to modernist methods to maximize textural and flavor surprises for the eye-opening tangle of wild greens, goat cheese orb, pickled watermelon radish, compressed cucumber, savory carrot marshmallow with hazelnuts and chanterelles, grilled mango and crispy vinaigrette. Among the most inscrutable elements, the marshmallows are a reduction of carrot juice flavored with sherry vinegar and thyme, gently heated, combined with xanthan gum, mixed into a combination of gelatin, glucose and isomalt, folded with whipped egg white, chilled overnight, cut into squares and garnished. The crispy vinaigrette is a dehydrated dressing ground up with freeze-dried fruit.



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3 Located in rural North Stonington, Conn., Linda Sample, president, and Shawn Bittman, executive chef, of **A Thyme to Cook Catering and Special Events** are always stalking the freshest, local ingredients, often by wandering through the fields of neighboring farms. Still capturing their attention in early fall is corn, which Bittman showcases in a variety of dishes—among them **Husks Stuffed with Creole Corn Maquechou**, which may incorporate bacon but here is strictly a mixture of fresh corn and various seasonal vegetables (butter beans, red peppers, onions, squashes, roasted sweet potatoes). To make them, the chef peels back half of the husk, which allows him to extract the cob, discard the silk and strip the kernels. After

PHOTO BY JOHN WATSON

soaking the husks in cold water, he stuffs them with the “succotash,” ties them with butcher’s twine, then lightly oils and roasts them. He unties and pulls back the husks for service.

4 The essence of summer any time of year, **Popcorn Bisque** has been on the menu of **Indiana Market & Catering** in New York ever since it kicked off a dinner the company catered at the James Beard House and was “a huge hit,” according to David Turk, owner and president. Made either with popcorn and fresh corn, dried corn and fresh corn, or just dried corn, the elegant opener also calls for organic milk, roasted tomato drizzle, and a fresh basil/olive oil puree.



PHOTO BY KATE MERCER, MYSTIC SHOOT THE GAME

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WHAT TO POUR

Entrees as delicious as those submitted for our feature deserve wine accompaniments that enhance their flavors rather than detract from them. Yet it’s often difficult to identify the right pairings. To find out how the experts would do it—and inspire pairing ideas for readers who may offer similar dishes on their menus—Catering contacted various wineries and provided them with the details of the entrees featured. Here are the matches they come up with, all with suggested retail prices of \$20 or less.

—Sara Perez Webber

LAMB LOIN WITH BUTTERNUT SQUASH PUREE AND CHARD • BARBARA LLEWELLYN CATERING & EVENT PLANNING



The **2009 DELOACH CENTRAL COAST PINOT NOIR** (SRP \$19), with aromas of ripe summer fruit touched with the pleasantly subtle notes of dried mint, matches this dish well, says Peggy Gsell, export manager for Boisset Family Estates. “Pinot Noir and lamb tend to be a match made in heaven, and this Pinot in particular, with its herbal and mint notes, is the perfect complement to the Butternut Squash Puree,” she says.



The **PATA NEGRA GRAN RESERVA 2004** (SRP \$16) is an ideal pairing for this dish, says Vince Friend of the Colección Internacional del Vino, a Spanish wine importer, who adds that lamb is the most traditional of meats in Spain. “This Gran Reserva is the go-to choice for lamb as it spends three years aging in American oak barrels, where it develops a very rich and complex combination of cherry, raspberry and tomato flavors, with just a hint of sage and mint,” he says. “It perfectly complements the smoky, complex flavors of garlic and lamb.”

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5 To lift its **Citrus Mint Marinated Shrimp** appetizer out of the ordinary, Liz Cipro, executive chef at **Tony Conway's A Legendary Event** in Atlanta, set it on a bed of parsnip puree and combined an unexpected array of colors, flavors and seasonings. After marinating in a mix of mint leaves, cilantro, lime juice, lemon and lime zest, and extra-

virgin olive oil for no more than an hour, the jumbo shrimp are seasoned with salt and pepper and grilled. The boiled parsnips are combined with butter and cream and machine-processed until smooth or hand-mashed for a more rustic effect. There's a final "wow" factor once the dish is plated: a drizzle of sweet Asian chili sauce around the puree (see photo on p. 38, along with an interview with Cipro).

6 **Culinary Capers Catering** and its clients are flipping over **Pacific Lingcod with Tangerine Chili Dust**, a new bestseller. The fish is not only delicate and delicious, says Executive Chef Margaret Chisholm, it's sustainable, local, Ocean Wise (a Vancouver Aquarium recommendation) and reasonably priced. What's more, the preparation is simple: The fish is covered with a thin slice of compound butter, sprinkled with a generous amount

of tangerine chili dust and roasted in the oven. The dust is produced by dehydrating long strips of the citrus zest in a low oven for a few hours, reducing to a fine powder in a coffee grinder and mixing with finely ground espelette chili powder.

7 Decidedly saucy, these fresh-flavored entrees are the sassy substitutes for same-old chicken and beef suggested by Julie Noggle, executive chef, and Stephen Gray, chef d' cuisine, at **Arthur's Creative Events & Catering** in Orlando, Fla. **Herb Roasted Pork Tenderloin with Ancho Chile Blackberry Sauce** is a sweet and spicy surprise with brilliant color that pops on the plate. **Braised Short Ribs with Barbecued Tomatoes** exceeds ordinary barbecue expectations with its zesty mix of fire-


roasted grape tomatoes, bacon, onion and balsamic vinegar. The accompaniments complement each other and the proteins: for the pork, roasted garlic smashed sweet potatoes and caramelized Brussels sprouts with fried shallots; for the ribs, honey mustard polenta and roasted asparagus.


8 With headlines calling attention to the Middle East, Persian and Turkish foods have found new homes on the menu of **Feast Your Eyes Gourmet Catering** in Philadelphia, much to the surprise of Lynn Buono, chef/owner. First serving the cuisines at the wedding of a Turkish engineer and an American lacrosse teacher, Buono realized that Americans respond immediately to the intense but accessible flavors of these foods. Among her favorite imports is **Turkish Meatballs** with slow-cooked caramelized onions and saffron yogurt. Slightly larger than golf balls, they are


tangy spheres of rich meat, curry, tomato and saffron broth, incorporating yellow lentils, spinach and rice (the latter keeping them very light). While the meatballs may be made with lamb, Buono prefers beef, since she often presents them with assorted kebabs, one of which is lamb.

9 In the face of resistance to rising tenderloin prices, Steve Ulibarri, executive chef of **Cuisine Unlimited Catering & Special Events** in Salt Lake City, has beefed up his repertoire of recipes featuring flavorful but less expensive cuts (among them, skirt

PACIFIC LINGCOD WITH TANGERINE CHILI DUST • CULINARY CAPERS CATERING


 Peter Mondavi recommends the **CHARLES KRUG PETER MONDAVI FAMILY SAUVIGNON BLANC** (SRP \$18) to accompany the lingcod dish, noting that the wine's peach and melon flavors would pair nicely with the tangerine and chili in the dish, and that the bright acidity of the wine would be refreshing alongside the richness of the compound butter. "It's always important to choose a wine with soft or no tannins to go with anything spicy, because tannins in wine can accentuate spiciness," he says.


 The rich stone fruit flavor of **DOMÄNE WACHAU RIESLING FEDERSPIEL TERRASSEN** (SRP \$18) is balanced by firm acidity, giving it the structure to match this sweet chili dish, according to Kerstin Klamm, export manager for Domäne Wachau.

 The citrus and butter flavors of this dish would pair nicely with the creamy texture and the zingy finish of the **BRIDLEWOOD ESTATE WINERY MONTEREY COUNTY CHARDONNAY** (SRP \$20) according to David Hopkins, winemaker for Bridlewood.



TURKISH MEATBALLS • FEAST YOUR EYES GOURMET CATERING

 The **ANTAÑO RESERVA 2005, RIOJA** (SRP \$12), a nicely aged wine, would meld with any of the meat selections, says Vince Friend of the Colección Internacional del Vino, who adds that this traditional wine has a spicy element that would pair perfectly with the saffron, curry and tomato in this dish.

 The **2008 BUENA VISTA CARNEROS CHARDONNAY** (SRP \$19) shows aromas of sweet vanilla, mango and pineapple fruit against a creamy, toasty background, with a mouth that shows intense apple, vibrant citrus, honeydew and pear notes. According to Boisset's Peggy Gsell, the creamy, toasty character of the wine would pair well with the sweetness of the caramelized onions and the creaminess of the yogurt, with the acidity of the wine pairing nicely with the tanginess of the meat.



Beyond the boring holiday bird, Turkey Osso Buco was developed by Indiana Market & Catering in response to a request from the Food Network for atypical Thanksgiving-related foods

steak, flat iron and terrace major, the near tenderloin-tender piece located just under the shoulder). Owner Maxine Turner says that the chef makes "a fabulous Ponzu beef" by tenderizing skirt or flat iron with a spicy Asian rub that brings out the best in the meat. But everyone's flat-out favorite seems to be **F flank Steak Roulade with Sun Dried Tomatoes and Spinach**, Ulibarri's entrée spin on a tenderloin hors d'oeuvre that has been winning raves for years. He seasons the steak with garlic/lemon sauce, before layering it with fresh spinach leaves, dotting it with chopped sun-dried tomatoes, rolling it into a large spiral, tying it and roasting it at 350 degrees for 25 minutes. Finally, he intensifies the flavor by plating the steak rounds atop a circle of the garlic/lemon sauce.

10 Beyond the boring holiday bird, **Turkey Osso Buco** was developed by **Indiana Market & Catering** in response

to a request from the Food Network for atypical Thanksgiving-related foods, recalls David Turk, president. Rolled in flour, sautéed and then long-simmered like the veal classic, this affordable but satisfying alternative is made with turkey drumsticks, tomatoes, wine and homemade turkey stock; flavored with thyme and rosemary; and sprinkled with gremolata. To better resemble its namesake and to further delight diners, the drumsticks are carved into steaks before cooking. Although the dish may be individually plated, Chef Chris Schley believes it's more beautiful when presented family-style on a big buffet platter, colorfully garnished with parsley and lemon zest.


11 People are falling for lamb at **Barbara Llewellyn Catering & Event Planning** in San Francisco, where **Lamb Loin with Butternut Squash Puree and Chard** is Executive Chef Jason Jilson's newest seasonal treatment. For a stunning presentation, he sets the cooked chard in the center of the plate, encircles it with squash puree, fans the lamb on top, and garnishes with micro greens and mint oil. The depth of flavor of the dish is the culmination of a series of meticulous steps. The condiment is a blend of blanched mint and canola oil. The squash is sweated with onions; simmered with butter, cream, Fresno chili, clove, brown sugar, nutmeg, and salt and pepper; and pureed and strained. The rainbow chard is chopped, blanched and seared with sweated onions, garlic, salt and pepper. The Colorado lamb loin is boned, seared, finished in a


350-degree oven, and sliced into 12 pieces, three to a plate.

12 It may appear to be an exquisite but otherwise ordinary sweet, but the **Strawberry Rhubarb Puff** from **Blue Plate** in Chicago packs surprising savory impact. After forming and baking the puff pastry cups, Pastry Chef Louella Ann Caringal fills




FLANK STEAK ROULADE WITH SUNDRIED TOMATOES AND SPINACH • CUISINE UNLIMITED CATERING & SPECIAL EVENTS


 With a medium body, round tannins and a clean finish, the **2009 FLEUR DE LYETH RED** (SRP \$11) boasts a blend of Bordeaux varietals that add layers of flavors and complexity to the wine, which is a perfect pairing to the intensity of flavors in the flank steak roulade, says Boisset's Peggy Gsell.

 **VIÑA ARNAIZ ROBLE, RIBERA DEL DUERO** (SRP \$15), a very firm, full-bodied wine with powerful blackberry and cherry fruit, is the perfect foil to a rich, hearty steak, says Vince Friend of the Colección Internacional del Vino. "This wine has a hint of fresh herbs and firm tannins, which also complement the meat and its filling," he says.



TURKEY OSSO BUCO • INDIANA MARKET & CATERING

 The **CONDES DE ALBAREI ALBARIÑO 2010, RIAS BAIXAS** (SRP \$15) has bright, fresh tropical fruit flavors and a slight mineral elopement, blending beautifully with poultry and lighter meats, says Vince Friend of the Colección Internacional del Vino.

 Boisset's Peggy Gsell recommends the "refreshingly bright" **2009 RAYMOND RESERVE SELECTION SAUVIGNON BLANC** (SRP \$15) for this dish, saying that the "crisp, lively acidity" provided by citrus and grapefruit flavors in the wine make it a great complement to the turkey osso buco.

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them with homemade strawberry rhubarb jam, fresh strawberries and homemade fiori d'Sicilia ice cream, and finishes them with pink peppercorn streusel, balsamic/sugar reduction and micro basil. Fiori d'Sicilia is an Italian floral extract often described as a cross between vanilla and orange. Beginning with a perfect pairing of seasonal ingredients, Caringal balances creamy with crisp and sweet with acidic to give the dessert a harmony that's heady instead of bland.

13 A popular childhood pairing, peanut butter and chocolate gets a decidedly grown-up interpretation from Pastry Chef Susan Brinkley of **Barbara**

Llewellyn Catering. Anything but kid stuff, her **Valrhona Nyangbo Fudge Cake with Peanut Butter Mousse, Caramelized Bananas & Crème Fraiche Ice Cream** takes the classic twosome over the top with a luscious layering of sophisticated flavors and lush textures. The rich cake is piped with peanut butter mousse, set on a pool of buttery caramel banana sauce, garnished with a caramelized banana spear, and set off by the contrasting accompaniments of a quenelle of cream fraiche ice cream and a shard of salted peanut brittle.

14 A little slice of heaven, **Pie in a Jar a la Mode** from **Abigail Kirsch Catering Relationships** drives guests crazy with its unique presentation and fresh-baked appeal, reports Alison Awerbuch. Inspired by the greenmarket and screaming farm-to-table, the dessert features seasonal fillings (apple cinnamon, pear cranberry, pumpkin pecan, and sweet potato for fall/winter) baked in individual

mason jars and topped with spiced buttery streusel crumbs. The crust is placed in the bottom and blind baked before the filling is added, and the dessert is served warm with a choice of house-made ice creams, among them Tahitian vanilla bean, praline crunch, toasted almond or caramel swirl. The dish may be plated, presented on a station in smaller jars, or passed in sealed containers with custom stickers as a take-away to departing guests.

15 What's the big dessert scoop at **Culinary Capers Catering**? Cones! Clients are getting carried away with them not only for dessert but as hors d'oeuvres with savory fillings. Handily transporting a few dollops of decadence, the **Petite Waffle Cones** are pretty, versatile, and easy to eat. A sensation last

summer, the concept is transitioning into fall/winter using truffle cone flavors, including dark and milk chocolate crisp; lemon white chocolate; and salted caramel. For hors d'oeuvres, sesame-flavored cones are filled with such fare as tuna tartare or chocolate mole chicken salad, garnished with toasted pumpkin seeds. ●

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HERB ROASTED PORK TENDERLOIN WITH ANCHO CHILE BLACKBERRY SAUCE • ARTHUR'S CREATIVE EVENTS & CATERING



The **2009 CASA SILVA CARMÈNÈRE RESERVA** (SRP \$12), a Chilean classic made in the Colchagua Valley, boasts earthy and vegetal undertones that would mesh well with the herbs and ancho chile flavors in this dish, according to Mario Geisse, winemaker at Viña Casa Silva.



DOW'S 2008 VALE DO BOMFIM (SRP \$12), made in northern Portugal, is full of wild berry flavors with hints of spice, and would complement the sweet and spicy flavors in this entrée, according to Paul Mugnier, vice president of sales and marketing at Premium Port Wines.



The **DON MIGUEL GASCON MALBEC** (SRP \$12) has a deep, dark blackberry nose that would be lovely with this dish, says Ernesto Bajda, winemaker for Don Miguel Gascon.



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BRAISED SHORT RIBS WITH BARBECUE TOMATOES • ARTHUR'S CREATIVE EVENTS & CATERING



A Tempranillo-based wine complements pork perfectly, according to Vince Friend of the Colección Internacional del Vino. Friend recommends the **CONDE DE VALDEMAR CRIANZA, RIOJA** (SRP \$14) to pair with this dish. "It is structured enough, without being overpowering to the lighter meat," he says. "It also has a great acid component that will stand up to and balance some of the sweetness going on with this dish."



The **ITALIAN FEUDI DI SAN MARZANO 2010 PRIMITIVO** (SRP \$11), a first cousin of Zinfandel, carries aromas of cherries, berries and a slight cinnamon note, creating mouthwatering flavors when coupled with barbecued meats and fire-roasted tomatoes, according to Steven Checca, area manager North America for Feudi di San Marzano.



For this dish, Boisset's Peggy Gsell suggests the **2008 RAYMOND SOMMELIER SELECTION CABERNET SAUVIGNON**, an on-premise-only Cabernet offering from Raymond that's brimming with blackberry, cherry and cassis flavors. "The balance and structure of this wine with well integrated tannins are a perfect complement to the zesty flavors of the dish," she says.