

CUISCENE



BY DON DOULOFF

THE MAIN EVENT

Goodbye rubber chicken...hello stellar entrées

In the arc of a plated meal, the main course is the star, supported by appetizers (designed to whet appetites) and dessert (functioning as the sweet denouement).

And thanks to the creativity and attention to detail of a dedicated brigade of catering chefs, meeting and event attendees are being treated to plated mains of uncommon variety.

"We are drawing on the livestock from smaller independent farms that are raising bison, elk and emu," says Devin Marhue, executive chef of Tulips and Maple - The Art of Catering, in Ottawa. He adds that farmers around the Ottawa Valley are raising heritage breeds of pigs, cattle and turkey "in ways that produce the succulent, flavorful meat our clients rave about."

Excitement and fun are also on the menu. "We have designed menus that incorporate retro comfort food like chicken and waffles, and playful meals based on international street food," says Marhue.

Over at Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth, in Montreal, low-temperature, slow, vacuum cooking [known as sous-vide] is popular, according to Mark Lintanf, the hotel's chef and manager of business development, outside catering. "With this technique, we can efficiently confit various cuts of meat, slowly braising a piece of beef, duck, goose, pork in its own juices or in a light broth. As everyone wants healthier, lighter main courses, we no longer make confit with fat, but with stock or broth." Adds Armando Arruda, the hotel's director, outside catering, "one of the biggest sellers is Quebec lamb fed on salted herbs on the shores of the St. Lawrence River."





For his part, Robert Arslanian, president and owner of Robert Alexis Traiteur, in Verdun, Que., near Montreal, notes that “the *plat dinatoire* trend is real and actual. Guests love it. A real dinner meal in a small plate! From a duck confit tian, to a lobster tail with white and green asparagus, as long as it is easy to eat while standing and chatting, it can be [passed] by the servers or set up as a food station.”

At Ottawa-based Thyme & Again Creative Catering, vegetables are big, as well as preparations tied to dietary health, says owner/founder Sheila Whyte.

“There’s been a huge increase in gluten-, dairy- and nut-free dishes,” she says. “Vegetable mains are taking off,” to the point, she says, where “people are ordering vegetable dishes instead of meats like duck.” And instead of rice and potatoes, ancient grains like quinoa are increasingly popular, she notes.

On the meat side, locally sourced game (bison, elk) is prevalent, as are deconstructed plates, such as beef bourguignon, whose individual components are arranged and plated separately.

Game is also finding its way onto plates at Vancouver’s Culinary Capers Catering and Special Events. “We are looking for interesting ways to introduce pheasant to our clients,” says executive chef Margaret Chisholm, who uses a confit method for the dark meat and a sous-vide technique for the breast meat. She also serves “a combined short rib and sablefish, lobster, spot prawns, for a more contemporary West Coast take on a surf and turf-themed plated entrée.” ⊕

—Don Douloff is Managing Editor of Meetings + Incentive Travel.