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Restaurant Evolution - Part I

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Managers Focus on Quality Products and Services
By Sharon McDonnell

A rapidly changing business climate---an inescapable condition of twenty-first century life---presents a formidable challenge for every American restaurant. Restaurateurs and their managers must be nimble and creative to succeed in an environment in which customers become ever more finicky in their food and beverage preferences; competition puts an increasing premium on special offerings and service; and operations, product, and labor costs press hard against potential profits.

Top Guns

Santé's panel of six top food-and-beverage professionals interviewed for this story keep their restaurants on top by successful adaptation. Sometimes an extensive menu, beverage, or facility overhaul is necessary. Often tweaking and refining an existing program can revitalize both staff and clientele. Occasionally, supporting an out-of-the-box idea or anticipating an emerging trend yields remarkable results. And making the most of human and technological resources are part of every winning formula.

In response to questions concerning the myriad challenges of running a successful operation, our panelists provided sound business solutions, both tried-and-true and recently forged. For instance, when diners scaled up their expectations for Mexican food, Richard Sandoval's Modern Mexican restaurants began changing menus four times a year and adding new dishes more aggressively. For Whist restaurant at the Viceroy Hotel in Santa Monica, California, changing the menu design to make it more user-friendly and updating menus weekly proved a winning gambit. Adding a variety of beers, holding a beer-pairing dinner, and opening a wine bar at the Statler Hotel, the teaching hotel of Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration in Ithaca, New York, spurred new business.

Some restaurants have devised ingenious ways to increase top-line sales without raising prices and scaring away price-sensitive customers. For example, Scala's Bistro in The Sir Francis Drake, a Kimpton Hotel in San Francisco, sells miniature versions of \$7 to \$8 desserts for \$3 to lure the weight-conscious, who just want a few nibbles; the cost-conscious, who are willing to spend \$3 but no more; couples or groups, who want to share; and variety-is-the-spice-of-life types, who find it fun to create their own sampling platters.

Food for Thought

Unlike most foods, food *trends* come with an uncertain shelf-life. Successful enterprises recognize what their customers want and do everything in their power to exceed patrons' expectations. Warren Schwartz, Executive Chef at KOR Hotel Group, and Food and Beverage Director at Whist in the Viceroy Hotel saw a need to draw inspiration from the simplicity of Italian cuisine instead of the exotic El Bulli-type offerings and present high-quality, fresh farmer's products. "You need to be a lot smarter than you used to be...and give people what they want," claims Schwartz. "So few people want to spend \$200 on a meal and have wild stuff happening."

Qdoba Mexican Grill venues give guests what they want by allowing them to customize their meal in the Q to Go catering line. Customers can build their own burrito or taco themselves or skip the burrito altogether and fashion a custom "naked" burrito, which comes in a bowl instead.

The best-run restaurants not only pamper customers with compose-your-own meals, but also anticipate patrons' special dietary needs. "Dietary requests come every 20 minutes in restaurant kitchens today...

We try not to do dishes that you can't alter, we offer steamed or broiled. . . and we always make garlic-free marinara," comments Michael Kornick, Managing Partner of the N9NE Group in Chicago, and Chef/Owner of mk in Chicago.

Raising the Bar

Wine, beer, and spirits are all part of the profits equation at most restaurants, and a thriving bar business that complements the food and service has become a necessity, not an option. Noting that his restaurants' spirits sales could be better, Sandoval hired a national beverage director to improve bar revenues and profits. His venues now offer Tequila tastings, and bar menus change with the seasons. When Sandoval opened Maya ten years ago in New York City, the 5,000-square-foot restaurant

included a 500-square-foot-bar area. When Zengo in Washington, DC, opened last October, a spectacular bar occupied one-fifth of the 6,000-square-foot restaurant. Sandoval clearly sees a payoff: "We've seen sales and profit margins increase as a result."

Some restaurateurs view the bar as means to drive top-line sales. N9NE's stylish steakhouses with a sexy young vibe in Las Vegas and Chicago have positioned a Champagne and caviar bar with soft suede booths center stage, offer a \$60 margarita, and partner with Tequila, beer, and other spirits purveyors to promote concerts and other events. In San Francisco, the Million Dollar Cocktails at Harry Denton's Skylight Room, which range from \$80 to \$200, have created a national and local media buzz--and a resounding ring at the register.

In Service of Service

To track client tastes and satisfaction, many operations employ the latest technology such as Adaco, Averro, Delphi, MenuLink, and OpenTable. Qdoba Mexican Grill asks guests to rate their experience on a 7-point scale, responding via Internet or telephone at their leisure. Other panelists use comment cards, mystery shoppers, or the time-honored table visit to solicit feedback.

These tools serve as a supplement---not a substitute---for superior hands-on service. "Anyone can get the basics done. We think always about the details," notes John Svensson, director of catering and convention services at Cornell's Statler Hotel. Schwartz concludes, "Some places in L.A. are too cool to say thank you, but customer service is very important."

Our panel of outstanding food and beverage professionals:

Michael Kornick, managing partner, N9NE Group, Chicago, and chef/owner, mk, Chicago. Kornick's culinary career in the restaurant industry includes employment at premium hotels (Boston's Four Seasons and Windsor Court in New Orleans), a restaurant group (Chicago's Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, and fine-dining establishments (Quilted Giraffe in New York City, among others).

Lisa McBeth, director of operation services with Qdoba Mexican Grill, Wheat Ridge, Colorado. McBeth serves as a liaison between operations and other departments to improve efficiencies, profitability, and communication. She interacts with every area of food and beverage for the company, from menu development and food safety to equipment and process innovation and vendor development.

Rob Robinson, general manager, Scala's Bistro at The Sir Francis Drake, a Kimpton Hotel in San Francisco, who also oversees Harry Denton's Skylight Room and Caffè Espresso. Robinson was previously at Ponzu restaurant in San Francisco and owned his own restaurant, Infusion.

Richard Sandoval, chef/owner, Modern Mexican, New York City, whose restaurants include Maya (NYC, SF, and Dubai), Pampano (NYC), Tamayo (Denver), Isla (Las Vegas), and Zengo (Denver, Washington, DC). Born in Mexico City, Sandoval captured Mexico's Chef of the Year award before garnering high praise in New York City for his modern-French menus at Savann and Savann Est. He then went on to create the high art of modern Mexican cuisine at Maya and all of his Modern Mexican venues.

Warren Schwartz, executive chef, KOR Hotel Group, and F&B director, Whist, Viceroy Hotel, Santa Monica, California. Schwartz is responsible for all kitchen operations and menu creation at Whist, as well as 24-hour room service at Viceroy and special catering events. Schwartz worked alongside Bradley Ogden at the Lark Creek Inn and Joachim Splichal at Patina before heading the kitchen at Saddle Peak Lodge in Calabasas.