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SAFETY FIRST

Caterers break down the new rules for food and beverage at post-COVID events.

BY MICHELE LAUFIK

As in-person event restrictions ease up and parties begin to grow in size, caterers are cooking up creative serving options as well as strategic setups that discourage guest congestion. From mobile food moments to smart buffet service, here's how some caterers are keeping guests safe and bellies full.

Make it individual.

To ensure guests feel comfortable consuming at an IRL event, downsize the offerings to individual servings, especially at events such as conferences and meetings that include F&B breaks. "We recommend having mostly passed and individually packaged food for breaks so the food comes to the guest rather than guests swarming one station," says Libby Russell, sales director for New York-based **Acquolina Catering & Event Management** (acquolinacatering.com).

Celebrity caterer Andrea Correale, founder and president of **Elegant Affairs** (elegantaffairscaterers.com), echoes that idea, saying "I would replace the classic grazing tables, with smaller individual vessels that house the food—eliminating the need for communal food stations. For example, a cheese board for 40 can be substituted by multiple individual cheese boards for one."

As for sit-down service, Chappall Gage of **Susan Gage Caterers** (susangage.com) in Landover, Md., suggests grouping "families and friends that have already been socializing together as best as you can. Instead of the traditional 10 guests at a five-foot round, try an alternative setup of six to eight guests at a 5.5-foot round or more smaller tables for couples, if spacing permits."

Spread out the food stations.

To help reduce guest congestion around F&B stations, Russell recommends offering "mobile moments that can float throughout a space such as a cart or larger cigarette tray that can hold more than your normal passing tray. If you go the stationary route, we recommend having many F&B moments spread throughout the space to disperse guests."

Prepare prepackaged snacks.

Correale suggests prepping a variety of snacks in a branded bag, which guests receive upon check-in—"like a gift bag except this bag would be filled with snacks and a beverage," such as individual bags of popcorn, gourmet trail mix, power bars and whole fruit.

Set up a smart bar service.

To help cut down on the wait time at the bar, go with a DIY bartending approach and fill individual mason jars with assorted fruit-and herb-flavored mocktails and offer a variety of individual liquor bottles, allowing guests to create their own cocktail, Correale says. "Also, individual bottles of rosé and white wine served with straws are quite the trend," she adds.



Petr Raba, vice president of meetings and events global at **Marriott International** (marriott.com), U.S. and Canada, says that the hotel chain has started offering its batched cocktails in custom packaging like flip-top bottles, cans and sustainable pouches. Also, Russell says that having multiple bars is key. "This will help draw guests to different spaces and keep them spread out."

Gage echoes that, saying for outdoor events, "a bigger tent will allow for more bars than usual, which can be used to minimize lines and congregating. A mix of self-service bars and fully-staffed bars can also help prevent one station from being too overwhelmed."

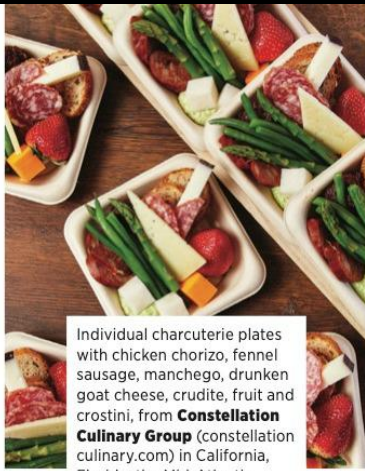
Design a buffet with safety measures in mind.

Although buffet-style serving may cause more health and safety headaches than its worth, it is possible to design a setup that works. Correale suggests providing personal serving utensils, along with the cutlery roll-ups that are given to each guest, so they can serve themselves without sharing germs. Also, she said to choose a deeper, wider table than usual to create a buffer between the guests and the food, and to present the food in individual bento boxes or other unique vessels to eliminate cross-contamination.

For a more hands-off approach, make sure the station is fully staffed, "so the waiters and chefs can make the plate for the guests," Russell suggests.

Marriott International recently introduced its Hybrid Event Learning Lab in key markets including Chicago, Atlanta and Boston, where planners can take an interactive, on-site tour to learn how to produce a hybrid event with new protocols in place such as redesigned coffee breaks and plated and buffet service.

"Single-sided buffets or stations allow us to make each interaction more personable. Double-sided buffets are still being offered but with single-serve house-made preportioned options," Raba explains. "Individual servings and more in-person action stations allow us to offer a wide variety of options as well as give us the opportunity to personalize and customize based on specific guest preferences."



Individual charcuterie plates with chicken chorizo, fennel sausage, manchego, drunken goat cheese, crudite, fruit and crostini, from **Constellation Culinary Group** (constellationculinary.com) in California, Florida, the Mid-Atlantic region, New England and Washington, D.C.



Açaí ice cream bowls in tin cans, from **Elegant Affairs** (elegantaffairs caterers.com) in New York



Brunch box with house-made waffles, house-made croissants with bourbon butter and Georgia syrups, house-made granola mini parfaits, berries, grapes and edible flower garnish, from **Proof of the Pudding** (proofpudding.com) in Atlanta



Individual "Galas in a Box" with snack items for virtual gatherings, from **Made by Meg** (mbmcatering.com) in Los Angeles



Petite grain bowls filled with saffron-seared shrimp with grilled peaches, mint and red quinoa, or sesame-crusted ahi tuna with watermelon radishes, avocado and pea shoots, from **12th Street Catering** (12stcatering.com) in Philadelphia



Banana pudding shooters infused with banana liqueur layered with bananas and home-made vanilla bean wafers topped with fresh whipped cream, from **Proof of the Pudding** (proofpudding.com) in Atlanta

SINGLE SERVING

These creative dishes are (mostly) contactless, COVID-friendly catering options.

BY MICHELE LAUFIK



Individual cups of ramen, from **Elegant Affairs** (elegantaffairs caterers.com) in New York

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