



Food the centerpiece of team-building success

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GRACIE'S

restaurant in Providence and Pamfilio's Catering and Deli in Cumberland have come up with team-building exercises designed to please the palate while tapping into the corporate-outings market.

Newport Hospitality offers its employees corporate outings five to 10 times a year to improve employee relations, but in June they tried something different: Gracie's "Beyond the Dinner Table" program.

Gracie's three-hour outing features a reception that leads to group planning for food and wine pairings and closes with a multicourse meal, explains creator and front-of-the-house manager Stephen Willson. The event is designed to provide a relaxing setting for corporate colleagues to get to know each other better, he said.

Newport Hospitality's Cheryl Twiss, vice president of sales, likened the pilot outing she experienced to a mini-

retreat.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for a small team to meet, get to know each other on a personal level, and even to break into smaller teams and do wine pairings and tastings and work together as a team on what you agree on and what you don't," Twiss said.

"The surprise was the way things tasted to different people," she added. "You could all taste the same wine but everyone had a different experience. There was no right or wrong opinion."

Pamfilio's, which already has corporate outings as 10 percent of its business, is now offering cooking classes as outings, said Dennis Labossiere, the caterer's sales director. Hunter Insurance in Lincoln participated in late spring with 15 employees, and found the interaction helped strengthen its commercial and claims teams, said Brian Hunter, the insurance company's president and owner.

The Hunter employees helped prepare and then eat a three-course meal and left with recipes they could try on their own, said Hunter.

ON THE MENU: Stephen Willson, right, front-of-the-house manager for Gracie's restaurant in Providence, reviews scheduling for a new corporate-outings program with consultant Val Littlefield. COURTESY JWESSEL PHOTOGRAPHY FOR GRACIE'S PROVIDENCE

The event fosters camaraderie "because the jobs can be stressful," he said. "This was without spouses, so there could be more bonding. It was like an adventure. They showed us how to prep the food and gave us recipes to try at home."

Dale J. Venturini, president and CEO of the R.I. Hospitality Association, is familiar with the concepts and thinks the hospitality industry can be instructive when it comes to corporate team-building.

"It helps a person gain intangible skills that transfer into any role outside of the industry, such as interpersonal and communication skills; how to work with and manage others; and how to deliver great service; not to mention how to maintain grace under fire," she said.

At Gracie's, Willson came up with the idea this past year as a creative endeavor, he said. While the events have the potential to generate revenue at \$200 a head, that is not the primary focus, Willson added. He has 22 years in the hospitality industry.

"The idea came from [familiarity with] the natural chemistry that happens when people sit down and enjoy good food and good wine," he said. "Conversations get easier."

Willson hired Val Littlefield as a facilitator. Littlefield also works at Johnston-based Aipso, a company that provides insurance services in the automobile risk-pool residual market. Aipso held an early trial corporate outing, said Natalie Benkovich, manager, office of project management.

Because the Gracie's gatherings are designed to be intimate, about 12 of Aipso's 300 employees participated, Benkovich said. There were several new members on an advisory board so the outing was planned as an exercise to get to know each other better in an atmosphere that was completely different from work, she said.

"Some of us had never worked together before," she added. "It was a great success."

Gary L. Avigne, vice president of acquisitions and development with the Waterford Hotel Group in Waterford, Conn., is actively planning to schedule a Gracie's outing. The Waterford Hotel Group typically sponsors two outings a year, he added, though sometimes they are more physically engaging and can feel contrived.

"It's intimate," he said of the Gracie's experience he had when he attended an introductory meeting. "There's a distinct lack of anxiety. ... It feels authentic."

At Pamfilio's, which charges \$69 a person, the corporate-outings business is already solid. Nonetheless, the cooking classes are a new approach aimed at team building in a fun, casual, but instructive way, Labossiere said, and he's trying to market it as such.

There could also be a themed outing where there's interactive cooking or food preparation, such as a self-service strawberry shortcake bar, he explained.

"We're not just going to try to sell you a cook-out," he said. "We're trying to take you on a journey through your event, rather than just be a caterer that puts out food." ■

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BRIAN HUNTER, Hunter Insurance owner