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Hotel F&B

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Inside Destinations, Interstate's latest photo-rich biennial beverage menu.



■ The planter box held about 20 sheet pans of chocolate cake, 20 pounds of Oreos, and 20 pounds of graham crackers.

A Deeper Shade of Soil

Portola Hotel & Spa's sweet, inspired dessert garden is rooted in edible "dirt."

BY TAD WILKES

A couple of truths about Las Vegas are that things there are never quite what they seem, and—no matter what the ads tell you—what happens in Vegas actually does not always stay there. And the latter can be a good thing.

When Portola Hotel & Spa's Director of Sales Terri D'Ayon Joyce attended the Industry Executive Council meeting for Associated Luxury Hotels International (Portola is a member of ALHI, which

is the global sales arm for the Monterey Bay property) at ARIA Resort & Casino, she experienced something creative that planted roots in her memory.

"They really were creative with their catering presentations," she says, recalling in particular a display titled Wesley's Vegetable Garden with Edible Soil, designed to look like a real garden. "It consisted of baby carrots, romaine spears, red oak lettuce, Belgian endive, heirloom tomatoes, romanesco, and assorted radishes. The edible 'soil' was made from pumpernickel bread crumbs,

sesame seeds, and a couple of other ingredients I don't recall specifically. I took photos of the 'garden,' which was served in a wooden box. They served their garden of salad items with three dressings consisting of buttermilk-herb dressing, Mediterranean hummus, and green goddess dressing."

Joyce sent the photos to Executive Chef Danny Abbruzzese at Portola in hopes of starting a discussion for ideas to create a similar garden to impress representatives of the Produce Marketing Association, which holds its event

each year in Monterey. The culinary team was impressed with the ARIA garden, but the chef struck upon a twist for the concept. "He took complete ownership and wanted to take the idea to the next level and create something sweet or a unique dessert," Joyce says. The dessert, at a charge of \$18 per person, would cap off a high-end dinner.

A BERRY GOOD IDEA

Abbruzzese swore Joyce to secrecy until the event, in order to give the finished product more impact for the group. "The edible garden concept does have savory applications, and moving forward we will explore those," he says. "But I was thinking, since strawberries were in season, we could create a strawberry patch."

The inspired chef bought a 4' x 4' planter box at Home Depot, which was then assembled by the maintenance department at the hotel. "We put a floor on it, so it could hold all the 'dirt,'" Abbruzzese explains. That dirt would be a mix of graham crackers, chocolate cake, and Oreo cookies.

"I picked up some live mint and strawberry plants and started growing them out of my house," Abbruzzese says. "It was completely edible, but that was more for display. Where we live on the central coast is the strawberry, garlic, and artichoke capital of the world. So, we made it look like rows of strawberries, with strawberry plants and mint speckled throughout. We had chocolate-dipped strawberries and regular, long-stem strawberries that looked like they were hanging from the plants."

The idea was that attendees could make their own strawberry shortcake. Abbruzzese used madeleine sweet cakes, bowls of whipped cream, and bowls of crème en glace. He says the food cost was "industry standard"—30% or less. "I'm not sourcing chocolate cake; I'm making it in-house," he notes. "I keep everything as scratch. And the good thing about

doing seasonal is that the market is flooded, so the cost is down on whatever produce you use."

The finished garden—with about 20 sheet pans of chocolate cake, 20 pounds of Oreos, and 20 pounds of graham crackers—weighed a couple hundred pounds, Abbruzzese estimates. "It was a lot, but it looked really cool. We had 20 to 30 people hanging around. People were taken aback by it at first, but once they dug in and tasted it and understood it was edible and really good, it was great. It was hilarious; grown people were like kids."

TENDING THE GARDEN

Each attendee got a small plate, and the chef advised them to get a madeleine and add crème en glace and whipped cream, then strawberries, and so on. "Someone has to attend it, such as a cook," Abbruzzese advises.

Watching the clients interact during this first execution of an edible garden, Abbruzzese realized needed tweaks—placing more madeleines, strawberries, or whipped cream in different places, for example. "As far as people digging in and interacting, I've got it all laid out for next time," he says. "But for the first run, it was fantastic. We even had little edible ladybugs. We wanted to make it look like a strawberry field."

In that field were little people, which were added by the group, which was doing a team-building event. "They wanted to accessorize it with the action figures," Abbruzzese says.

"The client was taken by surprise at how interactive the presentation became," Joyce says. "The dessert really spoke to their passion for their business and they found it to be highly engaging and fun to 'dig into' his garden of sweets with edible soil."

"They were amazed so much that we're now offering it on our new catering menus for 2019," Abbruzzese adds. "It's going to blow up. What I'm composing right now is seasonal savory and seasonal sweet offerings." ■

Tad Wilkes is editor at Hotel F&B.