



Portola Hotel & Spa recently introduced an Instagram-ready treat for groups: edible dirt

When it comes to Instagram-ready F&B, it's hard to beat a new offering from Portola Hotel & Spa in Monterey, Calif.: edible dirt. Attendees are given a four-foot-by-four-foot wooden box filled with what appears to be a flower garden and potting soil. On closer inspection, it is revealed to be an edible strawberry patch dessert atop "dirt" made of chocolate cake, Oreo cookies and graham crackers, complete with edible ladybugs.

"Interactive food and beverage offerings create an experience beyond the meal offering itself," says the 379-room Portola's executive chef, Danny Abbruzzese.

BY ALEX PALMER

MAKING MEALS MORE EXPERIENTIAL

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There are few things that attendees look forward to during a conference or corporate event as much as mealtime. But there is plenty more a meal can do than satiate hungry attendees. From providing visitors with a memorable, and Instagramable experience, to helping to drive home the larger theme of a gathering, food and beverage can be a multisensory, invaluable tool for a creative meeting planner — if you know how to make the most of it.

To gain insights on getting more out of F&B, we spoke with a number of planners, chefs and other culinary experts about how to elevate meals into something more impactful. Here are three major takeaways they suggested.

Give the Familiar an Experiential Twist

“There are a lot of ways that things can be more of an experience rather than just, ‘oh, here’s food,’” says Christine Couvelier, a culinary executive, executive chef and global culinary trendologist who runs the consultancy Culinary Concierge.

She points out that a major trend this year is “retro,” which can mean dishes “based around food memories.” Things like brown-sugar shortcakes with strawberries, mac and



An event hosted by ACCENT-DMC incorporated local New Orleans culture and food into the activities

cheese or fried chicken. One of the biggest things she’s seeing now? Wedge salads. But she suggests taking this classic and offering a “make-your-own wedge salad bar,” with different toppings and approaches. “That kind of memory — that cool, crunchy, creamy, smoky — is a great memory, and it’s participatory at the same time.”

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Make It Relevant

Beyond creating a memorable experience with F&B, planners can use it to help drive home the message of an event. Executive Chef John Armstrong of the Sheraton Seattle Hotel, which boasts 1,236 rooms and 40 meeting rooms, has helped planners customize their F&B with elements that make it particular to their gathering or their industry. For example, he put together the menu for a science organization in which most attendees worked in a lab. He and his team served up gazpacho in clear test tubes and the amuse-bouche in petri dishes. Mesquite-smoked tenderloin medallions as well as smoked duck were served under glass domes within which a burst of smoke was trapped and released when the guest lifted the dome.

“It’s driving an emotional attachment between the food and the event,” he says. “There’s an experience felt that somebody will remember.”

Brian Stapleton, vice president of food and beverage for parks and destinations at



Marigot Bay Resort & Marina incorporates local cuisine into its food and beverage for meetings



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Aramark Corporation, who is involved in around 300 events a year for the company, agrees that F&B provides a unique opportunity to drive home a meeting’s message.

“The food can be educational and can support a message that you decide early on in the planning process,” he says. “You can build menus that align with the event, so as people come out of meetings, the message flows right into the creative food and beverage.”

Stapleton had served as a chef for 25 years before he moved into the position as a corporate chef with Aramark. He is also an active board member of the International Association of Conference Centers (IACC), and has found that “there are all different types of ways to fine-tune your menu to elevate the food.”

Susan Harper, CIS, program manager at

Bishop-McCann, emphasizes that for this to succeed, early conversations are key.

“Great experiences are the result of a positive engagement and partnership between the planner, convention services manager and chef,” she says. “Challenge the chef with new ideas. The No. 1 mistake is choosing standard hotel menus without consideration of how each could be made better or without recommendations from the CSM or chef.”

Create a Sense of Place

The clearest way food and experience can go hand-in-hand is by connecting what attendees are eating to the unique place where the event is taking place. Amanda Solon, senior manager of conferences and events for healthcare IT software company Netsmart, found this to be the case when bringing the approximately 85 attendees of the company’s Masters Trip of top performers to the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia for an incentive event.

The gathering of incentive winners from a number of departments throughout the company included an awards brunch, a private beach excursion, and a dinner at luxury venue Villa Susanna. But the highlight of the experience may have been the food. At Villa Susanna, the group partook in a clay pot stew — a traditional Caribbean dish simmered for hours — among other local experiences.

The group stayed at 124-room, 57-suite Marigot Bay Resort & Marina, which offers locally focused F&B activities including rum tasting and cocoa tea making. The property handled a number of dining experiences for the attendees, including a chef’s dinner for the executive cabinet members and their guests that had Solon receiving “text message after text message saying, ‘wow, this is one of the top 10 meals I’ve ever had,’” as she put it.

“I was super impressed with the options that we were able to select, from a culinary standpoint, from just their general menus —

some of the food I had to google, but started learning about their uniqueness to the Saint Lucia culture and why they were including them,” says Solon.

There are few destinations that are as closely associated with great food as New Orleans. For one event, New Orleans-based ACCENT-DMC worked with a client who had a crawfish boil, starting with a street parade from the group’s hotel to the Port of New Orleans facility on the Mississippi River. Attendees arrived to a feast of boiled seafood, jambalaya in big iron pots and grilled oysters.

For another event, an automotive group that brought 80 of its top producers to NOLA worked with DMC Hosts Global to bring them Cajun-influenced Louisiana traditions and create food stations: a local specialty cocktail in a “go-cup” for the “ride of a lifetime” as they were paraded to the edge of the Mississippi River on floats; hors d’oeuvres upon arrival consisting of cocktail muffulettas, boudin balls, fresh gulf shrimp en brochette and oysters bordelaise; stations inside the main event space where delicacies such as whole cochon de lait stuffed with jambalaya, shrimp etouffee inside of a patty shell, and a beignet station were among the experiences on offer.

“With the overscheduled and highly preoccupied audience of attendees we have now, it is more important than ever to create an experience that grabs their attention (away from emails, social media and other 24/7 distractions in the palm of their hands) in order to have any ROI on your event,” says Holly Bethay, DMCP, director of sales and special events at Hosts New Orleans. The best way to achieve this experiential and emotional connection with a customer or attendee is through aspects that appeal to multiple senses — F&B. ■ *Questions or comments? Email apalmer@ntmlc.com*

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- An event’s F&B provides unique opportunities to deliver the meeting’s message.
- Culinary offerings are one of the most effective ways to connect attendees with a destination.