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# Tasteful Trio

L to R: Ashley James, Chris Kufek and Ken Oringer

*Three acclaimed chefs talk tips and trends*

BY PAUL D. KRETKOWSKI

A great meal is just the thing to break up a long day of meetings—or cap a successful event. Having a recognized, well-regarded chef prepare that meal helps ensure it's an experience to remember, rather than a plate of rubber chicken that may return to haunt planners in attendee comments. Below, three big-name chefs share their takes on how to translate an exquisite fine-dining experience from one table to dozens.

## Ashley James

*Executive Chef*

*The Four Seasons Hotel Los Angeles at Beverly Hills*

"It all starts with quality," says Ashley James, executive chef at The Four Seasons Hotel Los Angeles at Beverly Hills.

"It's just the way we do banqueting at the hotel—that the quality is identical to that at restaurants. Some hotels, for banquets they'll regenerate food—plate it and reheat it or hold it in a hot box. Ours is all cooked fresh and to order, so there are internal procedures that take place to make sure that happens."

Nearly everything James does is personalized at some level, he says.

"Some [clients] come up with a precise idea of what they want before they come, but others haven't got a clue of what they want. My advice is to always get the chef involved as much as possible. ... The client loves it when the chef comes and talks with them, but I find out key words from the client about what their favorite ingredient is, and build on that," James says.

How about "pomegranate?"

"The first thing that comes to mind is it works great with salads—some fresh goat cheese, citrus, some fennel, some great olive oil," James remarks. "It's interesting when people mention pomegranate: They're usually pretty health-inspired.

When you said 'pomegranate' I had a thought in the back of my head about how duck goes great with pomegranate."

Planners can go with the Four Seasons' excellent banquet menus, James says, but adding

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—Ashley James,  
*executive chef,*

*The Four Seasons Hotel  
Los Angeles  
at Beverly Hills*

a signature touch—his and his staff's attitude and vision—makes the difference for attendees.

"What I have in the plans at the moment is adding a lot of personality to our menus and telling more of a story about myself and my team because I have a great team of people. And a place for the food as well—where it's from. For me it's not just about food anymore; it's about the story, the experience."

James has no problems scaling from dinner for two to the Four Seasons' banquet cap of 300.

"We have a very highly trained team of staff and there are steps you can take, in *mise en place*—the preparation, in other words. ... In the restaurant, everything is prepped; the vegetables, meat and fish will be cut, the sauce will be somewhat ready. But the final execution, when the dishes are assembled—you cook the meat, finish the sauce, dress your dish, and [all that] final execution is done

at the last minute."

Remarkably, even if a group wants 300 plates of fish, James and his team can stagger the cooking of 30 portions at a time in such a way that all 300 plates can be finished—and finished perfectly—within an eight- to 10-minute window.

"We have a great reputation in the city for good banquet food. So many people say I had the rubber chicken at—I'm not going to name the hotel—but I know straight away that their food's coming out of a hot box."

Cocktail and buffet engagements are additional opportunities to showcase creativity.

"We'll do a lot of food stations, and a lot of those foods are finished in front of the client. For instance, there's a huge Latin community and a lot of Mexican food in the city, so we'll do a taco stand or quesadilla stand and have someone there making fresh handmade tortillas, so you get that great flavor and smell and action as well."

## Ken Oringer

*Chef, Owner*

*Clio and Uni Sashimi Restaurant*

Ken Oringer knows a bit about shifting focus in a hurry. As the chef and owner of Clio, a classic French restaurant, and Uni Sashimi Restaurant, both at Boston's Eliot Hotel, the ability to excel at two fundamentally different cuisines at the same time is a must.

Once that trick is mastered, scaling the experience up to groups must seem relatively straightforward.

"We are used to executing the dining experience at Clio and Uni for large groups every day; our dining room is always packed and our goal is to ensure that each guest has the best possible experience," Oringer says.

Both restaurants have several regular tasting menus that can mirror the menu format of a private reception, but Oring-

er can also do what might be termed the 'Trust Me' menu.

"There are the events where we start with our standard menus and then tailor them based on special requests and feedback from the planner. Then there are those where the planner is leaving the choice of menu in the chef's hands. They might provide some preferences, but leave the majority of decisions to the chef."

That leaves Oringer to gauge the group's sentiments and ask about any special dietary requirements, most of which (vegan, vegetarian, gluten-free, dairy-free) can be accommodated. But don't expect some tough-to-understand diva menu; despite his James Beard Award-winning cuisine, Oringer expresses a certain humility, a willingness to have world-class food work in the service of attendees.

"Guests certainly have expectations when dining with us, both in the restaurants or at a private event. Often with events and meetings, the food is secondary to the overall function. We don't want to override the event's content, but rather enhance the overall experience by offering really incredible food that complements the event theme and audience, and guarantees that people enjoy themselves!"

## Chris Kufek

*Executive Chef*

*Saddle Peak Lodge*

Having already catered many weddings in his career, Executive Chef Chris Kufek had aspirations when it came to Saddle Peak Lodge's banquet service,



Cabana

which seemed a bit "one-note."

"The entrees were chicken with mashed potatoes, a fish filet with asparagus and mashed potatoes, and a steak with caramelized onions and mashed potatoes. So we made sure the menu was the same as what we do for a la carte."

And since then?

"I don't think I've worked a party where they didn't say 'this is special; that they never get this type of food at these types of functions. And [with so many] foodies now, that's a top priority."

The Calabasas, Calif., restaurant, where celebrity sightings are frequent and the ghost of Errol Flynn is thought to haunt the grounds, can do a 100-person wedding as easily as a 30-person pharmaceutical dinner. While the restaurant's entire menu isn't typically available to groups, the quality is identical, Kufek says.

"For Valentine's Day, I butchered a hundred lobsters, picked out the meat, cut and deveined it, made some beurre blanc and poached it. It's really hard to overcook or undercook in beurre blanc so you get this perfectly cooked, poached lobster. Then there were oysters

for 240 people, and you shuck them slightly ahead of time," before orders actually come in—but anticipating that they always will during a rush.

Asked whether he proposes menus or starts with requests from the client, Kufek says it's a little of both.

"Brides and grooms have very specific things in mind, but being a chef I get carte blanche, especially in a fine-dining restaurant. ... People say 'I want something special.' They wanted a midnight snack [at a wedding], something bite-sized. So I said, 'How about truffled fried mac-and-cheese balls?' And they said

great, perfect, let's work on that."

And as always in the restaurant business, timing is everything.

"It's funny. If you're doing a wine dinner or someone orders the eight-course tasting menu, we'll slow things down a bit. ... If I send a table more than one course per 15 minutes with the tasting menu, they feel rushed. You read the situation."

Personal attention both before and during an event helps add his signature to the dining experience, Kufek says.

"I try to make sure I drop at least one course of the eight-course tasting menu, and if the server gives me some [customer] feedback I'll stop by, too.

"As far as events, I make sure I meet every bride and groom and I'm the first person to ask the bride if she wants a drink and some cheese, and they always do! I'm always happy to take the time out to meet people." **mi**

**PAUL KRETKOWSKI** is a frequent contributor for Meetings Focus and makes a top-notch charcuterie platter as well.

**"Our dining room is always packed and our goal is to ensure that each guest has the best possible experience."**

—Ken Oringer,  
chef, owner,

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## Group Dining Tips from a Top Chef Favorite

**T**iffany Derry is a two-time *Top Chef* contestant and winner of the show's coveted Fan Favorite award. A native Texan, Derry is executive chef and Partner of Private/Social in Uptown Dallas, which is uniquely divided between the casual 'Social' area and the more-upscale 'Private' section.



**What is it about dining out that makes it such a perfect group experience? And how does Private/Social enhance the group dining experience?**

Dining out is more than just a meal, it should be an experience you share with a group of friends or family, or even a date. At Private Social, we have two separate menus, one for our Private side and one for Social. The Social menu is designed to be plates you can enjoy with your friends over good conversation.

**What prompted the Private/Social concept of delineating between intimate dining experiences and group outings?**

I wanted to create something that was accessible to everyone, no matter the size of your wallet or what type of experience you were craving. We created Private Social to give everyone the option from an intimate multicourse meal to a more-social shared plate environment. I thought about my family and friends and the different ways experiences we always crave when we go out.

**What are some of the hottest dining trends you've seen lately?**

In my recent travels I am noticing more and more that dining is not about what is trendy and hip but more about what people's tastes are. I feel like diners as a whole are looking less for trendy but more for overall taste. There could be establishments out there who have been doing the same dishes for years, but because the food is so great, it is still trendy. Diners are getting smarter about what they are eating, how it is made, and where their food came from.

**What advice would you give to a planner trying to host/organize a large group dining experience?**

Make sure there is something for everyone, unless you know your group incredibly well. Try to stray away from serving more than one protein in various dishes. Also, if you are preparing the food yourself, make it easy for you so you are able to enjoy the experience as well! Finally, light bites and shared plates are best so everyone can try a little bit of everything.

**Are there Do's and Don'ts when it comes to hosting a large group for dinner?**

Don't try and serve something like steak where everyone requires a different preparation method. Do serve plates that people can share and socialize over.

For our full interview with Tiffany Derry, visit [MeetingsFocus.com](http://MeetingsFocus.com)