

INSIDERS DISH ON THE FUTURE OF THE PREMIUM FOOD AND BEVERAGE EXPERIENCE

A research team from the University of Dayton recently conducted interviews with 12 food and beverage professionals from across the North American venue marketplace. In this article, a sampling of their views on current and future trends is detailed.

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As a season comes to an end, a coach will evaluate strategies and players with an eye on the upcoming draft. Making adjustments based on these learnings is critical to the future success of the team. The same can be said for those who plan the premium food and beverage experience. To understand this experience in greater detail, interviews were conducted with 12 food and beverage experts from across North American sporting venues. These industry professionals shared their perspectives on what is trending right now and what can be expected in the future.

What menu items are becoming the new standard on the roster?

Several trends have recently taken hold of the industry. Focus has moved away from national brands in favor of local brands for both food and beverage options. The industry is also seeing more theme-based and all-inclusive packages, as well as professional chefs come into premium spaces.

Food is no longer limited to the mainstream favorites of hot dogs, hamburgers, and chicken tenders. It has grown to include an international flair with service from action stations, such as pasta or fajita carts and nacho and tostado bars. Other interesting menu additions are egg rolls, sushi, mac and cheese, pizza, BBQ pork, fruit salad with feta, and tenderloin sandwiches.

QUICK HITS

Local food and beverage brands are increasingly taking over where national brands once were dominant.

Gluten-free, vegetarian, vegan, and nut-free items are being increasingly requested and in some cases are appearing as regular menu items.

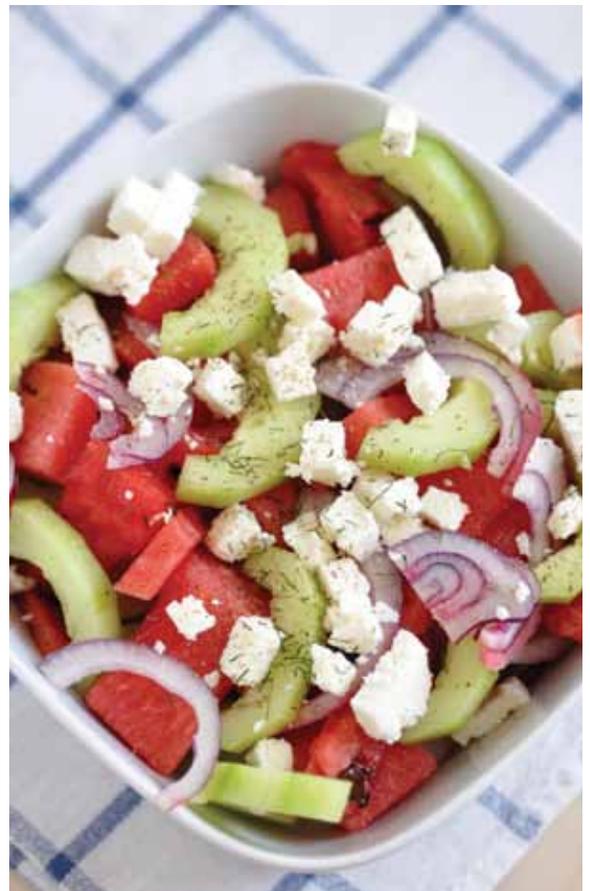
Chefs have gotten involved with social media, writing about their food and posting pictures.

Awareness of health-conscious F&B will continue to grow in the future. Premium seat holders will not have to choose between food that is good and food that is healthy.

What changes have been made to beverage offerings, and how is pricing handled?

Craft beer is hot. Those beers created by local breweries are becoming the local standard. Also, wine tasting and cocktail receptions have become widely accepted. Most venues now have premium seating areas that have their own bars exclusively to serve that area's seat holders. Suites can come stocked, similar to a hotel refrigerator, with beer, wine, and soft drinks, and the client is charged based on consumption. Additionally, in some buildings, clients can reserve a bartender and have him/her in their suite, paying for the service in addition to the individual drinks.

Soft drinks and beer are usually sold by the six pack and wine and spirits by the bottle. There is no return on the leftover product; however, some venues allow partially-consumed bottles of wine to be taken home. Single serving coffee pod ma-





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chines, like the Keurig coffee maker, are seen more frequently in suites lately, providing more options for coffee drinkers.

Are special dietary needs impacting food and beverage service options?

Requests continue to increase for menus that highlight gluten-free, vegetarian, vegan, and nut-free items, and it is a growing trend to offer these items on regular menus. Guests with special dietary needs are grateful to have the opportunity to eat while they enjoy an event. Now clients do not have to worry about packing their own food and can avoid the hassle of bringing food into the building.

Menus are being built to satisfy all consumers, and allergy-related requests are becoming more prevalent. Some venues offer designated gluten-free zones and also have gluten-free carts with beer, hot dogs, and turkey sandwiches. Vegan options, such as a Sloppy Jane, are available with or without bread.

The reality is that any venue that does not cater to guests with special dietary needs is not taking the fan into consideration. Special food orders entail little additional effort if following the standard requirement to make requests three business days prior to the event.

How does packaging work for food items?

Packages are being created that offer different themes and concepts. The typical suite menu also has a la carte items and is designed to accommodate anywhere from 6-20 guests. Packages are popular because they remove the guesswork, especially considering that the person placing the order for the suite is generally not attending the event. Having packages enables a one-stop shopping experience with the confidence that all details have been addressed. It is a considerable timesaver, and clients see it as a great value.

Are complaints about food and beverage pricing common?

Most feel that their food and beverage options are comparable with local restaurants. In general, pricing is strategic, based on market analysis that includes competitors near the venue.

How do corporate sponsorships with the team/venue affect menu options?

Local sponsorship deals could include clauses that impact menu options, especially for companies in food-related businesses. These arrangements offer value that further encourages dealing with local brands. Examples might be a bun provider, chicken tender and wing product, hot dogs, ice cream, or branded liquors. Not only might these sponsors be emphasized on menus and other signage, they could have negotiated exclusivity as well. It is important that food and beverage managers work within the framework of sponsorship arrangements made

by the venue, not just the suites.

Has technology impacted the industry?

Social media and other technology applications offer a huge opportunity in marketing, positioning, and the customer service experience. The channels of communication and feedback continue to shift. What previously was a method to send email reminders to clients to submit food orders has expanded into a vehicle for dynamic, real-time discussion about the quality of the suite experience. Today's experience can be captured in an image and immediately tweeted or sent out to the public via other channels. For venues that are excelling in customer service, the positive accolades are instant image enhancers.

Social media is now used for promoting special deals before or even during the game. In fact, some venues have a suite dedicated to social media. Twitter fans post pictures and tweet about how they are enjoying their food. Rapid, viral transmission of these messages has a huge impact on creating excitement. Even the chefs have gotten involved with social media, writing about their food and posting pictures. It is good exposure for the items and shows what goes on behind the scenes. The instantaneous nature of these communications makes it essential that venues place considerable importance on a quality experience. Unfavorable images and comments spread just as quickly.

What should ALSD members be looking for in the future from food and beverage professionals?

The future holds more innovation and a continued focus on theme-style packages that highlight local brands. There is a great deal of popularity for the all-inclusive ticket because it sells the overall fan experience. Trend experts are traveling around the world, constantly looking at new things to bring to the stadium and arena.

Look for more vendors to create portable carts that will work in a suite. Be ready for a little bit of everything instead of one main entrée. Also, health-conscious food and drinks will remain popular. Clients will not have to choose between food that is good and food that is healthy. Operationally, the industry will add more kitchens on the suite level to speed the food process. There is a need for reductions in transaction time, increases in sales, and decreases in product cost. If these things happen, food and beverage will remain an important revenue producer for the industry. #

Are you a team, venue, or company interested in participating in future research in the areas of premium product ownership, sales, and marketing? Write to Dr. Peter Titlebaum at peter.titlebaum@notes.udayton.edu.

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