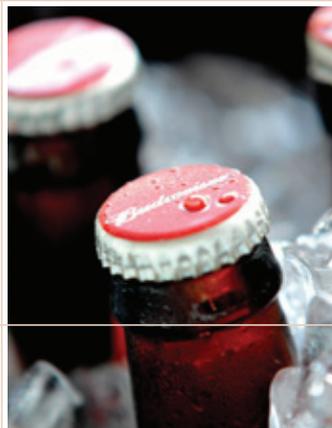


Catering magazine

The leading trade publication for foodservice and event professionals



How much attention do you pay to the wine, beer and spirits your guests will drink at an event? If the answer is “not much,” you could be missing out on a chance to boost your profits—as well as your reputation for merry-making.

“One of the most overlooked opportunities in catering is the beverage component of an event,” says Alyson Anderson, the national accounts manager for hotels for the Republic National Distributing Co. “Not only do the beverages chosen add tremendously to the ambiance and tone of an event, but they help reflect the personalities, interests and tastes of the clients. In today’s social media world, events are often ‘planned’ to the last detail by the client before they even come to meet with you, so an outstanding beverage program gives you a chance to showcase your own expertise.”

Most importantly for a catering professional, adds Anderson, there’s a financial incentive for dressing up your drinks. “A well-executed beverage event boosts profit and sales far more effectively and with less labor and cost than foodservice or most other elements,” she says.

But what if you don’t know your sangiovese from your shiraz, or your michelada from your Moscow mule? In addition to learning the basics of wine pairing and keeping afloat of cocktail trends, you could collaborate with an expert—with both of you benefitting from your partnership.

Thoughtful wine and bar service helps take events from mediocre to *memorable*

BY SARA PEREZ WEBBER

Successful Pairings

That's the strategy Josh Carin, owner of Geppetto Catering in Riverdale, Md., employs with his longtime friend Elliott Staren, owner of Wide World of Wines in Washington, D.C. It all started more than 15 years ago when they both were hired by the Embassy of Australia to put on a wine-tasting event, with Carin overseeing the food and Staren the wine.

"We immediately hit it off," says Carin. "We started to partner on some events where I had a client that was looking for wine-tastings. He would tailor wines to the food, or I would tailor food to the wines. We would end up with these great events where people could come in and try 10 different wines. If someone liked the wine, they could buy it from him at his store locally. It was a win-win."

The two are currently working together on a wedding that will take place in January. Once the client approves the menu, Carin will give it to Staren, who will choose the wines for the event. They bounce ideas off of each other; if it's spring, Staren might suggest a wine that evokes Washington's cherry blossom season, and Carin would adjust the menu to include an ideal food pairing for that wine.

"You don't need to be a wine connoisseur to do this," stresses Carin. "You just need to find the right partner."

Staren suggests asking your alcohol wholesaler for advice, or finding up-and-coming sommeliers to share their expertise. And he warns there are pitfalls to consider when trying to pass yourself off as a wine expert when you're really a wine novice. "You have to go out and find someone unless you're willing to take the time to send someone to learn about wines," he says, "because sometimes you face a crowd with a little bit of knowledge, and they're the scariest crowd."

Since beer isn't in Staren's bailiwick, Carin has turned to a reporter he knows who covers the beer scene for advice. When Geppetto Catering puts on beer tastings—with 10 beers paired with different foods—Carin will give his acquaintance the menu and ask for his pairing ideas. "Whether you're doing beer, wine or spirits, if you don't have the knowledge, go with an expert who does," stresses Carin. "Swallow your pride and partner with someone who's going to be able to help you."

Beverage-Only Catering

Another way to make sure the alcohol aspect of your event doesn't get shortchanged is to work with a bar and beverage catering company. Tammy Johnson, owner of Liquid Catering in Greenville, S.C., helms a business that's growing by leaps and bounds tapping into this niche, which allows a traditional caterer to focus exclusively on the food while Johnson's team focuses exclusively on the drinks.

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—Josh Carin, Geppetto Catering

Johnson was working as the catering sales manager at a regional restaurant chain when she came up with her business plan. Her employer decided it would no longer provide off-site bar services, and asked Johnson whom they could call to do the bar for their events. "I couldn't find anyone to refer them to," she says. "I started doing research and realized that the potential for a bar-only catering company was huge."



Wide World of Wines in Washington, D.C., frequently pairs up on events with Geppetto Catering in Riverdale, Md.

She estimated that half of the catering companies in her area didn't provide bar services, "and those that did weren't necessarily doing it the legal way, and they certainly weren't experts at the bar," she says. "I had over eight years of experience behind a bar, giving me both the beverage knowledge and the love of event planning that I knew could make it work."

Since opening in January 2011, Liquid Catering has surpassed its targets every month, and sales have doubled this year. Johnson has hired another full-time employee, and she plans to boost the number of part-time workers from 30 to 75 this fall. The company caters two to 10 events each week.

Liquid Catering is usually hired directly by the client, says Johnson. "I actually get a lot of phone calls from clients that haven't booked a catering company, so I refer them to my partner caterers," she says. "We have so many caterers that can't afford the \$3,000 insurance policy [for serving alcohol], so it works out quite well." (Johnson stresses that any business involved in alcohol service needs to understand and adhere to the liquor licensing laws in their area, as they vary by state.)

"When we are at an event with a caterer, we are a team," says Johnson, adding that Liquid Catering's employees will help the food caterer perform such duties as busing tables and unloading vans.

Johnson has found that flat-rate liquor packages work better than per-drink pricing. "The profit margin is a lot higher, and it's so much easier in the long run," she says. "We know what to expect and what to bring, and it's easier on the customer—all they have to do is tell us where to set up." Liquid Catering's two-hour full-service packages range from \$5 per person for a "mocktail" bar to \$13 per person for a top-shelf bar, with many add-ons available.

"We ask what the client wants and what their budget is, and work from there," says Johnson. "I love it because I don't have to count drinks or worry if the client can't afford to pay for the final (and sometimes surprise) bill."

Selling Strategies

Republic National Distributing's Anderson agrees that it's important to consider how you're presenting alcohol costs to your clients. "One of the things that we in the beverage business continually point out is that beverage in catering tends to be sold in intimidating amounts," she says. "Educating your clients to consider a by-the-glass or per-person rather than a bottle cost can help soften the beverage blow and get your clients to consider more premium items."

One way to accomplish this, says Anderson, is to build the event around the beverages—not the other way around. Suggest a Scotch dinner or a food-and-wine pairing dinner, she advises, and then integrate the cost of the beverages into the menu cost. "For example, a \$42 steak dinner could become a \$50 'Steak

What's Hot at the Bar?

We asked the experts which wines, beers and cocktails are selling best. Here's what they answered.

ALYSON ANDERSON, REPUBLIC NATIONAL DISTRIBUTING COMPANY:

Punches using fresh juices, classic or retro cocktails, and "skinny" drinks are all hugely popular and becoming easier than ever to replicate.

In beer, craft brands get bigger every year, and even major producers are cultivating the addition of more specialized flavor profiles and smaller batch styles in their offerings.

Lesser-known white wine varieties are emerging as the new food-friendly choice. Varietals like Argentinean torrontés, New Zealand sauvignon blanc, moscato and prosecco give the white wine drinker a wealth of new choices.... In all wine types there is an increasing trend toward organic and sustainable certification.

ELLIOTT STAREN, WIDE WORLD OF WINES:

Regarding reds, people are backing away from shiraz. They're willing to try other wines, such as less expensive reds from southern France. We're seeing a tremendous resurgence in pinot noir, and people are going to Argentina for malbec and to Spain for tempranillo.

TAMMY JOHNSON, LIQUID CATERING:

Yuengling is our most popular beer, along with anything that has Firefly in it. Moscato is our hottest wine right now.

PHOTO BY TAMMY JOHNSON



and Cabernet Experience,' or a dessert buffet could include a glass of prosecco for a charge per person included in the total cost," she says.

The key is to include wine and bar suggestions at the beginning of the event planning—not treat them as incidental to the food and tack them on at the end. "As soon as you are presenting menu items, the beverages should be an integral part of the menu choices," advises Anderson. "Creatively packaging or theming your program by having printed materials that show beverage alongside food items can help, as can mentioning specific pairings while you are discussing food. Since a client is much less likely to add items at the end of making their food choices, incorporating the beverages into the presentation makes the wine, cocktails and beer seem as necessary as the food, rather than an unnecessary afterthought."

The Lodge at Sonoma Renaissance Resort & Spa, in Sonoma, Calif., employs this strategy successfully at its taste panels for brides and social event meeting planners, according to Justin Hart, director of operations. The taste panels include wine pairing, so the clients are choosing their food and wine at the same time. "This is a huge win and allows the sommelier to upsell wines at the table according to the guest's taste," he says.

Signature drinks remain a tried-and-true method for upselling, say the experts—and the more creative you can be, the better. "Signature drinks show that you have attended to every little detail in getting to know what makes your clients tick," says Anderson. It's best to involve your client as much as possible in the creation of the signature drink so they feel "ownership and engagement," she adds.

At Liquid Catering, Johnson presents the bride and groom with a cocktail worksheet that lists 10 base liquors and 40 flavors, such as strawberry and key lime. "They each rank from one to five how much they like something," she says. Johnson takes the winners from both lists and combines them to come up with a unique drink.

If you don't want to take on the task of creating a cocktail, invite in an expert when you're meeting with your client, says Anderson. "This is a great place to call in your distributor and/or supplier partners," she says. "Most distributors have mixologists on staff or readily available, and suppliers always have great ideas on how best to feature their products."

Creative Concoctions

Signature drinks are a chance to show off your creativity. For an event for Southwest Airlines, Liquid Catering created the "757"—a layered martini with Seagram's 7, a splash of sweet vermouth and a splash of bitters shaken

and strained over grenadine in the bottom of a martini glass, topped with Italian blood-orange soda. The red and orange incorporated Southwest's colors, and the area surrounding the bar was decorated with suitcases.

For an upcoming event celebrating the opening of a medical center, Johnson is planning an "IV bar." The plan is for guests to make their own martinis, with the martini mixes filling IV bags. Liquid Catering's staff will dress up in hospital garb to further enhance the theme.

"The more unique the drink is, the more attention it's going to get," says Johnson. "We have a local moonshine distillery here that I love working with, because moonshine always gets a buzz. When we craft our signature drinks, we try to go for the 'wow' factor, but we also have to please a variety of palates and make sure the drink is efficient enough to distribute to 300 people quickly. I made a Lemon-Ginger Cotton Candy Martini for a carnival-themed event last year. In our tasting my team loved it, but the clients didn't. It was an older crowd that wasn't into the flavors of such a complex martini."

Whatever signature drink you come up with, make sure it's presented and served well. Liquid Catering will create a display in a picture frame for the signature drink, letting their guests know it's something special and what the ingredients are.

Serving With Style

"The way we serve drinks can be every bit as important as what the drinks are," says Anderson. "Think of the last event where you were a guest and how drinks were served. The odds are good that you either had to go to the bar to get your drinks, or if it was wine at a banquet, bottles were carried around and glasses were poured depending on your preference of red or white with no descriptions or fanfare. Typically this results in minimal sales and very little interest in the products being served.

"Now picture an event where cocktails are sampled on trays like hors d'oeuvres, and the staff directs you to a customized bar for full sizes or additional choices," she continues. "Or when you approach the bar, there are printed, customized drink menus describing the beverage choices. Recipes can be handed out on printed cards and be a nice reminder of the event every time someone makes the drink at home. When it comes to wine, cocktails or beer, the more visible printed material and 'stories' you can incorporate into the event, the better."

"It's all about adding something unique," sums up Carin. If you're doing a wine-tasting at an event, for example, you'll engage the guests and give them something to talk about. And that's something they'll remember.

"We all go to parties," he says. "You walk in, go to the bar, network, walk around and leave. But if you're able to leave an event and say, 'I learned something,' or 'Did you try that red?'... That event lives on." ●