



We Can Add You to

HOW TO CREATE SELL OUT DINING EVENTS AND FILL THE ROOM ON SLOW NIGHTS

BY
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There is no clearer correlation than a long line and a good restaurant. Your club's food and beverage program is no different. Dining is no longer just a vehicle for friends and family to spend time together. It's entertainment. It's creative. And, if done properly, it can be the talk of the town (or club).

While many clubs consider their food and beverage program as an amenity rather than a profit center due to the challenge of going beyond breaking even, that doesn't mean opportunities don't exist to boost club operations. Creating popular dining events that have the potential to warrant a waitlist generates buzz, leads to greater member engagement, and contributes to the perception that the club grillroom or dining room is on par with, or exceeds, options in the community.

This article will examine some of the successful tactics being used at clubs across the country to draw a crowd to dining room, starting with a California club that has done it particularly well.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The San Luis Obispo Country Club has a very creative food and beverage program and executes sell-out dining events on a regular basis.

The club's general manager, Michael Stanton, is a 2013 recipient of the Excellence in Club Management Awards program, which was established in 1997 by the McMahon Group and co-sponsored since 2005 by Club and Resort Business. Stanton received the Mead Grady Award for a club with fewer than 600 full-privilege members.

The club offers several successful dining programs, some of which highlight the club's location in wine country. One Thursday a month, the club offers a BYOB wine dinner that always sells out at 110 people. A wine varietal is selected, be it a pinot noir or syrah, and then the chef builds a perfectly paired three course menu. They try to choose ingredients that club members wouldn't normally cook at home like a laborious beef Wellington, or exotic wild boar tenderloin. Even though there are high food costs associated with

such a meal, the BYOB wine dinner experience is offered at a drool-worthy, reasonable rate of \$29.95 per person.

Members are seated at large tables for 8-14 people and typically sample each other's bottles of wine, creating a jovial environment that is low key, casual and enjoyable. "It engages a wide set of our members," said Stanton. He noted that a group of 60-year-olds come regularly as well as members in their 80s and 40s. "This is no formal wine dinner, you won't find tasting notes about leather and tobacco.

"The BYOB wine dinners create a buzz and encourages members to come back to the club at other times because the wine dinner was so enjoyable," said Stanton. "Events like these really build momentum."

Stanton believes that Americans in general are enjoying wine more now, making it possible for this program to be successful at clubs that don't call wine country home. In fact, Stanton says he has shared the idea with others and several clubs have implemented the program quarterly.

the Waitlist



Another oenophilia offering at the club are the private wine lockers available to club members. Members pay up front for the year to obtain a locker that can store 18 bottles of wine at the correct temperature. Each time the club member dines at the club, he or she is presented with a personal wine list. Stanton says this impresses guests of members time after time, and is yet another reason to choose the club dining room over other, less personal options in town. It helps with a cash flow boost in January to boot!

In addition to the craving for casual dining, and entertaining dining experiences, the San Luis Obispo Country Club has their finger on the pulse of another club trend—family-focused programming and events. The club's Burger and Bingo Nights often bring together multiple generations of family members. "A member in his 60s will bring his mother, his kids and his grandkids." It's offered one Sunday a month and always sells out at 120 people plus a waitlist.

There's a special Kobe beef burger menu for the adults and a dinner buffet with pizza, chicken and veggies for the children. Bingo winners can come away with everything from iTunes gift cards for the kids or bottles of wine for the adults.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLUBS WHO HAVE GONE CASUAL

Some private clubs have transitioned to a more casual dining program and some clubs have completely taken fine dining out of the picture. In the latter type of

club, there is an opportunity to breathe new life into the club's dining room by shifting into reverse to offer fine dining opportunities for special occasions.

The San Luis Obispo Country Club is one club that has gone 100 percent casual with the exception of a Christmas dinner and New Year's Eve party. These events always sell out, as it is an opportunity to get all dolled up and take pictures with friends, enjoy an elegant atmosphere, and of course, see what the chef can do.

Other clubs take the approach of offering a fine-dining experience once a month in the form of a four-course dinner or dégustation tasting menu.

On the other end of the spectrum are clubs whose culture dictates a formal dining program. They could implement exactly the opposite by offering a casual Friday burger and beer dinner as a break from the norm.

FINAL FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The exciting aspect of food and dining is that there are limitless ways to get creative and engage members. The following are some additional ideas for clubs to think about implementing in order to create more "wait list worthy" dining events:

- A chef's table program featuring a tasting menu with wine pairings
- Outdoor cigar dinners
- A night that members can enter the kitchen to cook a meal side-by-side with the chef and then enjoy together

- Theme dinners ranging from "kids eat free" to lobster night
- Packaged dinners for two such as "Three courses and a bottle of wine for \$60"
- Meet the winemaker dinners
- Family-focused make your own pizza night
- Timely, pop-culture-based events like an Oscars dinner with specialty cocktails named for nominated movies, an Olympics-themed dinner celebrating the host country or a Super Bowl bash that rivals any bar in town

Club leaders that run dry on ideas can always turn to members for ideas by putting a call to action in the club newsletter. Then, there are bars and restaurants in the community to look to for inspiration—it was a nearby restaurant that inspired the San Luis Obispo Country Club to offer the wine lockers that have become so popular.

Private clubs have a real opportunity to capitalize on the food movement sweeping across America. Freshening up club dining with some of the ideas included in this article means members will be talking for days and bringing guests (aka potential members) into the clubhouse to show off the innovative dining offerings. ■

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