



[Small Marketing Meetings](#)

Friday, September 1, 2017

SPECTRA CREATES EXPERT EATS

Bob St. Lawrence, is Eastern regional chef for Spectra by Comcast Spectacor. Although he's based at the Ocean Center, where he is the executive chef for Spectra Food Services and Hospitality in Daytona Beach, Florida, St. Lawrence's impact goes far beyond, as he oversees chefs at some 50 Spectra-managed venues on the Eastern Seaboard.

We talked with him about food-related issues that interest meeting planners: the use of local, fresh ingredients; ways to efficiently feed the masses; and how to ramp up food-and-beverage staffs.

Laden With Local Eats

With eating local all the buzz, Spectra-managed event venues have become adept at sourcing foods produced in their areas. An emphasis on local dovetails nicely with a pledge Spectra made a number of years ago, said St. Lawrence: to choose fresh over frozen whenever feasible.

Spectra gets a lot of requests from meeting planners who want to use local products in their menus, but it also suggests local touches when planners might not be thinking about them. Chefs remind that local foods take many forms: bread and beer, chicken and cheese, beef and beans, watermelon and wine.

When planners think local, they often think of family farmers forking over their corn crops or baskets of peaches. But as St. Lawrence pointed out, quantities required, seasonality and budgets can make it difficult to work with small operations. "The farm-to-table concept is not always feasible," he said.

Spectra has found other ways to bring local into the banquet. For example, some of its facilities in the Southeast offer North Carolina-based Brookwood Barbecue. Although the barbecue company began as a small operation, it now has the capacity to meet demands of larger meetings and conventions.

Spectra has also sourced cheeses made in North Carolina and South Carolina and fresh fish from Florida: red snapper, pompano and yellow tail for starters.

The explosion of wineries and breweries has made it easy to incorporate local wines and beers at events at most any Spectra-managed facility. St. Lawrence noted that those beverages can be used beyond the bar.

"A lot of the chefs like to tap into local beers and use them in recipes for sauces and demiglazes, or even in barbecues sauces," he said.

One example of an inventive way to use local products to create a new one is at the Lawrence Joel Veterans Coliseum in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where Spectra manages concessions. The arena is home to the Wake Forest Demon Deacons. Spectra decided the team's fans needed a signature dish around which to rally. Staff created a chili recipe that incorporates two local products: Texas Pete, a

well-known hot sauce made in Winston-Salem, and Cheerwine, a popular regional soft drink. The result is Deacon Chili.

“We took two products in the region and incorporated them into a dish to get the school some notoriety,” said St. Lawrence.

Ingenuity and a Portable Kitchen

In August, the Ocean Center wrapped up one of its large summer conferences: a church youth group that required 26,000 meals a day. It was the fifth time the group had used the center, and each time, St. Lawrence and his staff have come up with ways to better serve the crowd.

Among the innovations is a portable kitchen built on the loading dock, which allowed the center to ramp up food preparation. Different dishes were divided between the main and temporary kitchen based on what was needed to prepare them. For example, anything that was grilled was cooked outside in the portable kitchen.

The food was delivered to hot boxes hidden behind pipe and drape on the arena floor so it could quickly be delivered to the six double buffet lines.

During meals, Spectra’s Chef Out Front Program came into play. St. Lawrence and John Schmitz, executive chef at the Ocean Center, were among Spectra staff on the arena floor “paying attention to detail, keeping the lines organized and making sure we were quick in expediting the food, really owning the event,” said St. Lawrence.

“When you see a chef in a white jacket, it gives the guests a comfort level. They know we are taking pride and standing behind the product we are serving,” said St. Lawrence. “We can talk to the guests and show that this is our experience too.”

Staffing Up in a Hurry

Having an event at a Spectra-managed venue offers a benefit that is largely invisible to meeting planners yet has a big impact. Unlike a convention center run by a city or county government, Spectra facilities are connected and share ideas and staff across facilities.

For example, another Spectra-managed venue will soon use a version of St. Lawrence’s temporary loading dock kitchen to feed a large group it will host.

And St. Lawrence talks each week with chefs and food-and-beverage directors at various Spectra facilities in the Southeast about the challenges or victories they have experienced. Ideas are shared through a Chefs Council. The network “is one of our greatest assets,” said St. Lawrence.

Networking makes it easier to staff up when a convention center has a larger-than-usual event. St. Lawrence keeps track of which facilities might need extra help and which have staff that could help. For example, St. Lawrence has brought in chefs to the Ocean Center from Spectra-managed venues in nearby Orlando, Florida.

“We have people we can kind of put our hands on and send wherever we need them,” said St. Lawrence. “We never struggle staffwise on an event, because we have the resources.”