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SPECIAL SECTION: 2008 ELITE MEETING & EVENT PLANNING GUIDE

Special Menu Planning & Accommodating Dietary Requirements Will Make Your Event a Success

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An important factor in adeptly navigating dietary issues is selecting the appropriate venue for hosting your event. CHAKRA is proud of its cuisine, which can be customized for specific groups and events.

WHEN PLANNING AN EVENT FOR ANY NUMBER of people, it is important to consider each guest's individual needs. This will help contribute to a successful event in which each guest feels valued and important. Carrying off a gathering that takes into account each individual and is flexible enough to adapt to changes in what is considered to be standard fare, suggests to your guests a level of awareness, professionalism and forethought.

With the ever-growing prevalence, awareness and acceptance of individual dietary needs—whether they be ethnic, religious, health-related or moral choices—the ability to recognize, respect and adapt to unique, meal-related needs is an inevitability that any individual planning an event must take into account.

To effectively clear the hurdle of your guests' dietary requirements, you must understand their specific needs, find ways to accommodate them, and ultimately, execute the response smoothly. However, one must keep in mind that as the extent to which you make accommodations for special needs increases, so too does the level of complexity for coordinating meals and, potentially, the cost as well. Therefore, for each situation, the right balance must be found between the ability to accommodate "real needs" (dietary and religious) versus the general desires of guests, with full consideration of budget, time and scope of the event.

Determining the Level of Need

Determining the dietary needs your guests have is the first step in creating a plan for ensuring all guests will have an enjoyable meal, and not feel out of place or that they are imposing on your hospitality. The sooner the specific requirements are identified, the more time you and the venue you select will have to arrange a menu that will address all of your guests' needs.

Whenever possible, include a specific question on your event registration form or RSVP request that asks the recipients to specify any dietary considerations, such

as vegetarian, diabetic, gluten or lactose intolerant, kosher meals only, or other factors such as food allergies. If you are inviting guests in a less official manner, be sure to speak to your invitees and conduct an informal poll.

The more information your event hosts have, the better prepared they will be to seamlessly accommodate special needs. Knowing in advance how substantial and diverse the arrays of dietary requests are, along with the quantity of special preparations needed could significantly affect how the venue you choose will approach a solution. Knowing you will only need to arrange for two vegetarian meals rather than 20 kosher meals paints a much different picture of the planning needed.

Expect to find that as the complexity and variety of dishes increase, so too will the related costs to prepare the individual meals. For example, providing a vegetarian option for a meal is easy whether for 1 percent or 10 percent of the guests because it is only one additional option that can be repeated for each guest. Providing a vegetarian meal for one guest, a gluten-free meal for another guest and a low-carbohydrate meal for a third guest in addition to a regular menu for another 20 guests could be more difficult and expensive, as it requires three additional options. When a third-party must be brought in, for ensuring that meals are Kosher, for example, even greater room in the food budget should be made available. Knowing guests' specific needs well in advance of the event will make it easier to plan your expenses so that you are better able to stay within your overall event budget.

Selecting the Appropriate Venue

An important factor in adeptly navigating dietary issues is selecting the appropriate venue for hosting your event. Look for a facility that is knowledgeable and understanding of special requirements. Finding a venue that has had experience hosting events that required a mix of dietary needs is vital for accomplishing your goal of pleasing your guests and alienating no one. Ask facil-

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ities' event planners how they have dealt with such issues in the past and what they can do for your guests. If the venue you select is sensitive to dietary issues, they will be open to providing options and suggestions for making all your guests feel welcome.

The event planner should consult with the executive chef about menu options and work with you on preparing a set of choices that best suits your needs and budget. If an outside party must be brought in, you should speak with the venue's event planner to ensure that the expectations and duties of each group are understood and agreed upon in advance to avoid any last-minute confusion.

Making Your Efforts Pay Off

If your guests have noted special requirements that you are able to accommodate, be sure to tell them in advance. This will help them know what to expect, and make them feel more comfortable attending the event; it will hopefully also result in their appreciation of your consideration and efforts. If you need help determining or confirming what dishes they could eat, don't shy away from asking them. Trying to better understand their dietary requirements does not suggest your ignorance, it simply shows that you value their needs and are making efforts to address them.

When possible, work with the event facility's staff to have a system for determining which guests receive the specially prepared meals. You can help to avoid confusion or potential awkwardness by discussing the meal service on the day of the event, to review who should be receiving specific meals by identifying individuals by looks, name tags, seating arrangements, or something else. If a specially prepared meal is given to the wrong person or worse yet, an inappropriate dish is served to the individual with a dietary restriction, it detracts from the efforts you have made to accommodate these needs.

In the ideal scenario, each guest, regardless of their meal, will be served at the same time, allowing those with dietary needs to avoid feeling singled out or unusual. When guests leave knowing their personal needs were catered to and were tactfully accommodated, they will leave feeling pleased and satisfied with a positive impression of your event and its host. ■

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