



Buffet Stations Move from Utilitarian to Entertaining

Goodbye cumbersome, labor-intensive table-and-linen set-ups for buffet stations. Hello buffet stations that are durable, easy for staff to use, and sleekly designed to provide guests an upscale, unforgettable dining experience.

Ask any food & beverage service manager, “What is the bane of your professional existence?” The answer you’re sure to hear will be, “Setting up and tearing down buffet dining set-ups.”

Unwieldy eight-foot tables have to be set up, then dressed with linens. Next, serving ware, usually in the form of chafing dishes loaded with fuel, are hauled out of storage and strategically plunked on the tables. Placement of heavy dinnerware and silverware is next. Finally, centerpieces, or other decorations are placed to give a complete look.

That’s not so bad, is it? After all, this is the way it’s always been done, and managers certainly have it down to a science. It serves its purpose — guests get served, even if it’s in a rather utilitarian manner.

No, it’s really not so bad. *Except* for the risk of fire created by using chafing fuel. *Except* when an eight-foot table is too long and additional centerpieces have to be conspicuously filled in. *Except* when clean linens are running low. *Except* when it all has to be quickly torn down and reset in another space for another event.

Perhaps food service managers are justified in choosing old-style buffet dining set-ups. Never mind that the buffet set-up process is clearly labor intensive, both in terms of heavy-lifting and time.

And, of course, time is money.

Yes, the old style is functional, but it doesn’t provide an inviting, or engaging dining experience to savvy guests who expect more from the event.

Building a Better Buffet Station

The good news? There is a better option. Some companies manufacture self-contained buffet stations in an array of styles and applications that greatly improve the ability to set up, serve and tear down buffets. These include, but are not limited to, bar stations, food and beverage display stations, side stations, carving stations, multipurpose stations, sushi stations, griddle stations, warming, and cooking stations with energy efficient induction technology.

Buffet stations have a number of advantages. A notable one is that they are mobile. They roll on heavy-duty casters, ready to bring the action of the kitchen and a professional culinary experience to guests wherever, and whenever needed.

“With the casters’ easy mobility, we move the buffets wherever an event is taking place,” said Nouredine Chirchi, director of Event Operations at JW Marriott Hotel in Washington. The JW Washington uses a number of SICO mobile buffet stations. They have six SICO DECO bar stations, and six DECO multipurpose buffets. “We take them everywhere,” Chirchi said.

“When not in use, which isn’t often, we simply roll them into a storage spot,” he continued.

Another benefit is that buffet stations can be multifunctional, depending on the needs of an event.

For example, Tim Spears, Banquet Manager at Trinity F&B Services in Fort Worth, (which does between \$6 and \$10 million per year in food and beverage service), doubles their ice bar as an ice cream station.

“I have an annual group that takes an ice cream break every afternoon for three days in a row,” he explained. “I drop ice cream buckets in the ice wells, and the versatility works beautifully.”

Spears also uses SICO DECO cooking stations as omelet stations.

“Our cooking stations are equipped with LED lighting,” he described, “which gives a colorful and dramatic look to everything. We have an area in the lobby that is decorated with a sculpture of a star made of cowboy hats. When we set up omelet stations there, people are really wowed by the overall presentation. We’re known as the breakfast stop, and everyone comes here.”

A third benefit is that buffet stations can be customizable to match each facility’s interior decor. For example, one manufacturer allows you to pick and choose individual tiles and inserts to create a custom look. Another offers products in 18-gauge stainless steel and standard black laminate with the option of a brushed stainless steel exterior finish, or hundreds of laminate finishes.

SICO offers its DECO buffet station line with three customizable options: wood veneer, laminate, or acrylic with LED lighting. It also offers the Ovation line of oval shaped stations.

This manufacturer’s approach is to provide a variety of options to “personalize” the buffet stations so that they complement the unique personality of a property.

Another important factor is that because buffet stations are mobile and intended for continual use, they must be durably constructed.

“They are heavy duty and very well built,” said Chirchi of his stations. He also noted that, if his facility were to undergo a renovation, the acrylic panels on his stations can be updated to match the new interior look. A simple facelift ensures that his initial investment has a long life span, and that its appearance is less likely to become obsolete.

While Chirchi appreciated the long-term investment pay off, Spears appreciated the time and financial savings.

“It’s one piece, so I just roll it out,” Spears said. “Plus, there’s not a lot of decorating needed to make it look good. There’s space for the chef to cook, so I just plug it in and go. At the end of an event, I don’t have to break down a lot of items. And there isn’t a mound of linens to wash, which is eco-friendly.”

Spears also observed that the buffet stations have increased his staff’s productivity.

“They simplify our work by eliminating having to calculate how many tables are needed and how a presentation will look. I’m not using labor to build back drops.”

Spears indicated that, in many cases, staff is even able to stage the buffets days ahead of an event. For example, the bars can be stocked with drinks, mixers, glasses, napkins and towels, then rolled into place the day of the event.

“In this building, timing and putting things on wheels is invaluable,” he added.

With eight bars, three ice stations, three cooking stations, three warming stations, three carving stations, and eight end stations, Spears is able to serve 1,500 to 2,000 people per event while optimizing staff productivity.

The improved productivity works in reverse, as well. For some groups, there may be an 8 a.m. breakfast meeting, followed by an 11 a.m. meeting in the same room. When this happens, the breakfast buffet stations are simply rolled away and the room is refreshed for the next meeting.

“The stations make it so easy to do this quick turnaround,” Spears said.

Creating a Memorable Guest Dining Experience ... The WOW Factor

All the above-noted advantages are, indeed, worthy when it comes to making an initial investment decision. They are also somewhat — ahem — utilitarian. Here’s the part where the advantages move beyond functional to creating a memorable guest experience.

First, when guests attend an event, they are pleased to see an upscale product rather than the standard eight-foot table covered with linens. Add to that a chef, who engages and interacts with the guests and, all of a sudden, the guests become active participants in the festivities.

Second, the stations become destinations.

“Our SICO buffet stations glow with LED lights that can be adjusted to match an event’s color theme. Our event hosts like that. They can tell their guests to look for the vibrantly lit stations for food and drink, and guests like destinations,” said Spears.

“Moving from the old-style buffet set-up to this system is the difference between night and day,” agreed Chirchi, who also has LED-lit buffet stations.

“Our repeat customers notice them immediately. And even our associates are impressed. They say, ‘Wow, our employer is giving us this classy tool to serve guests. No one else in town has it.’”

“The option of the LED lighting is a tremendous asset,” Chirchi continued. “It elevates the guests’ point of view in terms of service, raising us to a much higher level of amenity and presentation. We always coordinate the light colors to the type of event and scene we set.”

Spears pointed out how pleased guests are when they discover the stations lend themselves to their themes. “If their colors are red and blue,” he said, “I’ll roll out a red bar with a blue end piece on each side. They love that. I recently did an event that was orange and yellow, so I adjusted the colors to cycle between orange and yellow, and our guests really enjoyed that.”

Chirchi agreed, noting that, “It’s not unusual for customers to spend \$50,000 to \$60,000 on decorations alone.” So when we contribute to their theme with something as simple as colored lights, they are always unbelievably surprised, happy and appreciative.”

Clearly, buffet set-ups do not have to be the bane of a food service manager’s existence. Thanks to modern buffet stations that are innovative, versatile, mobile and durable, properties can save time, money and increase staff productivity.

Upscale buffet stations also greatly elevate guests’ dining and entertainment experiences, making them a winning option for facilities of all sizes.

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