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Food and Function

Liz Sharples

Learning objectives

- Explore the role and significance of the food and drink offer at a range of events.
- Discuss how the food service element can support and echo the strategic objectives of the event.
- Provide examples of how the menu experience can be used to enhance the overall event experience.

Introduction

It has long been acknowledged that food and drink plays a vital part in the success of nearly every event, whatever its scale, purpose or significance. An investigation into historical accounts of feasts and festivals held throughout the ages, and in communities around world, emphasizes the importance of food as a central part of religious, political, social and cultural ceremony and celebration. (Tannahill, 1988; Kiple and Kriemhild, 2000; Anderson, 2005; Civitello, 2011; amongst others)

For example, early historical accounts of Eleanor de Montfort, Countess of Leicester, reveal the role of the communal meal in political communication in aristocratic households in thirteenth century England (Kjaer, 2011). Eleanor gained a reputation for excellent hospitality wherever she travelled with one account reporting that:

During the evening here Eleanor richly entertained the citizens of Winchelsea, with a meal including 2 oxen, 8 sheep and a vast quantity of geese, capons and other fowl; plates were also purchased. The 20s.4d. disbursed on bread would have bought enough loaves for 356 diners. (Kjaer, 2011).

Food at this event clearly played a key role in providing nourishment and sustenance for Eleanor's retinue and the invited townsfolk. However,

perhaps more importantly, the lavish nature of the meal successfully reinforced the host's position and influence within court and wider society. In modern society we witness a similar scenario when a president or member of a royal family entertains visiting dignitaries to their home country with an extravagant banquet which sends clear messages associated with power, position and status.

Food continues to play a key role in the twenty-first century event experience. The budgets, production methods, types of menu, service methods and consumer expectations have changed over the centuries, and there are a myriad of food experiences offered at events around the globe, but many of the core values associated with the giving and receiving of hospitality remain the same. Regardless of the size, purpose or nature of the event, participants have an expectation that they will receive some level of hospitality at nearly every event they attend. Imagine the reaction of guests attending a family wedding where no wedding cake or champagne is served, that spectators would feel when arriving at an open air music festival with no food concession stands available or of delegates travelling to a business meeting to find that there are no refreshments provided.

Quite simply, food is a crucial element of nearly every event and it could be argued that it has the potential to make or break an event experience. Participants rarely comment on food served at an event when it is competent but are quick to criticise if the food is poor. It is essential that the operational aspects of the food and beverage delivery are given full consideration (health and safety, food production/service method, timing of meals and so on) but how do we ensure that the food on offer is also in line with the strategic objectives of the event and will complement and enhance the entire event experience?

Note: (for 'food' read 'food and drink' throughout the chapter)

The academic study of food and events

If we consider the academic progression of an events management student it could be argued that it is not essential for a graduate to have an *in-depth* understanding of the food and hospitality aspect in order to produce a highly successful event. This argument appears to be supported by the academic community as, despite the central role that food plays in many events, the majority of degree level *events* courses in the UK, and indeed in other universities around the world, make little reference to this area of study in their curriculum.

An examination of current event management literature also reveals little about the importance or relevance of food to events, with few food

related articles being published in the key events management journals over the last five years. Discussion in the majority of events text books is also limited. For those who wish to find out more about the strategic relevance and importance of food and hospitality to the event experience, it is important to widen the literature search. The following section provides a few signposts for the reader.

As a starting point it is important to recognise that the study of food is complex and attracts scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds. Academic literature is plentiful, with books/journals providing an insight into many fascinating areas of study. Food can be viewed through a variety of lenses including sensory and organoleptic qualities (see *The Journal of Sensory Studies*); social, anthropological and cultural dimensions (see *Food, Culture and Society: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*); food and the environment (see *The Journal of Agricultural Sustainability*) and consumer and nutritional issues (see *The British Food Journal*). There are many others.

The study of hospitality has also become well established as an academic subject over the last forty years, in a number of countries, and this literature provides interesting reading for the events student and professional, in relation to the innovative production/service of food and wine at events and the field of gastronomy. As we will read later in the chapter, in order for an events professional to have an informed conversation with a caterer or hospitality provider, when designing the food element of an event, it is vital to have some appreciation of up to date trends in this area. (See *The International Journal of Hospitality Management*, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *Gastronomica* amongst others).

The area of literature concerned with experience and emotion, as related to events management, is discussed comprehensively in other chapters (see Chapters 4, 7 and 8) but how this body of knowledge then resonates with the eating/dining provision is important. The linkages that exist between food/hospitality provision and the notion of experience and emotion are well understood in both the academic and business community. The simple act of eating is one that arouses the human senses through taste, texture, sight and smell and chefs and restaurateurs through the ages have become masters of presenting food in a way that excites these senses and creates memories. The phrase 'menu experience', in the hospitality context, has been discussed by a wealth of authors including Wigger (1997) and Stierand and Wood (2012). There is also a mature understanding of how the design/ambience of a restaurant/eating space (colour schemes, lighting, furniture, table settings and so on) and the style of food service can influence the overall dining experience (see Carvalho de Rezende and Silva, 2014; Chua, et al., 2014). The fascinating relationship between food service and theatre is another rich seam of literature for students to explore (Gardner and Wood, 1991) and see section later in the chapter on food for novelty.

Food and event strategy

Chapter 1 clearly discusses the five guiding principles which should underpin the thinking which takes place by the event host, the event creator and the stakeholders when co-creating an event. It is therefore important that the food component of any event should not be seen as an afterthought (which too often happens) but instead forms a key part of the master-plan and eventscape (Chapter 8). This must be relevant, and of the right quality, to echo the strategic event objectives.

It is imperative to consider the needs of the various partners and stakeholders to ensure that the food on offer, at the event, is in line with their own personal or organisational objectives. Consider, for example, the challenge if you were tasked with planning an evening party on behalf of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (one of the UK Government departments) at the Heal's shop in London, which is well known as a hub for cutting edge design, (see <http://www.heals.co.uk>), with an objective to bring together and celebrate British design and trade. The event host then informs you that the headline sponsor of this event will be the Dyson company, another global company well known for its invention and cutting edge technology, (see <http://www.dyson.co.uk>), and the owner, James Dyson, will be the keynote speaker. This scenario presents many challenges with regards to the food package for this event, most importantly the need to serve dishes which are stylish and innovative to reflect the mission of celebrating good design, but as this event is concerned with promoting Britishness the food must also reflect this aim, perhaps by using local food suppliers from the London hinterland.

To further understand how food can be used as part of a strategic plan it is useful to consider the different *roles* that food can play at an event. The following categories are not exhaustive but provide some useful thinking about food, and its function, at events. It is important to acknowledge that the food offer at many events fulfills more than one strategic role; for example it may have a primary function as *fuel* but also be *sustainably sourced*.

■ Food for fuel and health

Our bodies work at their best if they are provided with the right amount of calories and the right balance of nutrients on a daily basis. An understanding of what constitutes a healthy diet is well established, although increasing numbers of the population, in developed countries such as the UK and developing countries such as India, choose to ignore this information and the rise of obesity and other weight related diseases such as coronary heart disease and diabetes is of concern to the World Health Organisation (World Health Organisation, 2014).