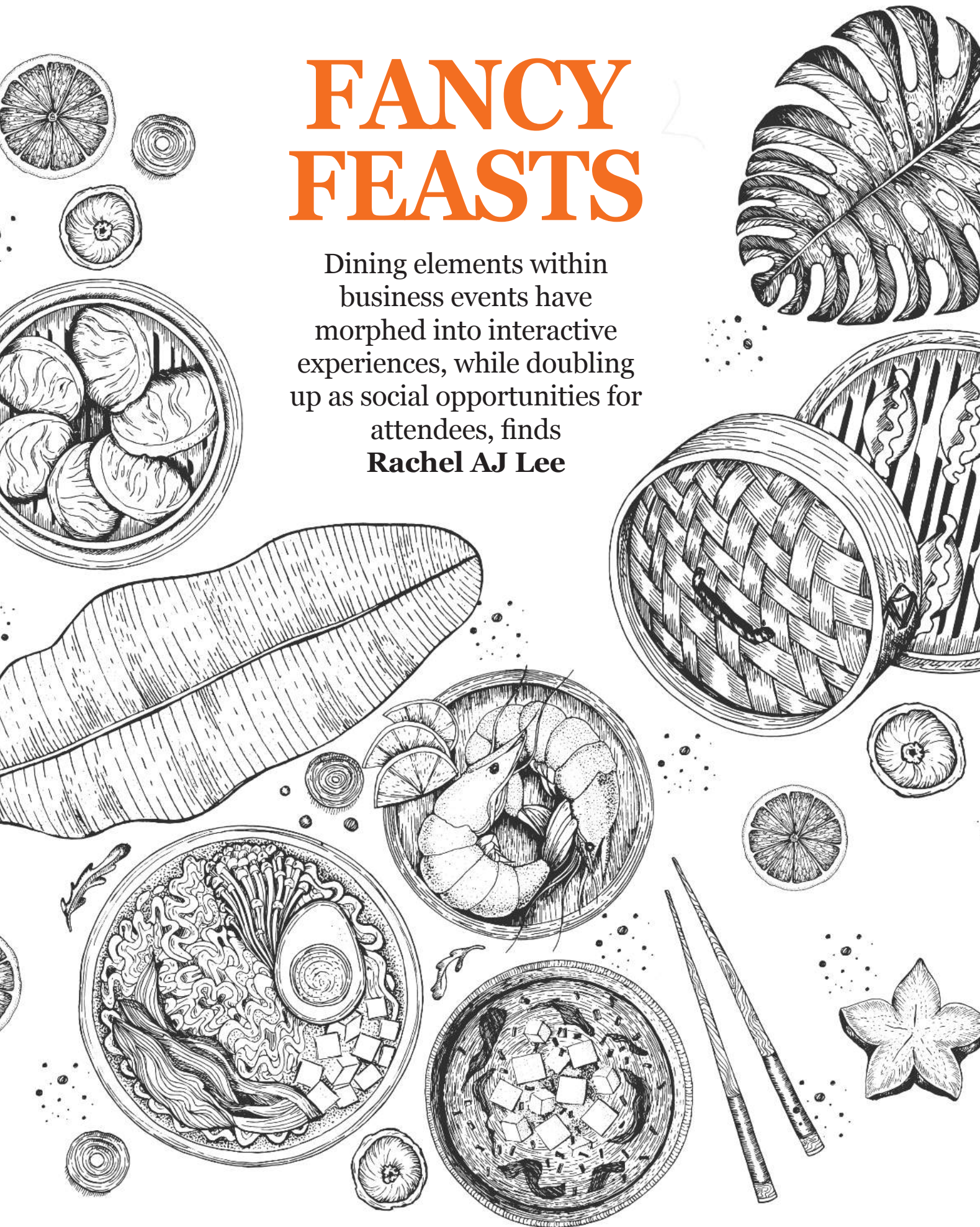


FANCY FEASTS

Dining elements within business events have morphed into interactive experiences, while doubling up as social opportunities for attendees, finds **Rachel AJ Lee**



As Covid-related restrictions recede around the world, event caterers, restaurant operators and large venues are seeing event dining returning in full force, and has become an important component among corporates eager to reconnect in-person.

Although social distancing and individual food servings were the norm during events that resumed earlier on post-lockdown, event F&B specialists have noticed a spirited return to live stations, controlled buffet lines, and grazing tables.

Melbourne and Olympic Park's head of F&B, Rachel Dolan, shared: "We're seeing a move away from traditional buffet-style services to interactive food experiences."

For example, during the AIME 2022 Welcome Event, guests were treated to 10 live food stations where they could watch chefs whip up dishes in real-time, while at the inaugural SportNXT leadership summit in April, guests were treated to live-oyster shucking.

A spokesperson from 1-Host – part of Singapore-based F&B, lifestyle & hospitality company 1-Group – shared similar observations: "We are now able to showcase more culinary specialties like live paella stations, live grills and even dessert counters. This has also reduced the pressure of having enough manpower."

Meanwhile, Craig Squire, director of Cairns-headquartered Ochre Restaurant and Catering, told *TTGmice*: "Grazing tables are back in vogue for private events, and corporate are mixing up menus; for example, share platters for a course, extended canapes or dessert stations."

To provide peace of mind and ensure hygiene, Showtime Event Group's (SEG) director of experience Brad Dabbs shared that "all live stations are manned by chefs who serve guests (directly)". During the Guinness World Record attempt at AIME 2022, individual tongs and sanitiser bottles were also provided.

Over at CWT Meeting & Events, the company actively encourages clients to make use of the food station concept where possible, to lower the chances of cross contamination.

Localised menus are also rising in popularity among organisers, as international delegates return.

Squire noted: "There has also been more interest in native ingredients, which we've incorporated into menus. We've noticed renewed interest in bush food tasting and cooking demo lunches for partner programmes and are



▲ From top: A cocktail event at The Old Melbourne Gaol, a venue under SEG; a beachfront event by Ochre

working with two indigenous start-ups to provide a bush food experience before the main meal."

Alan Pryor, general manager, Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (KLCC), commented he has noticed a "continuity in localising experiences", which the venue can provide through its "Malaysia-inspired culinary offerings".

CWT's director, Australia & New Zealand, Michelle Sargent, shared: "For a recent incentive group in Fiji, we visited a village and had a local catering company – that specialises in barbecue – assist with lunch. This was a great success due to the locally-sourced produce and our caterers' familiarity with local cuisine."

SUSTAINABILITY STATUS

It is no surprise that sustainability concerns have seeped into event F&B. These days, this movement has expanded beyond food miles and sourcing, to encompass biodegradable items and waste management efforts.

In Singapore, Cedric Nubul, general manager of Hilton Singapore Orchard, makes the effort to "source locally whenever possible, and make sustainable seafood choices with MSC- and ASC-certified produce".

The hotel also has a waste management programme in place, and utilises compostable and biodegradable, plant-based packaging and reusable bags during events. It also plans to partner with local farming organisations and cultivate an herb garden onsite.

Over in New Zealand, Te Pae Christchurch's director of culinary service Darren Tait shared that sustainable sourcing has been their "philosophy from day one", with over "80 per cent of our produce sourced locally", even though the supplier may not commercially be the cheapest.

Melbourne-headquartered SEG, meanwhile, combats item wastage by using biodegradable products for single-serve options and bamboo utensils, as well as on the food wastage front.

"This includes in-house composting, multiple production kitchens to reduce

travel emissions, and an Electrolysis System which creates food grade cleaning supplies that degrade back into water after seven days,” revealed Dabbs.

KLCC partners with Food Aid Foundation to donate extra food that is not served and safe to consume.

“We begin the conversation around food waste management with clients and organisers at an early stage in their event planning to ensure we are well-prepared, and that food wastage is properly managed in a timely manner,” shared Pryor.

Going a step further, KLCC has installed an AI-powered system to track type and quantity of food waste. Currently deployed for small meetings, Pryor plans to implement these for large conventions and banqueting functions.

“This data will enable our chefs to better understand delegates’ food consumption behaviour and engineer menus accordingly, resulting in not only lesser food waste, but also more efficient management of food and production costs.

“For larger functions, we aim to provide this data in a post-event sustainability report to help our clients’ with forward planning of their events,” Pryor added.

DIETARY, SPACE AND BUDGET TRENDS

Hotels with event venues and offsite catering services are spotting an increased appetite for wellness-focused and plant-based menus.

Nubul shared: “Guests are more health conscious and are requesting for healthier meal options, including locally-sourced produce and menu items that cater to a variety of diets like gluten intolerance.”

He cited the recent HSBC Women’s World Championship as an example, where the hotel’s culinary team conceptualised a plant-based menu that incorporated the use of Tindle meat.

Ramesh Daryanani, vice president, global sales, Marriott International, Asia Pacific, has also noticed an increase in demand for plant-based options at events.

“Covid-19 has left a lasting impact on our mindsets, especially in the way we make decisions around travel and dining,” he opined.

With the rise in wellness focus comes the challenge of having to cater to varied dietary requirements.

Tait said: “Approximately 15 per cent of guests now have dietary requirements, and this makes service challenging especially for larger events where seating

placement isn’t confirmed.”

To reduce the number of changes at events, Te Pae is “creating more menus that include gluten-free and dairy-free options”.

The great outdoors are also highly sought after by organisers, noticed Australian planners.

Dolan shared: “We are seeing a growing desire from clients and event planners for venues with multiple, connected spaces that offer indoor and outdoor experiences.”

She related how CENTREPIECE’s outdoor terraces are “popular locations for dessert and cocktail bars”, while the venue’s central terrace has also hosted pre-function gatherings that allow for outdoor networking.

For Squire, unique experiences offsite have proven to be popular. “Sugar cane farms are hot this year, and we’ve put some time into assisting a farm we work with to develop the shed into a ready-to-go venue.”

Sargent advised venues to “think outside of the box and consider how outdoor areas can be utilised”, such as an unused carpark to incorporate food trucks.

This would provide guests with a casual and fun ambience, along with some fresh air, help venues overcome labour shortages, and work with local vendors who have familiarity with local cuisine, she elaborated.

When asked about corporates’ budgets for dining functions, Sargent said clients are setting aside good money, with some “even (more) than pre-Covid days” as companies seek to reunite staff in a memorable fashion.

Nubul has also not observed “any restrictions on budgets”, because the priority now is on “celebrating being back together and creating memorable experiences.”



“We have noticed a significant increase in focus on social events and the need to connect and re-connect teams.”

Brad Dabbs

Director of Experience,
Showtime Event Group

“Everyone is appreciating the need to bring people together, so budgets have not been severely impacted,” observed Dabbs for SEG events.

However, when it comes to decision-making, Squire hopes that event organisers will have more respect for suppliers.

“As suppliers, we do our best to supply quotes as soon as possible, but when clients take their time to decide, venues become unavailable. We also take time to host potential clients at venues, talk through the possibilities and provide quotes, but we never hear back from them.

It would be nice to get back to us with a yay or nay,” Squire lamented.



▲ From left: A grazing table at CENTREPIECE at Melbourne Park; Monti Italian restaurant in Singapore, under 1-Group

MEMORABLE EATS

TTGmice reporters pick their favourite unique dining venues in the region that would be a meaningful and memorable addition to any corporate event



JAPAN

Fukudome Small Farm

Based in rural Kagoshima Prefecture, this family-run farm-to-table restaurant offers groups umami-rich and sustainably-sourced meat dishes served in a verdant setting.

The owner/chef, who holds Germany's renowned Meister qualification for meat processing, specialises in pork products crafted using traditional German techniques. Every item is sourced solely from pigs raised on the nearby farm with minimal environmental impact.

Groups can choose from the menu, which includes a vast range of hams and sausages, or opt for a tailor-made course.

The restaurant has outdoor seating for 20 pax, and an open space that can be used to pitch a marquee to host larger groups.



AUSTRALIA

Sounds of Silence

Sounds of Silence is a bucket list dining experience in the Australian Outback under the Northern Territory's open sky.

Dining begins with canapes and chilled sparkling wine on a dune top overlooking the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Sounds from a didgeridoo then make the experience even more immersive as the sun sets and stars become visible. Diners are welcomed to an interactive chef's station where they will be served their choice from a freshly-prepared, Aussie bush tucker-inspired menu incorporating native bush ingredients.

There's also a resident star talker decoding the southern night sky and highlighting planets and galaxies visible due to the outback sky's exceptional clarity.

INDONESIA

Sababay Winery

This three-course Indonesian family-style lunch with wine pairing at Sababay Winery is available for corporate groups visiting Bali.

Before sitting down at the table, guests are taken on a tour of the winery and get to learn about its history, its grapes and other locally-sourced ingredients used to produce various wines and other distillery products. Guests will also learn about the history behind the Indonesian dishes served.

The three-hour programme can cater from 10 to 100 guests.



JAPAN

Pino Collina Matsugaoka

This vineyard and winery in the fields of Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture, features a high-end restaurant with indoor seating for 30 pax and space for 20 pax more on the verandah, overlooking the grapes used for the pinot noir and chardonnay varieties.

The menu is French-inspired and features local ingredients including the famous rice and edible silk, as Tsuruoka is an historical centre for silk-making. There is also a shop selling wines and other grape-based items.



INDONESIA

The Farm Terrace

The Farm Terrace at Raffles Bali features an intimate space for just eight guests – exclusive to hotel residents.

The al fresco dining experience is set under a passionfruit pergola in the middle of lush gardens, where guests can expect to nosh on dishes such as the Raffles Garden (an organic mix of vegetables, waluh metambus (a vegan dish based on a Balinese pumpkin recipe), and tahu kalasan (beancurd and vegetable dish).



MALAYSIA OpenHouse

OpenHouse is a Malay fine-dining restaurant in Suria KLCC, where its decor has been inspired by the motifs and history of Malaysia, where the two main dining rooms are a modern take on Malaysia's villages.

Interestingly, OpenHouse has collaborated with the Department of National Heritage to access their archives to recreate menus, some of which are almost extinct Malay recipes that have been gazetted as national heritage dishes.

OpenHouse also works with indigenous communities to source jungle extracts and Highland Rice from Borneo to keep recipes authentic.

For complete buyouts, the restaurant has a seating capacity for 80 people.



NEW ZEALAND Cloudy Bay Shed

Located 45 minutes from Queenstown in New Zealand, Cloudy Bay has a shed it calls its "home away from home" where guests enjoy shared-style meals designed around each of their wines.

Menus change every three months and each dish tells a story – why it has matched with each wine, where the ingredients come from, and why they have been chosen for showcase in that season.

Originally set up as a tasting room, The Shed has evolved to focus more on dining since New Zealand chef Harry Bonning-Snook joined the team six months ago.



PHILIPPINES Chef Tatung

This exclusive 10-course degustation menu is hosted by celebrity chef Myke "Tatung" Sarthou in his home among the lush green hills of Antipolo, a city east of Manila.

Sarthou tempts the palate with traditional and contemporary Filipino dishes packed with flavour, made with quality ingredients from various parts of the country.

Come before sundown and bask in a dramatic sunset, where on some nights, fireflies dance among the garden foliage.

A maximum of 10 pax can be hosted in the formal dining room, with another 14 pax at the open cabana.

SINGAPORE Kausmo

The brainchild of co-founders Lisa Tang and Kuah Chew Shian – in partnership with Les Amis – this restaurant aims to spark conversations about conscientious ways of living.

The six-course menu – which combines European techniques with Asian influences – repurposes fruits and vegetables that are over-ripened and oddly-shaped, as well as shines the spotlight on secondary cuts of meat, regionally farmed seafood, and forgotten native greens and florals.

The sustainable theme extends to Kausmo's décor – think imperfect porcelain tableware, and coasters from upcycled fabrics.

There are two dinner seats daily, and a buyout for the 16-seater space starts from S\$1,260++ (US\$950), not inclusive of beverages.



SINGAPORE Claudine

The interior of this French brasserie is a sight to behold. Design studio Nice Projects has conserved elements of this 1930s colonial chapel – the gabled roof, original mosaic floor, and grille work.

A 15m-long paper lamp custom-made by Spanish lighting designers Santa & Cole soars overhead in the main dining room, while at the bar & lounge area, an original stained glass window of the chapel is an eye-catching centrepiece.

The menu here takes a modern and elevated approach to quintessential French classics, where diners can expect dishes including bouillabaisse, steak flambe, and roasted pigeon.

Pricing for a complete corporate buyout is available only upon request, and is suitable for groups up to a maximum of 100 people seated.



THAILAND Kate's Place

Pikun "Kate" Wangsantia turned a room in her home into one of the freshest private dining experiences in Bangkok – Kate's Place.

Beginning as a place to hang out with her friends above her Thai restaurant Boonlang Noodles during lockdown, the supper club now offers a set menu that revolves around Kate's imaginative takes on traditional Thai dishes. Think strawberry-infused panang curry with beef, and egg tom yum custard with crab & truffle.

The menu here changes monthly, and only 12 seats are available per night.