

GOING WHOLE HOG

The days of serving charred hots 'n' hams for the summer shindig are over



Attention Mr. Boss Man and Ms. Management Queen: step away from the grill. You may want to show your staff and colleagues how you've conquered coals and mastered meat, but current advice says you might be better off delegating this particular task to the pros.

"Companies used to have the managers cook for the big summer function," says Bruce MacPherson, owner of Sizzler BBQ catering (which has catered events in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and PEI). "But these days we find the managers are saying, you know, 'we're not cooks,' and they're calling in others to help out."

Food safety and allergy concerns are one good reason. For another, Atlantic Canadians' tastes have evolved, thanks to food shows, magazines, global travel and the region's growing creative food scene. Even as some businesses pare back entertainment budgets, the desire to make an impression has only increased. As MacPherson says, "people are looking for something to make the crowd go wild."

Hog wild? In a word, yes.

The southern barbecue is on most 2010 restaurant trend lists, and it's taking hold on the east coast. In Halifax, at least two new barbecue restaurants have opened since January, offering saucy ribs, pulled pork, brisket and sides like sweet potato fries, corn on the cob and baked beans.

It's no accident one of those new endeavours, Q, is owned by RCR Hospitality, a leading (and generally high-end) Nova Scotia catering and restaurant group. Q serves up a carnivore's smorgasbord at its downtown digs – but will also bring the BBQ to you and your group, whether you want ribs, smoked turkeys, half a goat or lamb or a whole roast suckling pig. The latter options, the high drama of bulk pig or lamb, have been catching on.

Just outside of St. John's, Bruce Day's Downhome Catering gets daily inquiries for pig or lamb roasts, though Day is more about the whole hog than the small suckling pig. He regularly makes a five-hour drive to Point Leamington to pick up fresh pigs for his chill room – usually eight to 12 at a time, weighing 50 to 300 pounds. (A 300-pound pig takes 28 hours to cook and will feed about 325.)

"People genuinely have fun with it," says Day, prepping a 50-pounder for a City of St. John's-sponsored dinner the next day. The pig roast used to be the domain of stag parties and birthday bashes, he says, but it's now booked for employee appreciation events, retirement parties, dinners, even as the ultimate icebreaker for visiting colleagues or conference

delegates. If it's an afternoon affair, the clientele can watch the roasting happen on Day's mobile spit-trailer.

MacPherson's Sizzler BBQ also has mobile rotisseries, which can do several 100-pound pigs at once. "I always tell people it's as much a show as it is a meal," he says.

And it is. The sight of the whole animal(s) turning, dripping, crisping up, slowly cooking over hot coals... while it takes a few people aback, the novelty – and the outrageous aroma – tends to turn otherwise reserved professionals into droolers. And the final product? "Nothing better," says Day.

Eating aware: In spite of all the attention just slathered on the finger-licking delights of a pig roast or southern-style BBQ pit, today's function also frequently offers more health and/or eco-conscious options. MacPherson says many clients choose lighter chicken and pork fare over the hamburgers, hot dogs and heavy steaks of the past. Susan McDonell of Halifax's Catering Unlimited buys local whenever she can, not only for the best flavours, but also because it's important to her and her clients.

Refined taste: McDonell (who does a mean suckling pig roast, by the way) says tastes have evolved hugely over her 18 years in business. "People are definitely becoming more adventurous," she says. "Instead of, say, breaded chicken, they'll want chicken stuffed with hot pepper cheese or served with balsamic cranberry sauce."

Location, location: Business event planners are spicing up summer summits by "getting away from the traditional large conference rooms and choosing a more interesting venue," says MacDonell. "Dining al fresco, eating outdoors, is so popular. We've been out on a fishing wharf, in a field, on a lawn. Rooftop dining is a new favourite."

Of course, this is Atlantic Canada, and the weather changes even faster than the hip menu plans. "Tents," she laughs. "You've got to have a back up plan." **ABM**

Got a fabulous idea for a staff get-together or a retirement party for the ages? Drop me a note at stephanie.porter@gmail.com.