



F&B innovators tap into new revenue streams

The challenges wrought by the coronavirus have required hotel F&B departments to come up with creative ways to drive revenue and customer engagement. Sometimes, they come right from customers – if hoteliers are paying attention.

All nine tasting rooms and all but one of the restaurants at the 40-acre Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa Valley and its sister resorts (the Vista Collina and Vino Bello) were shut down when California went into quarantine. But guests and visitors could still purchase bottles of wine at the resorts' Fivetown Grocery, along with groceries, grab-and-go meals and snacks.

Contributed by Jeanette Hurt

“What we noticed is someone would come in and grab a bottle of wine and some chips, and then they would walk out and see this huge lawn and just sit and stay there for an hour or two,” says David Ryan, managing director. “Word of mouth spread, and then we saw families, and couples out with their dogs started coming.”



The Meritage Resort and Spa in Napa Valley, California, leveraged the popularity of its lawn into a safe open space where families and groups could gather, with food trucks, ice cream carts and music.

Seeing an opportunity, the hotel set out tables with umbrellas all over the lawn, and its food truck and ice cream cart, which usually come out only for special events, make appearances every weekend. “We’ve made it Napa’s ‘beach,’” Ryan says. “We crank the music, and there’s dogs and kids. It’s a great feeling.” The resorts are planning an outdoor concert series when the situation allows.

Pivoting – and staying alert to what the customer needs or wants – is hard, Ryan says. “No one’s ever been through this kind of devastation, and when you come out of the ashes, I think the best thing is to go where the light is, and the light is where the customer tells you it is,” he says. “I don’t know how innovative it is, but it’s keeping your eyes and ears open.”

That’s what the staff at The Den Bangalore did. General Manager Vinesh Gupta, Nishendra Kashyp, and executive chef Kapil Dubey recognized that hundreds of workers in the Indian city’s high-tech industry were working from home during quarantine. The team advertised – and then delivered – thousands of cooked meals to area workers, says Haim Spiegel, F&B director for Dan Hotels, the hotel’s owner.

A bigger success: meal preparation kits assembled by the chefs. Packages of portioned ingredients feeding one, two or four people are delivered to a home, and the recipient watches a two-minute video on how to prepare the food.

“People were raving about it, and I was shocked to see the numbers of how many people would order these meal packets on a daily basis,” Spiegel says. Dan Hotels is looking to expand the practice to its hotels and resorts in Israel.

At the Mission Point Resort on Mackinaw Island in Michigan, a new, US\$2 million deck and pavilion had been constructed, but dozens of weddings and events scheduled for this summer have been canceled or postponed. “So, we’re taking lemons and making the largest lemonade stand on the island,” says Liz Ware, vice president of sales and marketing.

The “lemonade stand” is a newly built, outdoor covered event pavilion on a large rooftop deck, decorated with flowers and offering views of Lake Huron and passing freighters. The lemonade – and cocktails like Michigan blueberry mojito – are pre-packed in retro coolers, with snacks available to purchase. “The area resembles a beer garden with large flower pots and string lighting in the evening,” Ware says.

Surprise cost savings

Sometimes, the new sanitation measures are also big, cost-saving measures, says Jacob Musyt, director of F&B at the Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills. The Rooftop by JG, which just reopened, is no longer printing menus, and because guests are scanning QR codes on their phones. “Depending on the quality of paper, a hotel could save between US\$10,000 and US\$20,000, and that’s just for the paper,” he says. The 75 leather menu binders, costing from US\$60 to US\$150, also require replacement every two years.

Restaurants have to be alert to change quickly, says Kevin Harmon, director of sales and marketing for Le Meridien Indianapolis, Indiana. “Initially, our chef rewrote the menu so that it would be better for takeout, and she tweaked everything knowing it was going to be a to-go order, which was something we hadn’t offered previously,” he says.

The restaurant started offering grocery items, including toilet paper, and the chef began bottling bolognese sauce and salad dressings, along with other everyday items. “Now, it’s shifted again, and it’s become more of a traditional gift shop with grab-and-go items,” Harmon says. “We are transitioning, literally, again, as we speak.”

The lobby of the Shangri-La Hotel in Toronto is an iconic afternoon tea destination, says Malcom Webster, executive chef. But the biggest afternoon tea of the year is Mother’s Day, where more than 300 guests are served through four seatings most years. This year, it launched an afternoon tea to go.

“We wanted to capture signature elements from our afternoon tea while creating items that could travel well, sacrificing small, delicate garnishes in place of more stable embellishments,” Webster says. “We also sourced a three-tier disposable stand to help create an authentic tiered afternoon tea experience, and this came with guidelines on how to plate things.”

The Mother’s Day tea boxes were so successful that the hotel decided to offer a BBQ Box for Father’s Day. “It’s a ready-to-grill at home or grilled by us at the hotel,” Webster says.

The hotel also offers a weekend three-course menu that’s changed up frequently. “I want it to be as seasonal, fresh and relevant as possible,” Webster says. “We want to keep our guests engaged and reordering because when you look online to order food, often it’s the same restaurants and dishes repeated. To stand out, you have to be creative and fresh.”