

Outdoor Catering: Opportunities and Challenges

Gone are the days when the local *batwas* were pressed into service when there was any wedding or any other family function. The sight of soiled clothes of the *patnach* who would change his clothes at the eleventh hour before the function starts is a thing of the past. The burgeoning middle class in metro and other Tier II and Tier III cities have ensured that every event, be it a small get-together or a bigger social function, everything is planned to the tee.

Moreover, the companies also have a lot of functions which are handled by professional event managers. For all these corporate or social functions, the most important part is the food and it has given rise to professional outdoor caterers. Almost all the big five and four star hotels are into outdoor catering these days. Besides, there are full-fledged catering companies which take care of the entire requirements.

Increased state of the art facilities, enhancement in corporate computers for meetings as well surge in diversified venues for social gatherings has fuelled the demand. For caterers to provide catering facilities with greater flexibility.

Trends

There is no difference of opinion among the industry stakeholders on what really fuelled mushrooming of outdoor caterers in the country. Today, every event is organised on a different scale altogether, says

The changing lifestyles of people and social imperatives associated with it has fuelled the growth of event managers and corporate caterers in the market in recent years. People do not want to take chances when it comes to social events, therefore they engage the best of caterers to take care of the food arrangements. Outdoor catering has developed as a niche hospitality vertical and become a thriving business with even star hotels opening a separate division and revenue stream. In that context, **Hospitality Biz** explores opportunities and challenges that outdoor catering presents for hospitality players and its impact on the bottom lines.

Chief Saikar Pai, Executive Chef, Holiday Inn Mumbai International Airport. "Different type of meetings take place in offices where delegates from different nationalities, states, start for discussing business, they have their own special catering needs. That is where the outdoor caterers become very important," states Pai.

Outdoor catering has always been very a specialised business, says Sharad Sachdeva, CEO, Life Biz Foods. This trend is especially seen in Mumbai and major metropolitan cities. "In addition to weddings, big ticket events like IPL, Derby Racing, fashion and film events have only boosted this idea further. The changing lifestyle and trends of people have intensified tremendously over the years and led to its growth," Sachdeva said.

It also convenience and peace of mind that makes people look at reputed caterers, opines Gurneet Singh, Deputy General Manager - Operations, Celebrations, a division of Brigade Hospitality. "Serving a multi cuisine spread has become a custom and a value-add. This encourages people to hire professional catering services. Also, more and more corporates are opting to provide catereries to their staff at a

discounted price as part of employee satisfaction as this adds a bonus point in the list of benefits being offered."

Opportunities

There are numerous opportunities in this field as many business houses are spring for such services, even for the regular staff caterers.

For established brands in the hotel and restaurant business, outdoor catering is a natural extension and an incremental business avenue, says Chef Pai. It does not require dedicated manpower or equipment. Hotel infrastructure like kitchen, packing areas, bridges are good enough to cater to these situations.

The growing middle class population, their evolving lifestyles and habits would open up more opportunities in the outdoor catering business, believes Sharad Sachdeva.

People are looking for occasions to splurge. Weddings are a real show of money and status for Indians. Indian weddings offer major prospects for outdoor caterers, avers Singh, adding people today are well travelled and have experienced international and exotic cuisines. This exposure to international cuisine makes them want to be part of their event that may include international guests.

According to Sarat Mazumdar, Assistant F&B Manager, Crown Plaza Bengaluru, "National and international events including conferences, mega sporting events like IPL, KCL, destination weddings with huge budgets, etc., have propelled hotels of varied size categories to get their share in the market as there are patrons ready to spend money for the quality."

Outdoor catering is largely a low investment business compared to hard core hotel or restaurant business, confides spokesperson for ITC Grand Chola Chennai. "It doesn't require space and it creates the possibility of taking a board to people's homes or wherever required," the official said.

Challenges

To conduct any business there are a few challenges and outdoor catering is no different. However, the challenges are not so huge as compared to the hotels. Although outdoor caterers cherish big events involving both Indian and global cuisines, as they get an opportunity to showcase their talent and expertise, the complex serving requirements of global cuisines pose some challenges when outdoors. However, with the surge in travel, people love to have both Indian and global cuisines at elite dinners, say expert caterers.

Pai feels that the F&B operations within the precinct of the hotel are very smooth as the infrastructure is made to take care of the same. When it is moved to outdoor venues there are problems of creating makeshift kitchens, storage, final cooking and finishing, hygiene and temperature related issues. Food items exposed in open areas is also a challenge, he informs.

Service is a big element in the whole success of outdoor catering, says Sharad Sachdeva. "No amount of marketing will help outdoor catering unless the service is perfect at all times. It is important to be creative to establish a name and fame in the business. A Chef needs to ensure arrangement of an acceptable menu; plan well in advance to ensure minimum repetition of food; deliver choices should be sufficient in quality, tasty and attractive in appearance; ensure customers aren't served lesser quantities than promised earlier."

Moving from one place to another consistently with no wastage in

space and amenities is one of the biggest challenges for outdoor caterers. "A new setup is required for every event and that is the biggest challenge. Nevertheless, this challenge helps to grow and deliver best experiences to our customers. Cooking out of temporary set up, getting trained staff, preparing for any eventuality such as rain, thunder storm, etc., are a couple of other major challenges," informs Singh of Brigade Hospitality.

Challenges are numerous, according to Mazumdar. These include sourcing of right equipment, ensuring quality of products from vendors, engaging skilled staff and keeping an eye on them, etc. Mainstream hotels, because of their experience and expertise in handling situations of similar nature, are better equipped to handle outdoor catering in a seamless fashion, believes Mazumdar.

Accessibility to the site can be a grave issue especially while catering at sporting stadiums, observes the official of ITC Grand Chola Chennai. "Our stadiums are not planned as compared with international sporting venues like Melbourne Cricket ground or the Sydney Cricket ground where it is a pleasure to work. Some stress could result from non-availability of water and seating plans for staff, especially in remote areas. We have to ensure the place is cleaned up and sanitised before the team arrives at. A refrigerated van is a must."

Catering to special requirements

The customers' demands are regularly changing and it is a challenge for outdoor caterers to keep pace with those demands. A special set of skills is required to conduct such business. "The food industry is continuously evolving and a lot of new dishes and recipes are being introduced and one would have to learn these things so as to keep up with the pace. For instance, sometimes caterers are asked to prepare gluten-free meals or cholesterol free meals as part of the menu for parties," informs Sachdeva of L&F.

Checklists play a critical role as missing anything or it will lead into a greater problem, says Mazumdar, as hotel resources are not readily available. "Thinking on the feet and looking for alternate arrangements or a problem solving aptitude will lead into engaging events successfully," he observed.

For ITC Chennai's spokesperson, planning to the minutest detail is of utmost importance and screening the addresses gives an edge over others. Refrigerated vehicle is a must along with proper containers to transport food. Heavy duty trolleys come in handy to store things around and always carry a fire aid kit, he said.

One requires a special engineered vehicle for moving prepared food, trolleys, inventory of service ware, i.e. Cookery, cutlery, glassware, linen, etc., informs Chef Pai.

Caterers V/S Hotels

As hotels and restaurant chains compete with stand alone caterers for the outdoor catering pie in the market, there is an undeclared turf war on clean and superiority. ■



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