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When Fall is in the Air



It's never too soon to start planning seasonal menus

Purple Onion Catering owners Margot and David Jones may still be nursing sunburns from their recent seaside vacation, but back at their Vienna, Virginia headquarters, the autumn leaves have already turned. Sure, Labor Day is barely in the rearview mirror and the Nationals are slugging it out for the pennant just across the Potomac, but Executive Chef Adam Gooch has already tightened the bolts on his fall menu and the sales staff is busy inking in the year-end calendar.



Not long ago, Margot and Chef Adam sat down with Senior Event Designer Joanie Rylander to narrow the trio's slate of ideas into a workable — and saleable — fall concept. "Our seasonal menus tend to be up to date with whatever's hot at the moment," Margot says. Typically, Joanie will bring in some vogueish notions that anticipate client desires. These could be concepts picked up from blogs and other media, or elements currently found in heavy rotation on restaurant menus. For instance, the keywords donut, maple, and pork belly coalesced into a cinnamon sugar donut slider with a braised maple pork belly and sour apple slaw. "We all bring ideas to the table, but Adam is the one who develops the recipes and does the work," Margot says. Adam nods, "We're hearing what customers want and coming up with ideas from there."

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- \$500,000 to \$1 million
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Occasionally, an idea that works in the kitchen doesn't translate well in the field. Adam describes a coq au vin-style braised chicken leg from last fall's menu that flopped with clients because the bones made it too labor-intensive for off-premise consumption. A deconstructed and re-tooled boneless breast version of the dish was better received. "Now we save ourselves a lot of time and aggravation because the sales and event staff know exactly what the client is looking for and they point me in the right direction," he says.



Still, other items may make the fall menu cut, but aren't suitable for large-scale holiday parties. "One of the things that we're still trying to perfect are little red velvet petits fours," Margot says. "They are delicious, but the idea of cutting out tiny red velvet cakes, covering them in chocolate and sending them out, hoping they don't get smudged is not

something we’re going to be doing at Christmas.”

While the formal brainstorming session usually lasts just an hour, the fall menu is on their minds throughout the year. “Joanie, Margot, and I are always writing ideas down,” says Adam. “We came up with an idea last spring for a Meyer lemon risotto. We already had a new risotto on the menu, so we tabled it for fall.” From there, it usually takes a month to fine-tune the recipes before the staff tasting. “By the time the staff tastes it, I’ve worked out 95 percent of the kinks. The next day, they’re selling those items and they have to be ready,” he says.



Between scheduling staff vacations, summer conferences, and the heavy prep required for the holiday season, Margot intends to get an earlier start next year. “We always have a deadline,” she says. “It’s just after Labor Day and we have our corporate menus for Christmas done. We’re already touching base with people for holiday parties. Next year we’ll push things into July.”

By Mike Schulte
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