

CATERED AFFAIR

The recession has sent demand for some proteins at special events down — and others way up. Guess which meats are going one way and which trend in the other direction?

By Dani Friedland, Associate Editor

Buffets, steam tables, tuxedoed waiters asking the eternal question, “Beef or chicken?” Thus, the business of catering has always been, and will always be.

Or will it?

As it turns out, chicken and beef are still popular for catered events (and subject to their own trends), but pork is catching up fast, mostly due to a new catered offering: the pig roast. Pig roasts — in which a whole, slow-roasted pig is served up on-site — are popping up across the country for every kind of party from corporate picnics to, yes, weddings.

PIGGING OUT

“I’m surprised how many weddings I do, ‘cause I’m a barbecue guy,” says Dan Bell, owner of Little Taste of Texas in South Windsor, Conn. His pig roasting and barbecue chuck wagon (which “bring[s] a hoedown to your lowdown”) handles 30

to 40 weddings each year.

Bell, a former airplane designer who brought Texas-style barbecue with him when he returned to Connecticut from Houston, handles a wide variety of events, from employee appreciation dinners to graduation parties. At this point, he has roasted hundreds of pigs, and he estimates that his business is growing 15 to 20 percent per year.

In Lewiston, Maine, DJ’s Texas Style BBQ owner Don Cibert has also seen a spike in his pig roast catering business, which he says is up at least 50 percent over last year. “It’s the rage right now, I guess, at least here in Maine.”

His first year in business was pretty



bad, but three years in, Cibert is selling a lot of traditional barbecue: briskets, pulled pork, chicken and, of course, whole pigs, which now make up as much as 70 percent of his business.

The presentation certainly is part of the allure for consumers — a fully roasted, ready-to-serve pig on a spit, with all the fat rendered into the meat. That’s the way they do it at Colby’s Pig Roast Catering in western New York state.

Jim Kolb, the owner, says his chefs don’t bring knives when they cater a pig roast, because after 12 hours in the propane roaster, the meat falls off the bones. The chefs pull the meat apart and set up a buffet for the guests with a

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choice of sauces. They're in pretty good practice — Colby's does 200 to 250 pig roasts each year. The company could do more, but Kolb sets a limit.

For Kolb, the pig roast business is a natural marriage of a previous career selling gas grills and even earlier roots in a family that raised hogs for most of the 20th century. But in the 21 years he's been catering, Kolb has had to change his supply strategy: Initially, he would buy a hog from a farmer he knew and take it to the slaughterhouse. But the farmers he worked with all died, retired or went bankrupt, he says, and he wasn't satisfied with the quality of the hogs at auctions.

Instead, he now buys frozen pigs from North Carolina or Iowa, on the spit and ready to go. "The flavor of the meat is in the fat," he says. "So long as ... what the pig ate is high-quality, then the meat is flavorful and high-quality."

Of course, in today's health-conscious

world, clients are looking for lean meats, so 40 percent of Kolb's events include poultry — frequently tender turkey that's also been roasted for 12 hours.

Juicy pork aside, part of the success of the pig roast in catering likely boils down to pure economics. Little Taste of Texas's Bell has noticed more corporate clients recently, as well as more weddings. "People who would normally go to the high-dollar catering outfits ... didn't have the money at the height of the recession," he says. Instead of paying \$60 to \$80 a plate for an upscale company affair, "they went to somebody like me, where I'm at \$20 to \$25 a plate," he says. "So I didn't feel the pain as much."

Back in western New York, Kolb has noticed an increase in ready-made barbecue buffets for pickup. Three years ago, he says, they made up 20 percent of his business, and now it's twice that. Working out the numbers, it's easy to see why: A pick-up buffet for 60 people is \$500, while a full pig roast buffet goes for \$13.40 per person (\$804 for 60 people).

CHICKEN TAKES WING

Chicken is flying high in traditional catering. Chef Lars Lundin of Miami's Food by Chef Lars has noticed a 30 to 40 percent increase in chicken servings during the recession.

Boneless, skinless chicken breasts have a variety of advantages for caterers. Lundin says the lack of bones is great for mitigating liability. In general, chicken is "more universal, more acceptable, more price-reasonable ... so we're seeing a lot of that," says Kevin Brant, director of sales for Wolfgang Puck Catering Union Station in Dallas.

BEEFING UP THE MENU

For formal events, beef tenderloin remains overwhelmingly popular. In Chicago, Lyon estimates that nine out of 10 wedding or gala clients want tenderloin, and Miami's Lundin estimates that

at least 80 percent of weddings he caters have tenderloin on the menu. He hasn't seen many changes to the typical wedding menu of carved-on-site beef tenderloin and chicken breasts for the last five years, though the side dishes and appetizers have evolved from rice to risottos.

Beyond tenderloin, beef offers a lot of options for caterers. In addition to ribeye and tenderloin, Lundin offers churrasco to give clients a more affordable option. Chef Jeff Block of Ann Walker Catering in San Anselmo, Calif. has noticed a certain bias in the beef his clients want—and he's generally the one petitioning for a cheaper cut of meat. "Usually the customer leads us toward a more expensive piece of meat and we lead them back to our side," he says. "For me, tenderloin's a very bland meat." Instead, he prefers a hanger steak or another lesser-known cut with "more flavor and more texture and more personality."

Although beef is a catering classic, it is susceptible to trends. Lundin says he gets a lot of questions about short ribs. "I haven't done that yet because I don't think it looks nice on the plate," he says. "I do it at home, but I don't like to serve it at my weddings." At Wolfgang Puck, Brant says short rib orders picked up at the end of 2009 and continue to be

Jon Vidar



Pig roasts are gaining popularity.

ON THE PLATE

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popular because they offer good value and flavor, as well as a lot of spice options such as Puck’s Asian spice treatment. “It’s not your mama’s ribs or mama’s pot roast. It’s got a little Asian flair to it, which people like,” says Brant, who is a past president of the National Association of Catering Executives.

That said, it’s not all chicken and beef. Lundin says he uses rack of lamb frequently, and the recession has led to more pork on his menus. Block says, “I think I’ve seen an increase in pork products lately and a decrease in beef.”

GREEN TIE EVENTS

Meanwhile, some clients are now much more concerned about sourcing, with local, sustainable or grass-fed meats a primary concern. Block started getting a lot of requests for sustainable meats three years ago, and now he says they make up 20 percent of the jobs he caters.

Those buzzwords come at a cost, though: Block says going organic will double the cost of chicken for a family-style dinner, and local, sustainably raised product will triple it. At Neuman’s Catering in New York, President Paul Neuman says price is an issue, particularly for large corporate clients. Although sustainable meals make up less than 5 percent of his business, Neuman says it’s still an important part of his beliefs: “I’d love to sell 100 percent local and sustainable,” he says, “but with the volume of business we do, we just can’t ... afford it.” Chef Duda sees the trend as growing and suspects it will continue.

MONEY MATTERS

But while the sustainable niche grows, other clients are more focused on saving money. In New York, a lot of Duda’s clients have said they can’t afford menus with tenderloin or a lot of fish. He adjusts to chicken breast, which he says is the least expensive option, or turkey. For beef, he uses a lot of petit filet (the inexpensive, lean and flavorful Teres major muscle) and hanger steaks. Flank steak is also a big seller at Blue Plate in Chicago, which Lyon attributes to its versatility. Brant has noticed that his customers still want to offer a beef item, such as London broil or flank steak, to their guests.

Overall, Lyon says cheaper beef options appeal to his customers. A gala event that might have served tenderloin to 300 to 400 people last year might choose a Boston steak this year, instead. The Boston cut steak could be as much as \$3 per pound cheaper than tenderloin.

“They’d like to still keep the beef on the plate, but they don’t want to pay \$9, \$10, \$11 a pound for it anymore,” Lyon says of his clients. ☺