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Buffet Presentation

Buffets are one of the garde manger's most exciting professional challenges. They demand a unique blend of culinary and management skills. The practical aspects of a buffet make them advantageous to virtually any type of operation. The creative challenges and opportunities they open up to the garde manger make them a meaningful way to advance and develop a career.

The work of the garde manger as banquet chef can be divided into four distinct phases.

- The concept or theme is identified so that planning can begin
- The menu, price, and theme are worked out together, culminating in a production plan that makes good culinary and business sense from the menu to the plans for food presentation and service
- Chef prepares plans for the layout and setup of the buffet lines, tables, and platters that are intended to make the buffet attractive and welcoming for the guests as well as efficient and practical for the service staff to replenish
- Actual production and display of the food flows directly from the planning and preparation in the preceding stages

Flexible enough to incorporate new trends—both the foods that you serve and the style of service you offer—buffets are an important aspect of many foodservice operations, no matter what their size or menu. All facets of the foodservice industry have found effective uses for buffets, from fast food outlets, through supermarkets and delis, to family or multi-unit restaurants and fine-dining establishments, as well as corporate and institutional dining.



Concepts and Themes

A buffet may center on a particular meal period, special occasion, holiday, or ethnic presentation. The event's theme is typically the starting point for developing a plan for the buffet itself. Another fundamental decision is a menu that is developed around a theme.

The season, weather, and the guests' comfort and expectations hold together the theme. They have a direct impact upon the specific dishes selected for the buffet as well as the ways they are presented. When a buffet is part of a special event or celebration, the food should set the mood and enhance the occasion without overshadowing the occasion itself.

When the concept or theme is maintained throughout the buffet presentation, guests can easily recognize it as the concept or theme. At each stage of buffet work, from the development of the menu through replenishing the platters during the event, the theme or concept guides you to the best choice for the particular situation.

Buffets are integral to many special events. The event could be a personal or family occasion, such as a wedding, birthday, anniversary, christening, or bar mitzvah. It may depict a seasonal or holiday celebration, such as New Year's Eve, Mother's Day, or Thanksgiving. Cities, states, countries, and continents all can be used as inspiration to develop regional and ethnic menus for a buffet that will highlight a variety of flavors.

Buffets can be part of a fundraiser or a gala, or part of an opening reception for a new business, product, or exhibit at



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a gallery. Buffets are a part of many meetings, conferences, conventions, and similar corporate events. Buffets that are planned around a special event such as a fundraiser, gala, or wedding are generally planned with the client and must be tailored to their needs and budget.

A featured-concept buffet is designed to attract guests to the restaurant. Examples include Sunday brunches, pasta, or seafood buffets as well as “quick service” breakfast or lunch menus. The chef chooses foods for these buffets that have wide appeal and that work to improve the operation’s bottom line. One popular example of a “featured-concept” buffet is the ubiquitous breakfast buffet. Operations that regularly present breakfast bars include hotels, motels, resorts, casinos, and restaurants. A smaller version of a breakfast buffet might include muffins, croissants and Danish, fresh fruit, bagels, toast and jam, coffee, orange juice, and milk and cereal. This type of breakfast buffet, when featured at a hotel or motel, may be included in the price of the hotel stay in order to give the customer a “value-added” experience.

A menu from a more extensive breakfast buffet might include several action stations such as a carving station for hams, roasts, and lox, an omelet station that creates omelets to order, or a crêpe station making filled crêpes. These stations would be in operation where a person is alongside an extensive buffet that would include many breakfast items such as scrambled eggs, bacon, waffles, hash browns, quiche, and the above-mentioned muffins, bagels, toast, and fruit.

For More Information

Please visit www.prochef.com to learn more about The Culinary Institute of America’s professional development programs.

Action Stations

If your buffet plans include action or demonstration stations, select foods for those stations carefully. They should add something more than simply another menu item. Guests enjoy these stations because they see them as a custom experience; foods are made, sliced, or presented to their order as they watch.

Highlight the special talents of your staff as they make crêpes and fill them or carve a steamship round of beef. They are also a good way to foster interaction between the guests and the staff. For example, a cheese display staffed with a knowledgeable attendant is effective not only as far as serving the guests is concerned, but it also increases the chances that the guest will return.

These stations add to the overall cost of the buffet because you have to have one person dedicated to this station and this person must have the skills to execute the preparation on the station. Also, there may be special equipment needed to produce the item, such as an induction burner or extra refrigeration. However, the items on an action station almost always draw a higher price from the client and can be a cost-effective way to cook food that otherwise may have been sold for less.

Action stations can now be adapted to encompass nearly any food item on a menu. New developments in equipment have expanded the possibilities of items that you can feature. Keep in mind, with these new items, the skill level required to work on an action station can be high and may require a second person to work on a single item. For instance, in order to create an appetizer of potato blinis with smoked salmon and caviar, one person may be sautéing the blinis while the second person is slicing the salmon and plating the appetizer. Some resorts and casinos have up to 20 people working on action stations in a single buffet. These higher-end items are usually reserved for events where the cost can be passed on to the client.

Action stations are expanding beyond the buffet as well, often utilized at an event that features hors d’oeuvre prepared by a chef in the dining room and passed by servers. This eliminates guests having to wait in line for food. Restaurants that have open kitchens feature a sort of action station. The chefs are making food for customers in full view and must keep the same level of quality and cleanliness as a station in a buffet. Some restaurants that have chefs making tapas to order for bar customers have action stations.

