

HOTELLIER

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HUNGRY FOR CHANGE

BY DENISE DEVEAU

CHALLENGING TIMES ARE OPENING DOORS TO A NEW WORLD OF FOODSERVICE OPTIONS

AS OCCUPANCY rates plummeted in hotels across the country, hotel food-and-beverage operators have learned that a little ingenuity can go a long way in shoring up declining revenues. From ghost kitchens and local partnerships, to virtual cooking classes and exclusive under-the-stars dining packages, creative thinkers are exploring new ways to expand their services

to guests and the community at large.

Many of the ideas are gaining so much traction, in fact, experts predict they will continue long after the pandemic becomes a thing of the past.

The food-and-beverage team at the historic Auberge Saint-Antoine in Quebec City has managed to weather the constant regional restrictions with a multitude of creative ideas beyond basic

takeout and delivery offerings.

When its own farm operations began producing a bounty of heirloom fruits and vegetables in June, the team at Auberge Saint-Antoine decided to donate some to local food banks, as well as create farm boxes for curbside pickup that contained 10lbs. of produce. They sold out of the boxes in the first week.

"Within a week of planting, we put

JOEY RICHIE



our produce on social media. People loved it so much, this year we are launching a membership program,” says Dagmar Lombard, director of Sales, Marketing and Communication.

That’s not the only plan that resonated with an audience hungry for new dining experiences. A huge hit has been its Zoom en Cuisine program, in which head chef Alex Bouchard and chef Arthur Muller from its Chez Muffy farm-to-table restaurant lead virtual cooking workshops using a curated box of ingredients delivered to customers’ doorsteps. “We turned one of the spaces in the hotel as a cooking studio and trained the chefs on delivering online

classes,” Lombard says.

The Auberge has since expanded the program to include local family-owned restaurants and businesses, offering options such as a bread baking and a children’s pastry class, as well as a holiday floral-centrepiece workshop. It has now taken the concept abroad with Zoom for a Cause. For a \$10 to \$20 donation, participants receive a shopping list to purchase ingredients locally, with all proceeds going to Le Pignon Bleu, a local charity focused on food security of children.

For customers craving a formal dining experience, they introduced a pop-up concept that offers private outdoor terrace dining in a heated glass greenhouse overlooking the urban landscape. “So many people wrote about it on social media. It generated some amazing revenues. We started with seven; now we have 13,” Lombard says.

For those that can’t book a greenhouse spot, the hotel also offers full-course in-room dining packages to non-guests, she adds. “It rejuvenated our clientele because it drew a lot of people from the area.”

Food-and-beverage operations at Fairmont properties across Canada are putting their own spin on keeping their customers and staff motivated.

Jens Moesker, general manager of Hotel Fairmont Pacific Rim, says that like many city-centre hotels, it had to depend on the local community to generate revenues. They’ve tried hosting live-music programming with artists performing from home that include tutorials from the beverage director. “We also came up with in-room wine tasting, which was very popular.”

When weather permits, the main focus is on outdoor spaces. For example, they set up a patio pop-up event in the driveway that features live music and a food truck.

Last summer was also the first time

they featured picnic lunches to go, he adds. “It’s not something we did pre-COVID-19. But we will continue to do it after. It’s been a good initiative that we’d like to keep,” Moesker says.

At Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth in Montreal, the Marché Artisans grocery restaurant bar has become a focal point of its pandemic strategy. While most of the food stations have been closed, the hotel continues to produce meals for pickup and delivery. Grocery selections include Fairmont’s line of custom products such as cookies, chocolate and olive oil. “It’s been a great way to extend our brands,” says executive chef Baptiste Peupion.

The effort involved creating a new website and setting up deliveries with DoorDash and Uber Eats to increase volumes. “We also developed on fully prepared meal boxes for special occasions with a QR code link to a video to explain how to prepare a meal,” Peupion explains. “That was a



special project because it was a very different way of working. We had to think about the types of boxes, how to deliver them, what to include and how to change the website to make it easy to order.”

Newer programs include Zoom cooking events for groups of 200 to 300 people, he adds. “We’re also introducing the idea of in-room Zoom events for large groups staying in

Fairmont properties in different locations, in which they can enjoy a meal together from their rooms at the same time.”

Fairmont Banff Springs has managed to keep its operations at a steady pace. It is utilizing empty guest-suite spaces to offer private in-room dining for single-household groups, as well as expanded takeout from the grab-and-go STOCK Food & Drink café in the lobby, to include wine and pre-made bottled cocktails for two.

The real star of its culinary program however is the 360° clear dining dome they purchased in February (Whistler has a similar offering), where groups of up to six people can meet privately and take in a view of what William Van Horne famously called ‘the million-dollar view’ of the mountains. “People just love it because they not only get a great meal, they also get an experience,” says David Garcelon, hotel manager “It’s pretty much sold out.”

The Westin Harbour Castle in Toronto may not be able to offer mountain views, but its 10,000 sq. ft. of empty convention kitchen space proved to be the perfect venue for REEF, a large-scale ghost-kitchen operation, that was set up in temporary digs. “They’re utilizing both those kitchens and much of our storage space on our conference centre side as their production kitchen on a three-month renewable contract,” explains Dan Craig, executive chef. “When we start to get events large enough to necessitate the conference centre, we will look at taking that space back over.”

The hotel is also approved to host American Hockey League and National Hockey League teams, which provides a steady stream of food orders for the culinary staff, Craig notes. “That’s an ongoing thing as teams stay for three or four days at a time, so we pack meals for them to pick up or have delivered. They stay in their bubble and are tested every day.”



Chef Arthur Muller from Chez Muffy at Auberge Saint-Antoine



(above) The Rattle Bar at Fairmont Banff Springs; Auberge Saint-Antoine in Quebec City has re-imagined its F&B programs (left)

Even as the pandemic drags on, Peupion says the spirit of innovation will continue. “Our resilience has been challenged; we have never stopped working since the beginning of the pandemic. But it’s also a great opportunity in the way of creativity and finding out how we can be more flexible. It’s changing the way we look at hotels and the restaurant industry.”

As Lombard says, “If you just stay at home and wait, nothing will happen. There’s always a way to be innovative that can be beneficial for everyone.” ♦