

With companies increasingly looking for new entertainment options, **Vicki Williams** peruses the ever-growing menu of culinary classes, tours and tastings

Supporting events, from grands prix to world-class cricket and rugby competitions, were once a top choice for corporate entertaining, be it for staff or clients. But times are changing, and companies looking for something different are now becoming aware of the growing influence of all things culinary. From guided tours to masterclasses and gourmet festivals, both locally and abroad, corporate entertaining, with a strong focus on epicurean pleasures, is giving sport a real run for its money.

Josh Oakes, director of MPT Corporate Events, says: "We have seen an increasing demand from companies for culinary experiences and wine appreciation activities. As the Asian market becomes more adventurous and makes requests for entertainment experiences that are new, exclusive and a little bit different, we expect demand to continue to grow."

The Australian company has organised 15 corporate culinary events in the last three months alone. Clients have included a leading telecommunications company, a recruitment firm, and a well-known movie studio. Popular choices have included: A Foodies Journey Through The Mornington Peninsula, A Yarra Valley Wine Blending event, an interactive sommelier-led Chef's Table event, and a chef-led Truffle Hunt. Group sizes range from sessions of 10 people to groups of 300 people.

And it's not just Australian companies seeking out MPT's services. Oakes says: "We



have a lot of business coming from Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines. Our innovative, 'hands on' culinary entertainment experiences are very successful, particularly in the Asian market."

GASTRONOMIC PLEASURES

Also providing gourmet entertainment is A Taste of Spain. The company organises private culinary programmes all year in Spain, a country known for its food and wine, and home to some of the most famous Michelin-starred restaurants in the world. Miguel Ullibarrí, one of the company's partners, says: "Corporate is a growing segment of our business and we tailor-made 18 entertainment programmes for companies in 2012. Most of our enquiries come from the US, northern Europe and Australia, but enquiries from Asia doubled last year." Ullibarrí actually expects demand for the company's services to increase even further this year.

The culinary tours, which can be as short as one day, are the most popular choice. Ullibarrí says: "Andalusia is particularly attractive among Asian clients, as it encompasses the essence of Spain: beautiful landscape, World Heritage cities and internationally renowned foods and wines such as tapas, Ibérico ham, olive oil, seafood and sherry."

The company recently hosted a corporate group from the US, putting together a comprehensive 10-day programme that saw the group travel through Catalonia, the Basque Country, the La Rioja wine region and Madrid. Ullibarrí says: "This programme included private visits to gourmet food and wine purveyors, hands-on cooking classes, tutored food and wine tastings as well as meals at noted restaurants."

Ullibarrí believes that there is a simple reason for the increasing popularity of corporate entertaining centred around gastronomy: pleasure. He says: "Food and wine are a great source of pleasure. It's not just about the eating, either. What makes it special is the cooking, tasting, learning where foods come from and how they're made, and discovering the culture of a region through its food and wine."



OPPOSITE & THIS PAGE: Classic culinary creations from db Bistro Moderne restaurant in Marina Bay Sands



EVENTS TO SAVOUR



UNDERSTANDING HONG KONG'S LOCAL CUISINE

In addition to culinary walks, Little Adventures in Hong Kong provides an Eating Concierge Service that may appeal to companies entertaining guests who are not from Hong Kong. Company founder Daisann McLane says: "We take the guesswork and anxiety out of Chinese cuisine dining, at the same time giving insight into the local food culture. We help choose the restaurant and work with the restaurant manager to develop a custom menu that incorporates the restaurant's signature dishes and any seasonal specialities. One of our hosts will attend the dinner to facilitate and guide diners through the meal, as well as give guests more insight into the history of Hong Kong food, and its current scene."



A TASTE OF CELEBRITY

Singapore's Marina Bay Sands (MBS) is also attracting companies seeking to entertain with a sybaritic journey of celebrity chef fare. The resort is unique in the Lion City in that it is home to six celebrity chef restaurants. One spokesperson for MBS said: "One option is a 'dine-around' experience. Guests can commence with a pre-dinner aperitif and nibbles at one of our six celebrity chef restaurants, and then proceed to different consecutive celebrity chef restaurants to enjoy their appetisers, main meals, desserts and, finally, digestifs."

A growing trend for MBS, as well as stand-alone celebrity chef restaurants, is for companies to request private events with the particular celebrity chef in attendance. The spokesperson for MBS said: "For example, last year a company commissioned celebrity chef Justin Quek to create a custom menu, and we transformed a private space into an extension of Quek's renowned Sky on 57, creating an one-of-a-kind, unforgettable dining experience for the 1,800 guests."

MBS has also launched a three-day gourmet food and wine appreciation event, Epicurean Market, which was held recently. "Epicurean Market brought together the finest in international culinary delights and wines, and allowed guests to sample from the restaurants of acclaimed chefs and 80 establishments, 30 culinary masterclasses and workshops, plus personal appearances by celebrity chefs Nancy Silverton, Daniel Boulud, Tetsuya Wakuda and Justin Quek." The Epicurean Market was such a success it will now become an annual event.

FESTIVALS FOR FOODIES

Major food festivals are also a popular choice for corporate entertainment because of the variety of options. Classes, workshops, talks, dinners, tastings and more allow companies to entertain around the activities that appeal the most. Examples include Singapore's World Gourmet Summit (April 16-26), France's Fête de la Gastronomie (September 20-22) and Hong Kong's Wine and Dine (October 31-November 3).

This year's World Gourmet Summit (WGS), which is supported by the Singapore Tourism Board, marks the 17th edition of this highly popular food event, which attracts local and international celebrity chefs and award-winning winemakers, and takes place at various locations across Singapore. Jeannie Lim, executive director, exhibitions



“MAJOR FOOD FESTIVALS ARE A POPULAR CHOICE FOR CORPORATE ENTERTAINMENT BECAUSE OF THE VARIETY OF OPTIONS AVAILABLE”

& conferences and conventions & meetings, Singapore Tourism Board, says: "This year's event celebrating Artisans & The Art Of Dining, features innovative and unique gastronomic events such as Singapore's first ever Hearts On Fire Edible Fashion Show, Citibank Gastronomic Jam Session chef demonstrations, celebrity chef dinners and hands-on workshops."

WGS is just one of a growing number of food events being held in Singapore. Also coming up is Savour (April 11-14), a gourmet food festival showcasing over 25 noted chefs and 60 award-winning dishes, with over 300 complimentary chef masterclasses, workshops and demonstrations; and the World Street Food Congress 2013 (May 31-June 9), a new event that will celebrate street food from

around the world. Lim says: "The trend for culinary themed, education programmes extends to corporate entertainment."

Building on the success of last year, the Fête de la Gastronomie has been extended to three days. Last year's one-day-only fair saw over 4,000 events take place across France, and in select partner cities such as Tokyo and New York. The event celebrates French cuisine and its global appeal, with cooking demonstrations and classes, food fairs, tours, food and wine-pairing programmes, banquets and picnics, and specially priced restaurant menus.

This year's Hong Kong Wine and Dine Festival will be held in a new venue, the Central Harbourfront Promenade, and promises to be bigger and better than previous years according to the Hong Kong Tourism Board. Last year's festival attracted almost 190,000 visitors, 200 wine booths, and over 100 gourmet food booths. The festival was followed up with a month-long series of events and promotions. Kenneth Wong, GM, MICE & Cruise, Hong Kong Tourism Board, said: "Corporate groups tend to look for an in-depth experience when entertaining, and diversified culinary options and activities provided by this signature festival can cater to this need." With such diversity, corporate entertaining of a culinary nature provides enough choice to sate even the most demanding of guests. ■

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World Street Food Congress
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Hong Kong Wine & Dine Festival
www.discoverhongkong.com

Fête de la Gastronomie
www.fete-gastronomie.fr/en/edition-2013/



ITINERARIES



A TASTE OF SPAIN – DISCOVER ANDALUSIAN DELICACIES

One day tours are possible, but this six-day tour highlights the wide range of possibilities on offer:

DAY 1

After checking into the hotel – housed in a palace in the heart of Seville – take part in a guided walking tour, visiting the main monuments. This will be combined with a tapas sampling itinerary around the historic town centre.

DAY 2

Take a guided tour through the colourful food market before attending a hands-on cooking class, learning how to prepare a range of Andalusian specialities. Once the cooking is done, enjoy the authentic meal. The evening is free.

DAY 3

Visit Aracena Natural Park, before a private visit to an artisan Ibérico ham producer, followed by a tasting. Enjoy a home-made



lunch in the farmhouse, featuring Ibérico products and seasonal organic produce. The evening is free.

DAY 4

Day excursion to Jerez de la Frontera, one hour's drive from Seville and home to an amazing variety of sherry. Visit a traditional cellar for an insightful look into the history and process of making sherry, followed by a tutored tasting. Then, indulge in lunch at one of the best restaurants in town. The evening is free.

DAY 5

High-speed train from Seville to Cordoba (less than an hour). Take part in a guided walking tour through the old town, featuring narrow winding streets, tiny, hidden squares and a famous mosque. Dinner at a noted local restaurant.

DAY 6

Take a one-hour drive to Zuheros, a whitewashed hilltop village with wonderful views of the Subbética Natural Park. Visit a prestigious olive oil producer for a masterclass in tasting premium extra virgin olive oils. Lunch is in a nearby village restaurant that was once an olive oil mill. Back to Cordoba for a free evening.