

Foodservice Shifts Loom Large at Casinos

Foodservice in the gaming sector continues to evolve, pandemic or not.

Even before COVID-19 emerged last spring, casino restaurants had gone through a number of ideations necessary to adapt to the ever-changing gaming industry. From their start as lavish buffet concepts, geared toward satiating gamblers, then moving toward more upscale fine-dining concepts meant to attract those looking for a night out for both eating and testing their luck, restaurants became more of an attraction than simply a value-add at casinos.

Changing Formats

“With COVID-19, they shut down buffets, and the big challenge will be getting people to come back in,” says Arlene Spiegel, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates, New York City, who is working on the Cherokee Entertainment Casino projects. “The casinos also are connected to hotels and have local visitors and tourists coming in. A big part of the marketing, incentives and accommodations was the buffet, which took up 12,000 to 30,000 square feet in some of the properties. They needed to decide what to do with that space.”

“Casinos continue to do most of the bulk prep and cooking in their commissaries or BOH kitchens,” Spiegel says. “The buffets however, formerly had open stations scattered all over for self-service – some were attended for Carveries and Stir Fry concepts. But by and large, guests were using tongs, ladles, fingers and self-serve beverage stations, which is no longer acceptable.”

Transitioning away from buffets represents a trend among many of Spiegel’s gaming and racetrack clients that precedes the current pandemic. “I converted one several years ago for Harrah’s in Pennsylvania,” she says. “The 30,000-square-foot buffet was a battle-axe, not attractive and created lots of waste.” Harrah’s was seeking to rebrand the venue and the menu to expand its senior demographic and appeal to those in their 50s and 60s who seek a higher-level experience. “We converted Harrah’s former buffet into a streetscape food hall model called The Block which was reflective of the immigrant Mom and Pop food businesses that settled the area.”

Achieving Economies and Control

“At the Cherokee Nation property in West Siloam Springs, OK, the food hall will incorporate two 24/7 concepts to accommodate guests who are in a hurry or want leisurely dining. There’s a bakery café with a meal-centric grab ‘n go and a full-service restaurant, as well as four unique outlets to choose from,” Spiegel says. “The awesome part with this project is that we’re not touching the back of house, just the front facades, that will operate as individual restaurants with both remote and on-site kiosks for ordering. Guests can have a visual, authentic, multi-concept experience without hopping from station to station.”

The stations are programmed to be self-contained and operate independent of each other. For example, The Mexican Station menu would have eight - ten meal and snack items, along with signature soft drinks and alcohol-based beverages like frozen margaritas,” Spiegel says. “Instead of a one-price, all-you-can-eat buffet, the food hall is priced like a street-side urban restaurant, with meals and beverages costing a bit more, but the quality and experience is elevated. We’re also eliminating the waste and labor of a buffet.”

“The food hall model puts the operator in control of the hours and offerings based on traffic and demand. Foodservice never has to completely close, but all venues don’t need to always be open,” Spiegel explains. “This way, casinos will always be able to serve guests in a profitable, pragmatic way.”

“Employing modern POS technology and a wireless logistical plan, will ensure that getting food safely and quickly to all parts of the property and dining areas will be seamless and be incorporated into loyalty programs,” Spiegel says.

“There’s opportunity to offer take-home meals and become a restaurant outlet for local businesspeople as well as for hotel guests. As long as you have a kitchen, food, a chef and effectively market and communicate the offerings, the food hall is a safe bet.” ●