



Saving Private Parties

On a Mission to Bring Banquet Business Back Alive

By Howard Riell

Prior to the pandemic, investment in building banquet and catering business was considered the “smart money” in the full-service sector.

Where is the Happy Ending?

It is hard to discuss the status of any restaurant sector (other than quick-service chicken and pizza perhaps) without the litany of sad pandemic stories.

Says Arlene Spiegel, president of Arlene Spiegel & Associates in New York City “With the ups and downs and downright shutdowns as a result of the pandemic, the banquet business has been decimated.

Clients have requested their deposits back and are very reluctant to sign any guarantees for future bookings. This has left this sector of the industry without a party or a plan.”

Another burden on banquet operators is the ever changing rules and regulations about the number of guests and protocols required for indoor and

outdoor gatherings. Some states are forcing establishments to become “like law enforcement agencies instead of providing a warm welcome to guests,” Spiegel notes. “Who is going to tell a guest entering the ballroom that they cannot enter because they didn’t provide proof of a negative COVID test? Who is going to tell the bride and groom that the bridesmaid’s temperature reading is too high?” And then add varying personal philosophies about COVID restrictions clouding what should be a joyous occasion, such as guests angered by social distancing and other cautionary restrictions.

Are private parties destined for a Time magazine “... Is Dead” cover story? Fortunately, people still want to celebrate anniversaries, birthdays, bar mitzvahs, and weddings over food. To make a come back to pre-COVID levels, restaurants need to combine high standards of operation and service with scrupulous attention to sanitation and an openness to innovation. Like every aspect of the restaurant business, however, the game has changed. **RS&G**