

Hosting Creative Special Events At Your Facility

MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



Hosting special foodservice events can impart fun and festivity throughout the year

Whether you work at a long-term care facility, a school, or another non-commercial setting, hosting special foodservice events can impart fun and festivity into the year. Not only are these events engaging for your clientele, but they offer you the chance to showcase your department's culinary creativity.

BENEFITS OF SPECIAL EVENTS

Aside from the pure fun factor, special events offer numerous benefits for your clients and staff:

- Gives residents, clients, or students the chance to feel excitement and anticipation about the upcoming event.
- Helps develop a strong sense of community. Allison Thirion, MPH, RD, LD, FAND, District Dietitian at Cleveland

Metropolitan School District, emphasizes this point: "Special events are a great way to engage with internal and external partners. Food brings people together, and we use that philosophy to help guide us in planning. We try to not only engage with the students, but also the school staff, administration, and families when we do these events."

- Enhances morale among staff. According to Chef Rocky Dunnam, CEC, CCA, WCEC, CDM, CFPP, Area Support Director at Forefront Healthcare-Texas, "Special events break the mundane of the daily grind for your staff. It allows staff to get creative and to work outside of their normal duties, which is always fun and energizing."



Chrissy Carroll, MPH, RD is a registered dietitian, freelance writer, and brand consultant based in central Massachusetts.

- Provides staff members with an opportunity for team building. Employees might enjoy working together to design a unique menu, or gathering as a team to create themed décor.
- Offers staff the chance to further develop skills in menu planning, cooking, and presentation (all of which are also important on a daily basis).
- Showcases your facility's culinary talents. In addition, it also allows you to test new recipes and concepts. According to Dunnam, "If you find that a particular recipe is really well received at an event, it may be wise to have it on a menu at some point on a more permanent basis!"

CREATIVE IDEAS

Stumped about what type of creative special events you could offer? Here are nine ideas:

Hawaiian Luau

Break out the leis, play some traditional Hawaiian music, and add festive palm tree and pineapple table centerpieces (quick tip: fresh pineapples make great décor that can be repurposed later in the week at meals). Create a menu that features delicious luau food like Huli Huli chicken, shredded pork, macaroni salad, sweet potatoes, and Hawaiian rolls.

Live Cooking Demos

Let your audience get a behind-the-scenes look at your culinary expertise! Chef Timothy S. Wright, CEC, CDM, CFPP utilized this idea for World Chef Day in his position as Executive Chef of Cleveland Metropolitan School District.

Wright says, "I co-presented with another chef from a local food company for a classroom of second and third graders. We demonstrated a Hummus Pita "Pizza" with an assortment of fresh

Sunday each month you set up a cart with eggs, vegetables, diced proteins, etc. and then cook custom scrambles to order tableside—seem to be a constant win."

Gardening Club

Creating a farm-to-table connection can be valuable at any age. Schools or senior living facilities can install raised beds in an outdoor area, invest in indoor hydroponic equipment, or try inexpensive windowsill herbs. Residents or students who are interested in being involved can help tend



HAWAIIAN LUAU

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vegetables and hummus, and had students build their own. We were able to show students ingredients that they might be unfamiliar with. Students were encouraged to sample along the way and to try new things."

Dunnam uses similar live events in his work: "I really like trying to incorporate live action cooking when possible. Events like "Sunday Scramble"—where one

the plants, which could later be used in meal preparation.

The initial investment is sometimes costly (in both time and money), and the initiative may require support from other staff, but research has shown numerous benefits to this type of project. For example, a 2017 review in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* found

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that gardening interventions result in a small but positive increase in fruit and vegetable intake among children. Similarly, other research has found benefits of gardening for residents in long-term care, including decreased levels of agitation among those with dementia.

Art and Appetizers

If you are working in a long-term care facility, try bringing in a local artist who can do a directed paint event with residents, while serving some tasty appetizers. If you work at a school, perhaps you can coordinate a fundraising night with your PTA, offering the “arts and apps night” to parents for a fee. Be sure the ticketed cost covers the expenses for the food, artist, and supplies, along with extra to support fundraising efforts.

Holiday Events

From Halloween to Christmas to Hannukah, holidays provide the perfect backdrop for a creative foodservice event. For example, if you work at a school, perhaps you team up with a local farm to supply fresh pumpkins in October. You can teach students about the edible parts of the pumpkin, and demonstrate how to roast pumpkin seeds (with sampling)!

For Thanksgiving, maybe your long-term care facility teams up with a local school where students can color in festive placemats with messages for your residents. And of course, you can serve a traditional turkey dinner with all the fixings.

Pajama Party

It may seem silly, but pajama parties can be a hit for kids and adults alike! Consider serving a meal like “breakfast for dinner” if you plan this as an evening event, or perhaps host this as a special afternoon event with healthy appetizers or fun snacks. You can also team up with other staff to include activities as part of your party, like dancing or a DIY photo station.

Take Me Out to the Ballgame

There are few things more nostalgic for many people than a good ‘ol baseball game – so why not incorporate it into your foodservice plans? At your long-term care facility, you could celebrate opening day with a “concessions” table set up with classic baseball snacks (like soft pretzels or popcorn) and use festive décor throughout the dining room.

Or at your school, you might test out nutritionally-elevated ways of serving stadium classics, like a lower-sodium hot dog on a whole wheat bun with pineapple salsa, or nachos topped with shredded chicken, beans, and loads of veggies.

The Big Game

Sticking with the sports theme, consider celebrating the Super Bowl with a foodservice event. Thirion describes how her school district embraced this, stating “The event was held on the Friday before the Super Bowl. The students were very excited to see some of their ‘fan favorite’ foods like buffalo wings as part of the menu that day. Our staff wore shirts to support their favorite teams, and our physical education teachers helped us make a video that we played in our cafeterias and on social media. We also used the event to kick-off the contest for our annual ‘Breakfast with a Cleveland Browns Player,’ an event we do each March.”

Summer Picnic

Is there any better way to celebrate the warm weather than a fun picnic? Bringing residents or students outdoors is wonderful, but don’t let it deter you if that’s not a possibility – you can bring the picnic inside by using gingham tablecloths or tray liners, and sprucing up a communal dining area with fresh flowers. For the menu, consider traditional picnic foods like sandwiches, green salad, potato salad, and watermelon slices.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SPECIAL EVENTS

As a foodservice manager, you're well aware of the food safety regulations and budgetary constraints that affect your daily operations. These are also factors to be mindful of when planning special events, along with a couple other unique issues. Here are some considerations to keep in mind:

Food Safety

- All standard food safety rules and regulations still apply for special events. Wright notes, "Food safety is always a consideration when we do any type of presentation. As we plan for the event, we build in control points where needed." Thirion echoes this, stating "We try to do as many of our special events as possible in the school cafeterias. That way, we have access to the kitchen and can better manage food safety issues vs. prepping or transporting food into a less-ideal space."

- If staff members are wearing costumes as part of a special event, be sure the outfits are safe and sanitary for food handlers. For example, staff should still wear a hat or hair restraint, should not have long or polished nails, and should not wear jewelry.

Budget

- Special events may require different staffing levels than normal daily operations, depending on the complexity of the menu and the involvement of employees during the event. Be sure to account for this in your budget.
- Be creative with menu planning, thinking of how event ingredients can be repurposed later. According to Dunnam, "I like to work ingredients into events that are easily cross-utilized in other areas of the operation (like retail or a featured item on the menu) to keep costs under control."

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YOU MIGHT TEST

OUT nutritionally-elevated ways of serving stadium classics, like a lower-sodium hot dog on a whole wheat bun with pineapple salsa, or nachos topped with shredded chicken, beans, and loads of veggies.



- If your budget is tight, consider searching for donations or grants that can help support these events. For example, a local grocery store may be willing to donate food, or an area chef may be willing to donate their time. There are also many grant opportunities available for non-commercial organizations – be sure to apply! As Thirion states, “It’s always great when we can team up with a community partner to both tap into their resources and lighten our load for executing events. We’ve been able to partner with chefs, local and national food companies and farms, and organizations like Fuel Up to Play 60 and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation.”

Additional Logistics

- If the special event is taking the place of a regular mealtime, be sure to address the required nutritional components and diet patterns for your facility/clients.
- Consider collaborating with additional staff—like the dietitian, nurses, activity directors, or teachers—when planning an event. Wright mentions, “I am very fortunate to work with a great dietitian. We collaborate and support one another to provide fun events for our students and staff.” Working with others may allow you to bridge the themed event across multiple aspects of the day.
- Not all residents, staff, or students will be comfortable with concepts that encourage themed attire. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t host such events—just make sure there’s no requirement; offering alternative ideas may help alleviate any discomfort.



SPECIAL EVENTS DON'T HAVE TO BE HUGE TO BE MEMORABLE. Even something as small as a monthly ice cream party can be an activity to anticipate.

- If using festive décor, see if there is storage space where you can keep it for future events. This can help reduce the budget the next time you host the same type of event.
- Don’t forget to ask for feedback on what people liked or disliked, which will help with future planning.
- Lastly, remember that special events do not have to be huge to be memorable. As Thirion mentioned, “Special events can be as big or as small as you like.” Dunnam adds, “Even something as small as a monthly ice cream party seems to always be an anticipated time.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

As you can see, there are many ways to introduce fun into the lives of your residents, students, and staff through special events. Make a plan that fits within your budget, and don’t be afraid to solicit help through grants or community partnerships. Flex those creative culinary muscles and you’ll be sure to come up with an amazing event. **E**

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Pride in Foodservice Week

February 7-11, 2022

Member Appreciation Week

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holiday season!*

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CE Questions | MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



This Level II article provides basic to advanced resources. The desired outcome is to facilitate application of knowledge into practice by drawing connections among ideas and using information in new situations.

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1. Which of the following is most likely to be a benefit of special foodservice events?
 - A. Improved client and staff morale
 - B. Reduced cost per meal
 - C. Reduced planning time
2. Which of the following is *not* true regarding research on gardening interventions?
 - A. They may help increase fruit and vegetable intake among children
 - B. They may help decrease agitation among residents with dementia
 - C. They require very little in terms of cost and staff resources
3. Your long-term care facility has a small budget, but you’d still like to plan a special event. Which of the following would be the *best* choice?
 - A. Purchase outdoor raised beds and start a year-round garden club
 - B. Create a made-to-order scrambled egg station once a month utilizing standard menu ingredients
 - C. Host a monthly “arts and appetizers” evening where your department covers all food and entertainment costs
4. Your school is hosting a “Game Day” event. Which would be the best option for festive staff attire, keeping foodservice regulations in mind?
 - A. Clean team jersey
 - B. Nails painted with favorite team colors
 - C. Festive beaded necklaces in team colors
5. Your school wants to host an interactive after-school event for students. Which would likely be the *best* option when it comes to food and student safety?
 - A. Students prepare rainbow fruit kebabs in the cafeteria with fruit that was cut by staff in the kitchen; each student eats their own kebab
 - B. Students prepare fried buffalo cauliflower, frying it themselves with staff supervision in the kitchen; the cauliflower is placed on a platter for everyone to share
 - C. Students should never be involved in any type of food preparation, even for special events
6. Which of the following would be the *least* desired option for funding special events in long-term care?
 - A. Securing grant or community partnership opportunities
 - B. Working the event into your standard budget
 - C. Requiring residents to pay to attend events
7. Which of the following should be completed after an event?
 - A. Obtain feedback to help with future program planning
 - B. Immediately start planning the next event
 - C. Throw out themed décor

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