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How to host a restaurant week

The Kansas City area has already lost 15% of its restaurants to either temporary or permanent closures amid the pandemic. That makes this year's Restaurant Week, held to boost sales during a traditionally slow time of year, potentially more important than ever. That's according to Derek Klaus, director of communications at Visit KC, the tourism organization that sponsors the annual restaurant-booster event. "This year, we're really accentuating that our local restaurants need our support now more than ever," Klaus said. "We used to amplify the value aspect. Now, it's getting out and supporting local restaurants at a critical time."Around the country, Restaurant Week organizers understand this is a life-or-death moment for independent operators. They're also realizing their annual promotional events are more critical than ever."Historically, they tell us this is one of their strongest weeks of the year," Klaus said of the Kansas City event, which started earlier this month. "We're hearing a really positive reception."But Restaurant Weeks will look a lot different in 2021 than in previous years, with many dining rooms shuttered because of the coronavirus and many operators struggling to survive. Most are pivoting to takeout-focused promotions, and many organizers are waiving registration fees.**New York City: Birthplace of Restaurant Week**The first Restaurant Week started as a lunch-only promo in New York City in 1992. The event began as a way to welcome the Democratic National Convention to the city. It launched with 95 participating restaurants, all offering prix-fixe menus. Last year, more than 360 NYC restaurants participated in the event, all offering set-price meals for lunch and dinner. And now cities large and small around the country host their own Restaurant Weeks. This year, New York's event is called "NYC Restaurant Week To Go," and runs from Jan. 25-31, with an optional weeklong extension the first week of February. Event organizer NYC & Company waived the fee for restaurants to participate in this pandemic-style Restaurant Week. Previously, the entry fee ran \$2,800 for Manhattan restaurants and \$1,500 for those in the other boroughs. That price covered both winter and summer restaurant weeks plus annual membership in NYC & Company, along with its marketing clout.Those savings attracted Paolo Del Gatto, operations manager of Soccarat Paella Bar. He is offering the \$20.21 lunch at the restaurant's two Manhattan locations. "Soccarat hasn't participated in a few years, but Del Gatto feels this model "is a good formula. It's fun and easy to execute," he says, and can reach a larger clientele. The previous lunch specials of \$25 were a draw at the midtown location but not so much further downtown.Soccarat is offering Paella for One—a dish that is usually prepared to share—along with an appetizer of croquettes. Both these items travel well, Del Gatto says. During the pandemic, the restaurant purchased new to-go containers that better retain heat. Guests can order the prix fixe lunch for pickup or delivery via Uber Eats and Grubhub. Barbara Sibley, chef-owner of La Palapa in New York City's Greenwich Village, is a first-time participant in NYC & Company's restaurant week promotion. In the past, she felt that the typical restaurant week customer gravitates toward pricier midtown spots where a typical two-course lunch can run \$50 or more. La Palapa's more residential downtown location isn't ideal for business lunches and her menu is always reasonably priced so "deals" are not that compelling, Sibley says.This year, however, the to-go theme is a good fit and NYC & Company offers additional online promotional support. "Participating is a way to remind people that we're here and open and ready to serve our guests," says Sibley. She is offering a prix fixe menu that can be ordered any time throughout the day, focusing on food that travels well. Included in the \$20.21 meal are soup, taquitos, guacamole and dessert—but no sorbet or ice cream, she notes. Plus, Sibley enjoys the creative challenge of meals-to-go. "We can get really innovative with the menu this year," Sibley says. She is also offering a takeout restaurant week menu at her booth in Gotham West, a marketplace/food hall that's further uptown on Manhattan's west side."These are the places that attract new customers who wouldn't otherwise come in. But this year, the public really wants to support our restaurants and restaurant week deals help them do that." -Greg Casten.**Big changes to Washington, D.C.'s Restaurant Week**In Washington, D.C., the Restaurant Association of Metro Washington on Tuesday postponed its winter restaurant week promotion by one week, so as not to interfere with possible political unrest around Inauguration Day. It is now running from Jan. 25-Feb. 7, and although 25% capacity indoor dining resumes Jan. 22, the Association is sticking with the theme "RW-TO-GO." Greg Casten, owner-operator of four seafood-centric restaurants in downtown D.C., is focusing on "food that's not in your house." At the Tavern at Ivy City Smokehouse, the \$35 three-course dinner menu includes a starter of housemade clam chowder or mixed green salad, an entrée choice of grilled salmon, grilled branzino or a half rack of heritage pork ribs, and a dessert of banana bread with vanilla ice cream. Tony & Joe's Seafood Place, another D.C. restaurant in Casten's Fish & Fire Food Group, is featuring a lobster dinner for \$55. It includes an appetizer of clam chowder or salad, a whole steamed lobster and the "chef's dessert of the day." A three-course lunch is also available at Tony & Joe's for \$22, with more casual entree choices such as shrimp tacos and a crab cake sandwich."All these menus are simple enough not to tax our inventory or our staff," says Casten. His restaurants are offering curbside pickup, limited delivery and in some cases, outdoor dining.Casten has participated in RAMW's restaurant weeks in previous years and found that eateries on the higher end get a bigger bump in traffic. "These are the places that attract new customers who wouldn't otherwise come in," he says, "but this year, the public really wants to support our restaurants and restaurant week deals help them do that." Attracting new restaurants**Kansas City's Restaurant Week** has traditionally charged operators \$200-\$300 to participate, Klaus said. But that fee has been waived this year, with the costs underwritten by two area foundations. Klaus said he has seen dozens of new, first-time participants, including a large number of restaurants owned by women and minorities. "We collaborated with multi-cultural chambers of commerce and business organizations to cast a wider net," he said. "January is traditionally a slower period for our restaurants. Add to that a pandemic and it takes on a whole other light."coronavirus_independents News "What if you held a Restaurant Week and nobody came? Restaurant Weeks are a relatively recent development in the Nutmeg State, and they're multiplying like mad. Some have been wildly successful, others somewhat successful, still others negligibly successful. The origin of the Restaurant Week concept can be traced to the Democratic National Convention held in New York in 1992. The idea was hatched by the late restaurateur Joseph Baum (a Cornell University Hotel School graduate famous for creating themed restaurants like The Four Seasons Restaurant and Windows on the World) and by Zagat Survey founder Tim Zagat (whom I worked for as the editor of the Westchester County edition for a couple of years but have never met). Since no one in Connecticut has more experience with Restaurant Weeks than I, since I am fortunate enough to have a pulpit from which I can preach, and since readers count on me to tell it exactly like it is, I'm going to set forth what I believe goes into creating a successful Restaurant Week. Close followers of this blog know that I recently donated my time and expertise to help create a Restaurant Week in Hamden, the town in which I grew up and currently reside. Hamden was a town which many people overlooked, but it had a handful of fine restaurants which deserved greater attention. Promoting them proved to be an incredibly rewarding experience. Working with newly elected Mayor Scott Jackson and Nancy Dudchik of the Hamden Chamber of Commerce, I was able to shape a Restaurant Week for which people came from near and far, turning out in droves. Several restaurants had lines out the door almost every night. One 55- seat restaurant did an amazing 1,700 covers in seven days, and almost 300 in one night. Still, realistically, there are at least a dozen towns in Connecticut with better restaurant scenes than Hamden's, and yet only a couple of Restaurant Weeks that have worked as well. It's not that I want to call on the carpet the creators of disappointing Restaurant Weeks, but some are clearly not organizing these events effectively. I suppose no one really gets hurt, but if a Restaurant Week produces only a modest and momentary bump in business, then limited town, chamber and other resources clearly could have been better utilized. One of my major concerns about Restaurant Weeks is the tendency to select too high a price point. New Haven (November 7-12) is the one town that has become such a dining destination that it seems able to thrive with a price point of \$29. Even so, one suspects that only top-tier restaurants are reaping the full benefits of that price point. It's difficult for a medium-priced restaurant to compete for customers with a Union League Café, a Bespoke, or an Ibiza Restaurant. Mid-level restaurants do benefit from the spillover of jam-packed restaurants, but I would suggest that the best way for them to compete is to up the value they provide by including an extra course or glass of beer or wine. The Taste of Hartford and Connecticut Restaurant Week (in the past) had stuck to a \$20 price point, and that is what I advocate for the Nutmeg State. If top-flight restaurants like Peppercorn's, Dish Bar & Grill, Morton's Steakhouse, Feng Asian Bistro, Carbone's, Mickey's and Park Central Tavern can manage that price point, any Connecticut restaurant probably can. I consider higher price points ill-advised. Any restaurateur who says he can't create an interesting three-course menu for \$20 off of which he can still make a little money is either being disingenuous or may be losing his edge. The real question for a restaurateur is, would you rather have a modest surge in business at a higher profit margin or lines out the door with a lower profit margin? Restaurateurs I talked to who stuck to a \$20 price point scoffed at the notion that anyone would lose money—some experienced the best weeks they had ever had. And none lost sight of the fact that a high percentage of their customers were new customers, giving them an unbeatable chance to expand their customer bases. In Fairfield County, there has been a tendency to price Restaurant Weeks too high. I checked out South Norwalk on a week night during SoNo Restaurant Week, which used a bifurcated \$20 and \$30 price structure for dinner, and I couldn't even tell that there was a special promotion going on. Presumably, participating restaurants drew better later in the week. I talked to one major restaurateur, and that individual was pleased to have had 30 people the night before, a ripple compared to the tidal wave of business experienced during other promotions. And obviously, one was left wondering why the promotion didn't encompass all of Norwalk? I'm going to set forth my rules for doing a Restaurant Week right. Why should I give away "the keys to the city"? Because when a Restaurant Week is done right, everyone who participates benefits. But let me also warn: It's one thing to understand the rules, but it's another to have the mental toughness and consensus-building skills to implement them. Suggestions For A Successful Restaurant Week: 1. Start by forming a tight exploratory committee that includes town leadership, chamber leadership and three or four influential restaurateurs. 2. Make sure you can sign up enough good restaurants to make the event appealing—if you can't do the event right, don't do it at all. 3. Plan on doing real footwork to convince restaurateurs that effective participation should bring them real publicity, new customers, rejuvenated old customers, a big spike in business during the event, and hopefully, raised business afterward. 4. Make sure you have lined up the resources necessary to generate press releases, an effective website or web page, attractive signage, and so on. 5. Charge restaurants a participation fee that's substantial enough to cover most of your promotional costs—you can charge less for lunch-only participants. 6. Collect participation fees far enough in advance so that you don't wind up promoting for free ambivalent restaurants that you wind up dropping. 7. Consider a publicity-generating kickoff event, involving local celebrities, creating commercial tie-ins that will benefit retailers, and so on. 8. Keep things simple—the public doesn't handle complicated messages well. 9. Stick primarily to the three-course, prix-fixe format, preferably with just one price point for lunch and one for dinner. 10. Establish a price point that's so low people will turn out in droves (in today's Connecticut, I recommend \$20 for dinner). 11. Don't overly democratize the organizational process, but rather form strong leadership that gets as many of the restaurants on the same page as possible, and then forget the rest—if the event is a great success, they'll probably join next time. 12. Plan to spend time and energy keeping after the participating restaurateurs, who as a group are some of the busiest and hardest-working people on earth. 13. Encourage participating restaurants to offer value that, separately billed, exceeds the prix-fixe price by at least \$10 per person. 14. Warn restaurateurs to plan carefully their staffing adjustments (hostesses, servers, cooks and dishwashers), supply orders, dishware available, and so on. 15. Tell restaurateurs they shouldn't reduce portion size one iota (remind them that the mission is to expand their customer bases). 16. Encourage restaurateurs not to dumb their menus down, but to make sure they're enticing (but also representative). 17. Advise restaurateurs to include a vegetarian starter and main course. 18. Make certain all menus are posted to the Restaurant Week website well in advance of the event. 19. Promote the event widely through various news media and through social media; encourage restaurants to promote it through their own websites, advertising and social media. 20. Employ plenty of visible signage around town and at the participating eateries. 21. Require participating restaurants to hand out Restaurant Week menus at the same time they hand out regular menus (some may even elect to offer only their Restaurant Week menu). 22. Stay disciplined—inist that restaurateurs uphold the standards you set or you'll regrettably be forced to drop them from further participation. The following photos show what a Restaurant Week should look like. If you think you know your way around Connecticut's restaurants (hint: check our archives, if you get stuck), be the first to identify all of the restaurants shown and win a restaurant review with your date and one of our critics!

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