

Ho-ho-hum

Holiday parties bring tepid tidings to restaurants, caterers

By JOHN CALLEGARI

This holiday season, many businesses are finding they have a little more to celebrate, but local restaurants and catering halls are hardly singing carols. The global recession that took its toll on businesses' bottom lines has also taken a bite out of the holiday office party – that joyous occasion that recognizes employees for a “job well done” – or at least a “job done well enough that we didn’t have to let you go.”

In the past few years, many catering facilities have seen the number of holiday bookings drop off. But this year, small increases in bookings have brought a cautious optimism to those in the hospitality industry.

Mirabelle Restaurant in Stony Brook has seen an uptick in reservations for corporate office parties compared to the past few years, although the size of those parties has been drastically reduced.

“Companies aren’t booking large parties anymore,” Mirabelle Manager Maria Reuge said. “We went from having companies bringing 50 to 100 individuals to their holiday party down to between eight and 15 people for a small, sit-down dinner. Those attending seem to be more of the core group of executive officers for the company. That’s a really interesting trend.”

Roger Bedoian, owner of Ragazzi Italian Kitchen and Bar in Nesconset, agreed with Reuge’s assessment, saying his own establishment will see smaller parties this year than even just a year ago when he opened his doors.

“A party that used to be 50 people will be 20 people this year,” Bedoian said. “It’s interesting; companies aren’t offering to allow their employees’ spouses or acquaintances to come. From a personal standpoint, I can even say I haven’t been invited to as many holiday parties, so it’s not just the parties we have here.”

Smaller numbers don’t necessarily mean business is bad – at least not relative to the economy. Ragazzi has made about the same number of bookings this year as last year, although its off-premises catering for holiday parties has surged. And considering the drop-off in holiday reservations after the 2008 holiday season for Mirabelle, which

Reuge couldn’t quantify, the increase in bookings, even for smaller parties, has been good for the restaurant.

“We’re happy to see the uptick,” Reuge said. “It’s not 2006; it’s 2011. We had lower expectations for this year than we did during the boom years, so we’re happy we exceeded them. Plus, from the beginning of the year to now, we’ve had one of our best years in recent history.”

And that increase doesn’t take into account recent renovations at Mirabelle that turned some underutilized space into the new “Belle Lounge” – a wine and champagne bar with a leather bench and fireplace designed for intimate get-togethers. The new addition only officially opened last week.

“The word is just getting out [about it], so I doubt I’ll pick up too much interest for holiday parties this year as a result, but we are starting to see people ask about renting it for cocktail parties further down the road,” Reuge added.

Perhaps even more good news is that the slight increase in reservations was attained without the need to lower rates for holiday parties. Both venues noted that they had not changed their prices from last year.

Stewart Weiner, executive director and general manager of Danford’s Hotel and Marina, said holiday party bookings at the Port Jefferson landmark are up about 20 percent from last year – a statistic Weiner

attributes partially to the economy and partially to a reinventing of its menu thanks to chef Jonathan Levine, who was hired in July. “Our new chef is really, really making a difference,” Weiner said.

“We had people who lived in the area tell us they didn’t care for the food but gave it another shot because they heard we got a new chef. After trying the food, they went right to our office and booked their holiday office party.”

And each party booked at Danford’s has resulted in at least a couple of reservations at the attached hotel, allowing the facility to pull in double – or even triple – the business, according to Weiner.

“We offer our business parties a special \$99 rate for a room, and we try to encourage them not to drink and drive,” Weiner said. “That’s the nice thing about incorporating a hotel with our venue. Our business is driven up on both sides, and then we get them for breakfast the next day too.”

Encouraging partygoers not to drink and drive may be easier this year. Representatives at many venues have indicated the number of parties with an open bar has dropped off dramatically.

“This year, the trend [for holiday parties] has been toward smaller parties that don’t serve alcohol,” Bedoian said. “Ninety-five percent of all the parties we’re doing are cash bar only. It never used to be like that.”

Bedoian said for many, the cost, coupled with the liabilities, just doesn’t add up. Ragazzi’s most popular holiday package, which charges \$29.95 per head, would be almost double the price – an additional \$25 per person – to include an open bar.

And many small companies have found they can offer holiday parties on-site at a fraction of the price. Bedoian, who noted that his takeout catering service has seen larger increases this year than his holiday party bookings, said one of his clients who held a holiday party at Ragazzi last year decided to do a catered house party for her office this year.

“Instead of a cash bar, she bought the liquor wholesale and had us cater the event,” Bedoian said. “That’s saving them money on both the alcohol and the fact that there’s no gratuity attached to takeout. I think that goes back to the fact that people are still afraid and unsure of where the economy is going.”

Unlike party venues that double as restaurants, bars and lodging facilities, catering halls such as the Crest Hollow Country Club in Woodbury are especially sensitive to fluctuations in holiday business. There, too, reservations are up compared to years past.

“[Holiday party bookings] have come up a little bit,” said Janine Dion, Crest Hollow’s director of sales and marketing. “We make it very convenient for our loyal customers by holding a comparable date for the year after they hold their party here. That results in a considerable number of [re-bookings]. Not all of them were able to do so, but they let us know when they’re able to, they’ll be back.”

Along with an increase in bookings, party venues report that reservations came in earlier this year than previously. Last year, many companies waited until mid-to-late November to schedule their holiday parties. This year, many made their reservations in late October or early November.

“Last year was a strange year,” Weiner said. “The bosses were probably waiting until the very end to see how the finances looked before deciding it was OK to have a party. I think this year they feel they can spend a little money, so that’s a good sign.”

Callegari can be reached at john.callegari@libn.com.

‘JOINER’ PARTIES PICKING UP SPEED

While the number of holiday party bookings has increased, albeit only slightly, from years past, the number of offices participating in holiday “joiner” parties has been picking up along with the number of facilities offering them.

Stewart Weiner, executive director and general manager of Danford’s Hotel and Marina, defines a joiner party as a holiday office party for small businesses that are too small to book their own party but want to enjoy a night out. By coming together with other

small businesses at a single venue, multiple offices share their party.

“Offices with a limited number of employees can’t book a large venue,” Weiner said. “For example, a doctor’s office with only five or six employees isn’t going to book a holiday party here at Danford’s, but if there’s already a holiday party going on that they’re able to join, it becomes an attractive alternative.”

Joiner parties typically include dinner, live music and a dance floor where some office workers are certain to become the talk of the office after channeling their inner Elaine Benes.

Danford’s is trying its hand at a joiner party for the first time this year, calling its offering the “Jingle Mingle Party.” Scheduled to take place Friday night, the party already has 250 reservations, 75 more attendees than Danford’s largest booked individual office party this year.

Danford’s opted to go the cash bar route, which kept ticket prices at \$35 per person. But some prefer to have an open bar, which drives costs up to \$69 or \$75 in the cases of the Garden City Hotel and Four Food Studio in Melville, respectively.

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