

## NYC catering queen's tips and trends for holiday parties

By TERESA NOVELLINO

**W**hen Liz Neumark started Great Performances in New York City 30 years ago, she was a budding photographer running a small catering business on the side. It was staffed by women in the arts like herself who really wanted to be Broadway actors or dancers but also waited tables.

They needed a regular paycheck but had no use for the men who dominated the restaurant business at the time, sometimes taking advantage of the city's constant influx of artsy ingénues.

"This was just the beginning of the catering industry, and it was dominated by male chauvinist pigs, and we didn't want to do that," Neumark tells me. "So we said OK, let us be the ones to run our own business."

Fast forward to 2013, and Neumark, also a cookbook author, has turned her side job into multimillion dollar catering company that boasts exclusive contracts with the likes of the Plaza Hotel, Dizzy's at Lincoln Center, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Sotheby's. While her business is about both food and hospitality, the latter reigns. "Even more important than what you serve is how you serve it—that's what is memorable," Neumark says.

Here are some of the tips and trends she sees among businesses throwing parties during the holidays, and year round.

**Corporate clients rule:** Holiday employee parties, one of the casualties of the recession, have come back as more modest affairs. Rather than big bashes that united everyone from the mail room to the boardroom in one place, there are now smaller team gatherings. As for the rebound back to 2009 levels of

event revenue, that is being driven not by employee bashes but by "corporate entertainment," in which businesses host more intimate gatherings for their best clients, Neumark says.

**Startup savings:** If you're a startup looking to save costs, family-style and buffet meals are a very economical way to

go, suggests Neumark. Another way to shave costs: order eco-friendly disposable china. "The cups, plates, napkins, if you're renting it all and have a tight budget, you can save \$30 or \$40 a head by using disposables," she says. Great Performances also encourages budget-conscious entrepreneurs to get their own bars, and take advantage of cool office space. Staffers at startups tend to be creative types, so deploy them to help with music, lighting and simply moving things around for an event.



Liz Neumark is the founder of New York City-based Great Performances. *Rebecca McAlpin*

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**Hip and historic venues:** The trends in settings for holiday bashes can range from “super raw loft spaces” to very intimate, curated environments. Some companies like a place that has a day life such as a historic home or an old industrial site, Neumark says. For events outside the city, she has partners in the Hudson Valley. While “everyone wants to be married on a farm,” more rural settings are also a good place for team-building events, she says. Another venue for team events: culinary centers, where the whole team can get together and cook a meal.

**Eating local and vegging out:** In recent years, there have been “huge, huge changes” in what’s on the menu at restaurants, and at gatherings. “People are very interested in eating locally and incorporating that into the events,” Neumark says. While kale and Brussels sprouts are trendy menu items, the farm to table movement is really about taste. “What we try to impart to our clients is that it has intrinsic value in terms of flavors,” Neumark says. “Something that is fresh and local is going to taste better. We have so many clients that respond to that.” In line with the above, menus that feature items for people who either willingly or by necessity have restricted diets are becoming much more popular. Gluten-free is big, while vegetarian and vegan are “huge,” Neumark says. As for beverages, the “local trend” has dipped into cocktails too with the use of fresh local herbs and herbs preserved for winter becoming hot.

**Small plates:** In terms of cuisine, ethnic remains big, but Great Performances tries to give it a local twist. For instance, if it’s German, they’ll do a beer garden theme with craft beers. Small plates and tapas or family-style dishes are another popular approach.

While we reached out to Neumark because of her decades of experience in throwing parties, and her long list of awards, including the James Beard award and Ernst & Young New York’s Entrepreneur of the Year, we found out

that one of her secrets is bringing a youthful, experimental approach to the job.

For her, that includes owning and operates the 60-acre Katchkie Farm in upstate New York that provides ingredients for the dishes served at her events, and for a CSA (community supported agriculture) program she provides for companies in New York that want fresh produce delivered to their workplaces. It also where Neumark’s signature retail line of condiments and jarred goods is made. It is also home to The Sylvia Center, an educational non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring children to eat well through farm visits and garden-to-table workshops.

“I feel that if my attitude were not one of trying to act like a startup I couldn’t do it as long as I’ve done it,” she tells me. “Just the notion of disruption and innovation and thinking outside the box is how we operate: we have a lot of fun, and we do new things all the time.”