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Business Boom

A menu overhaul, sophisticated software installation and staff training equips a business caterer to expand into the big leagues of big-city special events.

By Michael Sherer || Photos by nuphorIQ

You might not think a culinary background is the right training to learn software engineering, but for Chef John Reed, Assoc. FCSI, CEC, CCA, mixing up software programs as part of a menu overhaul was a recipe for bigger sales, increased profits and better inventory management for one of his Management Advisory Services (MAS) clients.

Reed, the owner of Customized Culinary Solutions (CCS), Skokie, Ill., got an assignment from long-time client Lawrence Walter, COO of Tasty Catering, Elk Grove Village, Ill., to help his company revamp its menu so it could better compete in the special-events market. Tasty Catering had long serviced area businesses but wanted to expand into weddings and other special events.

The client recognized that breaking into a new segment of the business required an increased level of sophistication. The company wanted not only menus that would "sell" with customers, but a higher caliber of foodservice. Working closely with the client, Reed developed new special-events and wedding recipes and menus. Once they'd agreed on the new items and menus, Reed broke down the rest of the project into three phases.

The first phase involved training the staff in the skills necessary to produce the new menus. "The staff needed to improve their skills and expand their culinary knowledge to properly and perfectly execute the new items," Reed says. "This was especially true for special events as both the menus and services incorporated very upscale off-site catering techniques." Confident in the new skills of the kitchen staff, the salespeople could go out and solicit new business.

Adding a whole new area of business created new challenges, however. More menus and menu items meant more recipes and inventory to manage

in the kitchen. Reed evaluated several software packages and settled on Chef Tec as the new recipe management program for the client. He and his staff input more than 2,000 recipes and close to 1,800 inventory items in the new software.

Once the data was in the new system, Reed was able to reduce the overall number of menus and the number of menu items in Tasty Catering's repertoire. That had the enormous benefit of eliminating duplication and paring the number of items needed for inventory. It also provided the client with up-to-date food costing on menu items. This occurs on a daily basis as soon as the invoices are received either through a vendor-supplied electronic data interchange (EDI) or traditional paper invoice.

The recipe management software provided another major benefit: eliminating recipe binders in the kitchen. The kitchen staff now is able to access all recipes anywhere using tablet computers instead of going through recipe binders or using the back-office computer to print out recipe sheets.

With the foundation in place, Reed and CCS saved the hardest phase for last. "Tasty Catering had been using CaterEase, an event management software program, for many years," he says, "but they hadn't utilized the full potential of the program. We rebuilt the way they use it and tied it into the recipe management software."

Reed had to create new names and ID or PLU numbers for all of the items on the inventory list to make them recognizable to both databases. Then he restructured the way the data is used. "We changed the data associated with menu items from menu-item descriptions as the starting point of production—which required the production teams to interpret quality and preparation parameters—to detailed descriptors with quantities and details on preparation methods. Chefs

had access to multipliers and formulas to calculate production quantities based on the number of items sold," Reed explains.

"We also focused on supply processes, delivering specific information that the production teams needed and hiding information they really didn't need to review. This improved speed and accuracy of the production teams. That allowed costing and purchasing information to be exchanged between the two systems. Reed also streamlined the detailed production sheets the kitchen staff used for off-premise events.

◀ Tasty Catering staff had to learn new culinary skills and recipes to master the company's new and expanded high-end menus. Chef John Reed served as instructor.

▼ Executive Chef Alfredo Velasquez confers with a staff member about a recipe. Tasty Catering employees now use tablets to access all of their instructions, recipes, inventory information and client details from anywhere in the facility or on site. The "portable office" improves accuracy and speeds production.





^ The Tasty Catering customer proposal (before, left, and after, right) underwent a dramatic redesign. On the new version, the client receives costing upfront, while photography gives them an idea of what to expect, the entire tone and delivery of the proposal is logical and professional.

New software streamlines the time it takes employees to input data and frees them for other duties. ▶

At A Glance

- **Facility:** Tasty Catering, Elk Grove Village, IL
- **Project:** Transformation from business caterer to special-events caterer
- **Scope of Work:** Menu Overhaul, Culinary Training, Event Management Software System Implementation
- **MA5 Consultant:** Chef John Reed, Assoc. FCSI, CEC, CCA, Customized Culinary Solutions, Skokie, IL

"The biggest challenge was making the changes without disrupting daily workflow," Reed says. "We handled it by letting the sales staff use the old system until we held one-on-one meetings to get staff input." He then communicated changes to the staff to get their buy-in and trained them on how to use each new system element before actually making the changeover. "It was sort of like rebuilding a house while people are still living in it," he says.

Adding the recipe management software and integrating it with the rebuilt event-management software has enabled Tasty Catering's staff to cut proposal-writing time by 75%.

The culinary team now saves about 18 labor hours per week finding and costing recipes since the company's 23 recipe binders were trashed in favor of tablet computers, and food costs have decreased 8%-10%.

Most significantly, the project enabled Tasty Catering to compete with much larger caterers for special events and weddings. That business has grown by about 40% per year, and the average check is 84% higher for these types of events vs. the traditional corporate business. New business has been so successful that Tasty Catering dropped its tagline "The Caterer for Business," re-branding itself as a broadline caterer. 🍴

