



It would if their life was on the line.

» [Club Features October 2010](#)

## Destination Dining

**More properties are beginning to realize that the hottest culinary trend in club and resort dining isn't on the menu.**

by Joanna DeChellis ([jdechellis@clubandresortbusiness.com](mailto:jdechellis@clubandresortbusiness.com))

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It's 5:30 p.m. on a Thursday night, and at Robert's Pub, the newly redefined casual dining restaurant at Black Butte Ranch in Sisters, Ore., the Lowerys are sitting down to dinner. Mom, sporting her favorite new Levi's, orders the Northwest Salad served with Rogue River blue cheese crumbles and Oregon hazelnuts. Dad has a hankering for meat, so he orders the Rodeo Burger topped with Robert's stout chili, onions and Tillamook cheddar. The kids are torn between the Pub Mac & Cheese and the Buffalo Chicken Sliders, so they order both and share. Mom orders a glass of white wine; Dad orders a microbrew.

After a short wait, the meal arrives, served by Jenn, the Lowerys' favorite server. Dad

finishes first, and is easily entertained by the big-screen TVs broadcasting the game. Soon, everyone else finishes, and the bill, which adds up to less than \$60, is paid. The Lowerys leave, the table is cleared, and promptly reset.

Sound familiar? It should.

Scenes like this now play out every day at club and resort properties—from modest daily -fee courses to the most exclusive and upscale private club operations—that are using strong F&B programs to position themselves as go-to locations, whether or not activities such as golf, tennis or swimming might also be part of the appeal.

"The way members dine has changed considerably," says Doug Wayne, Regional Vice President with Billy Casper Golf (BCG), the Vienna, Va.-based owner-operator of more than 120 golf courses and clubs in 27 states.

"Casual" is now the name of the game," says Wayne. "I don't think we'll ever get back to big heavy meals, with members sitting in a formal setting for two or more hours."

So how can a club or resort become a true dining destination today? By following these routes to culinary quality, value and enjoyment:



Big Challenges for the Coming Decade is appearing as a special series in selected issues of Club & Resort Business in 2010. To follow this third installment on Food & Beverage, the final feature in the series will be:

- The Big Challenge for Membership and Marketing: Finding, and Keeping, Tomorrow's Members and Guests (December 2010 issue)

Previous installments included "A Capital Spending Thaw?" (The Big Challenge for Capital Spending, January 2010) and "Stewards of the Land" (The Big Challenge for Course & Grounds, June 2010)

View [PHOTO GALLERIES](#) of club and resort food-and-beverage venues that have become go-to spots.



Both Ocean Reef Club (above) and Sea Pines CC (right) emphasize the importance of consistently offering their members and guests quality food at a good value.

### Create a Concept (or Two)

Black Butte Ranch (BBR) has a tough mission when it comes to its dining scene. As a seasonal, 1,800-acre, master-planned golf resort community, BBR is home to 18 miles of bike paths, two 18-hole championship golf courses, 19 tennis courts, five swimming pools, and two restaurants.

The property has two dining outlets that must satisfy the owners of the community's 1,251 homes, and also cater to guests who rent these properties seasonally. The restaurants also seek to "wow" locals from outside the gates, drawing diners from as far away as Bend who consider a scenic 40-minute drive to be a pleasure rather than a burden.

There was a time, however, when BBR had trouble getting diners to take 40 steps for a meal at one of its outlets.



"Last year, the General Manager had a golf guest say to him about our Lodge restaurant, 'If you weren't looking out the window, you could mistake this restaurant for any senior center in the country,'" says Charles Kingsbaker, Director of Sales and Marketing. "That hit us pretty hard. To that point, our volume had been steady, but check averages were down."

Kingsbaker, along with other key managers including Dean Ecker, Executive Chef and Food & Beverage Director, conducted a SWOT analysis of the property's dining operation. They also surveyed members and guests, to see how and where they thought things could improve.

"We knew that we couldn't cut our way to greatness," says Kingsbaker. "So it was time to reinvest in our F&B program. The perception of our dining among our homeowners was not very favorable, and the two restaurants we had were cannibalistic in nature. When you can get anything anywhere, what makes either place special?"

The team embarked on an ambitious remodeling of both restaurants (with a price tag of \$400,000) that would meld the property's ranch heritage with a more modern motif. At the same time, each restaurant was given a distinctive character and an individual identity.

The result: two popular eateries that could not be more different.

Adorned with cedar and tamarack, exposed hardwood floors, modern color accents and rustic-inspired décor, The New Lodge Restaurant now boasts a cool, upscale Northwestern vibe. The dinner menu, which was completely revamped by Ecker and his team and now changes seasonally, is broken into five categories: grazing, salads, sides, big plates and cowboy chow. There is also an extensive wine list featuring some of the Northwest's finest vintages. To underscore the theme, new flatware, furnishings and lighting were also introduced.



Billy Casper Golf looks for employees with a 'serving' mentality to work in the properties it manages. "They need to smile, be courteous and friendly, and look professional and presentable," says Doug Wayne, Regional Vice President.

Meanwhile, Robert's Pub, named for course architect Robert Muir Graves, has a casual, ranch theme, with more flexible seating options. The atmosphere is very family-friendly, with several TVs hanging on walls so patrons can enjoy watching sporting events. The all-day menu includes savory "pubwiches," fresh salads and classic sandwiches. The pub also features a wide selection of Oregon microbrew beers (including local favorites from Deschutes Brewery, whose owners have a home at BBR). Northwest wines are served by the glass, and an outdoor patio offers incredible Cascade mountain views.

"There weren't many changes to the back of the house," says Ecker. "The biggest challenge, operationally, has been the increased volume. We've exceeded our sales results by 14% in The New Lodge Restaurant and by 20% in Robert's Pub."

### Be a Menu Engineer

"Once you know who your members are, it's time to focus on the menu," says BCG's Wayne, who started in the industry as a golf pro 25 years ago and eventually worked his way up through the ranks, earning his CCM. "That's the central document that everything feeds from."

If designing a winning menu were as simple as zeroing in on the dishes with the best profit profile, than any club or resort armed with food costs and sales figures would likely have no problems. In reality, the challenge of improving profitability and member usage involves not just hard numbers, but emotions and gut feelings as well.

“If your menu isn’t your best sales tool, then something needs to change,” adds Wayne. “When a member reads an item’s description, he or she is looking for words and ingredients that resonate with them.”

### **Make Sustainability Work for You**

Chefs at Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa’s Augustine Grille, in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., have undertaken an important mission to help make their menu their very best sales tool.

The goal, set by Director of Food and Beverage, Mark Butcher, Executive Chef David Scalise and Chef de Cuisine Brett Smith, is to offer the finest cuisine while using all-natural, sustainably grown products. The team is following standards set by SlowFoodFirstCoast, which focuses on providing food that is good, clean, and fair while maintaining quality, authenticity and sustainability.

“We started building relationships with local growers and farmers who support the philosophy of caring for the land,” says Scalise, who with the help of Smith, creates seasonal and signature menu items featuring heirloom fruits and vegetables, locally caught seafood, in-house dry-aged beef and specialty cheeses.

“There are some challenges associated with this type of food sourcing,” says Scalise. “One of the biggest we’ve faced this year has been the weather. We had 13 freezes in a row—an all-time record—so we have to be cautious with our menu writing, which is now dictated by what is available from our growers.”

One farm the resort has worked with is Anson Mills, a South Carolina-based grower that harvests and sells heirloom varieties of corn, wheat, and rice. Another partner is Twinn Bridges, which delivers its specialty cheeses in a truck powered by waste vegetable oil that the resort supplies.

“When we launched the new menu in June, we lowered our price points as well as our portion size and increased our variety,” explains Scalise. “Our diners were looking for more ‘shareable’ plates.’ ”

Since the rollout, Augustine Grille has seen higher check averages and increased traffic, despite slightly higher food costs.

### **Watch Your Food Costs**

Ocean Reef Club, Key Largo, Fla., is equally invested in sustainable practices.

“We keep in contact with several local farmers, fishermen and other local food purveyors that are sensitive to sustainability,” says Philippe Reynaud, Senior Director of Culinary Operations.

Without much fanfare, most of Ocean Reef’s menus reflect these carefully crafted relationships. “We use the farms’ names in the menu descriptions as often as we can,” says Reynaud. “Plus, working directly with farmers gives us access to quality products at a greater savings.”

Ocean Reef controls food costs through proper menu engineering, precise recipe development and execution, training on how to handle ingredients, and consistent recipe production.

“We use proper cooking and storage methods to prevent waste,” says Reynaud. “We match all invoices to what was ordered, and make sure that staff meals are accounted for. We also conduct food ‘cuttings’ to compare products and be certain the best balance of quality and price is reached.”

### **Be A Smart Buyer**

Reynaud believes that quality is obtained by good food purchasing practices and excellent culinary craftsmanship.

Wayne agrees. “We work very closely with our vendors to devise menu strategies and get the best possible product at a fair price. We tell them what we’re trying to achieve at a property, and they help us meet our goals.”

BCG’s 1757 Golf Club, in Dulles, Va., is a prime example of this philosophy. “Our members know that by dining here, they will get a higher-quality product at a competitive price, because as a private club, we can afford to run higher food costs and still make good margins,” adds Wayne. “Our purchasing process is a big component of that. If we don’t search for the best prices from our vendors, we can’t turn around and save our members money.”

While it might make more fiscal sense to save a few bucks buying lesser-quality products, both Wayne and Reynaud agree that doing so is bad for business.

“Our members and guests decide where to dine,” says Reynaud. “Once in the restaurant, a number of other things must be performed well during their experience. But the variety and quality of products sold should always exceed their expectations and secure their next visit.”



The New Lodge Restaurant and Robert’s Pub at Black Butte Ranch have increased sales by 14% and 20%, respectively, through distinctive makeovers of both decor and menu themes.

### **Beat the Street**

“Clearly, the responsibility to deliver a good value in our F&B operations is at a premium,” says Dolf Berle, Executive Vice President of Hospitality for Dallas-based ClubCorp. “But we’re also paying more attention than ever before to making sure we distinguish ourselves in ways that commercial restaurants can’t.”

In ClubCorp’s case, this means offering various member specials and, in some cases, actual membership packages that center around dining amenities.

But if you don’t get members through the door, it doesn’t matter how great your menu is, notes Robert Parody, Director of Food and Beverage at Sea Pines Country Club, a private, member-owned club in the Sea Pines Resort on Hilton Head Island, S.C. (see “Fantasy Island,” C&RB, May 2010).

To keep its outlets front-of-mind, Sea Pines CC hosts a multitude of foodcentric events for members and guests.

“We have successfully increased our usage by making food and events key components of our business,” says Parody. “The restaurants in the area can’t do the kinds of things we can. By hosting events that are unique to our property and situation, our members have made us their favorite dining destination.”

One of Sea Pines CC’s more popular events this year, a “Battle of the Chefs” series, started with three staff members who were tasked with creating dishes that represented their ethnicity. Because of its popularity, the event grew to include 11 staff members, with contestants from both the dining room and kitchen.

“ ‘Battle of the Chefs’ was a great value to our members and helped build better morale within the staff,” says Parody. “Plus, it gave members a chance to interact with our team in a different way.”

### **Give ‘Em A Good Deal**

If there was a single lesson from the economic downfall for clubs and resorts, it was that value—as perceived by the member or guest—was central to the most successful operations.

The Club at Boca Pointe, in Boca Raton, Fla., has a unique set of challenges for its dining program. With dozens of clubs within a fifteen-minute radius of its front door, as well as hundreds of restaurants offering everything and anything a hungry diner could crave, Boca Pointe finds success by offering the best value proposition to its more than 1,200 members, 900 of whom have social memberships.

“Our average member age is 72, with a number of our members on a fixed income,” says General Manager Ian D. N. Fetigan, CCM, CAM. “This changes the emphasis on value, so we have to maintain that reality no matter what the economy does.”

There are two main ways Boca Pointe ensures that members will get the best deal available. First, the chef is diligent in finding ways to cross-utilize products. Second, Fetigan controls labor costs by cross-training staff members in multiple areas of the operation.

“This helps us to reduce our costs without cutting quality,” he says. “We also have a dedicated team that handles purchasing, checking for any errors at the point of receiving.”

### **Make Good Service No Accident**

Today, more than ever, service matters.

A recent American Express study found that Americans believe quality customer service is more important to them in today’s economic environment (61%)—and that they will spend an average of 9% more when they believe a company provides excellent service.

Boca Pointe touts this as one of its keystones to success.

“Our dining staff averages 10 years tenure,” says Fetigan. “Members will dine with us and ask for a certain server by name. That kind of dynamic isn’t easy to attain outside the club world. Knowing that Mr. Smith doesn’t like carrots, or that Mrs. Griffin would prefer oil instead of butter, are the kinds of things that generate repeat business.”

Robert LeFever, CCM, CCE, President/CEO of Portage Country Club (PCC), Akron, Ohio, agrees.

“We really hammer home the message that we are in the ‘Happy Business’ and that we must provide excellence in service, amenities and activities on a daily basis,” he says. “When I first started, the team was not engaged and was very rude to the membership and to each other.

“We changed that through proper training, selective hiring practices and efficient follow-up on reviews. That led to giving those

who did not want to be in the 'Happy Business' an opportunity to move on."



PCC trains staff daily, with the chef discussing food preparations and pairings at every pre-meal. Each overall menu update is preceded with tastings for the staff, along with a detailed training menu that discusses the particulars of each item.

Wine training is monthly during the season and weekly during the off-season. "We encourage the team to ask questions and offer tastes of wines, when appropriate, so they become familiar with them," says LeFever.

"Ultimately, it comes down to finding people with the right personality and mindset," says BCG's Wayne. "You want staff members to have a 'serving' mentality. They need to smile, be courteous and friendly, look professional and presentable. The rest comes down to training and good communication."

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