

HELGA LOVERSEED takes a look at some of the ideas and developments in food and beverage lines in some of the world's leading hospitality groups.

Hot tables

The mention of hotel cuisine used to conjure up platters of boring food served in gaudy banquet rooms or bland family fare dished out in dull, cookie cutter coffee shops. However, that era has long passed.

These days, hotels are redesigning their food and beverage offerings, keeping ahead of current trends and creating cosy eateries to appeal to today's health-conscious travellers.

In the past year alone, Starwood Hotels & Resorts, Embassy Suites Hotels, Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, Westin Hotels & Resorts and Fairmont Hotels & Resorts have all launched health-oriented, environmentally-friendly initiatives – everything from removing trans-fats (as Starwood has done), to linking F&B operations with companies specialising in nutrition.

Westin, for example, recently entered into a partnership with SuperFoods LLC, a company with expertise in food 'synergies' – the science of boosting the nutritional values of food by combining certain ingredients.

HEALTHY BRANDING

The trend towards more nutritional foods is being fuelled by rising rates of obesity and the health problems associated with being overweight, such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes. These concerns, coupled with the popularity of celebrity chefs and television programmes about food preparation, have educated the public about what they are eating. At the same time, consumers are discovering the benefits of a nutritious meal and the fun of sampling something new. But for hotel companies, offering healthy food is also a way to boost their brand.

Fernando Salazar, vice-president, food and beverage for Wyndham Hotels and Resorts, said: "We've come to realise that the sexy part of hotels is F&B. Consumers are becoming more educated about how food is prepared and our guests are constantly asking for organic produce."

He notes that diners are demanding fresh ingredients and seeking out the tasty flavours characteristic of fusion

cuisine – lemongrass, coriander, chipotle and the like. Finger food and small portions of tasty nibbles like tapas, Middle Eastern mezzes, skewers of Thai chicken, and, the universal favourite, sushi, are also hugely popular.

Cod with locally grown peas and microgreens, served at The Fairmont Chicago.

Wyndham Hotels and Resorts has responded to this demand by tweaking its breakfast offerings, upgrading F&B choices with sugar-free granola, a choice of eight fresh fruits and low-fat yoghurts. Its morning meal is dubbed the Fields and Sun Breakfast, a tempting description that will be augmented by a chain of ERL (Eat, Refresh and Live) cafés, to be introduced later in 2008.

Riding the fresh food wave strengthens brand image, but it's only one of several moves that hotels are making to attract guests. Stylish décor is also being used as a lure.

In January, Embassy Suites Hotels introduced restaurants called Flying Spoons in the lobbies of some of its North American properties. A cross between a European café, an office-space-on-the-run and a place to just hang out – Flying Spoons is a concept the hotel company describes as 'hip casual'.

Kris Beck, director of brands operation support for Embassy Suites, said: "Our restaurants weren't offering what our guests were looking for. As a hotel operator we wanted to offer a dining experience that was in step with what people are eating today."

Flying Spoons restaurants are replete with designer details and offer three levels of seating – belly bar tables, regular small café tables and wingback chairs. Numerous power outlets allow travellers to plug in their laptops while they sip on a skimmed milk mocha latté or munch lobster enchiladas with roasted tomatoes.

For Embassy Suites Hotels, the new lobby restaurants will not only help its



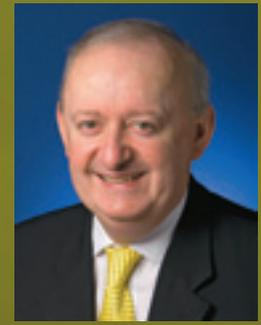
The new Fields and Sun breakfast buffet at Wyndham Hotels and Resorts' properties.



Fernando Salazar



Kris Beck



Fred Lawlor

brand image but will also boost the bottom line. The hotels have large atriums and, according to Beck, the new cafés utilise wasted space and maximise business in a high traffic area, helping hotels to cover the cost of light and power.

While oversized lobbies are not usually a feature of resorts, for timeshare operators converting an empty space into a small, trendy snack bar or café could well be a profitable idea, adding an additional revenue stream. Introducing modern design features such as elegant chairs, splashes of art and tasteful colours can also be a practical way to refresh the image of a resort that is beginning to show its age. It's also a less expensive refresh than a structural expansion or a major overhaul to a building.

Jody Pennette of CB5 Restaurant Group LLC, a Connecticut-based company that designs hotel restaurants, said: "The key is to create a welcoming gathering place. We like to create a cocktail party feel where people can meet and mingle. The restaurant should be fun and funky, but it doesn't have to be fancy."

Pennette dislikes the current tendency for over-the-top menus and pretentious descriptions – calling soup 'velouté' for example, a term that many people might not understand – but at the same time, he stresses the importance of showcasing a hotel's brand. If it's a luxury property with a sophisticated clientele, then the restaurant should reflect that. If it's a family-oriented resort then the restaurant should cater to that segment of the market.

Jody explained: "The architecture, the standard of service, the brand, all of them come together.

"The food has to balance the overall design of the place, but there's no need to overload the menus. More isn't necessarily better. The dishes should be colourful and appealing, but there's nothing



One of the restaurants designed by CB5 Restaurant Group – Pao at the Clinton Hotel, in Miami.



The executive chef at The Fairmont Royal York, Toronto, in the hotel's rooftop herb garden.

wrong with simple, nutritious food served with style."

Fairmont Hotels & Resorts is at the upmarket end of the hospitality industry and for this Toronto-based chain, serving healthy food is not just a matter of brand image – it's part of the corporate DNA. The company has its roots in Canadian Pacific Hotels & Resorts, a century-old hospitality chain that was known for its regional cuisine and concern for the environment, years before either became global trends.

Fred Lawlor, vice-president purchasing for Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, said: "We started recycling programmes back in the early 1990s. That led to other environmentally-friendly initiatives and now we're focusing on food."

The hotel group, whose brands include luxury chain Raffles and Swissôtel, as well as the recently launched Fairmont Heritage Place and Fairmont Residences (vacation ownership properties) are introducing changes. Under the title 'from the farm to the fork' the group is reviewing purchasing and food sourcing policies to determine how best to

implement sustainable practices. Across the network, chefs are busy finding food that is grown or raised as close to Fairmont's hotels as possible, seeking out organic produce and sourcing fair trade beverages.

These foods are highlighted on menus, so that diners can make an educated choice. Some Fairmont hotels also offer food-oriented programmes that include cooking classes, trips to the countryside to visit farmers and food producers, and Shop with the Chef excursions to local markets during which participants can ask questions and learn even more about their passion.

These are engaging ideas that could be taken on board by timeshare resorts, adding another dimension to the guest experience while helping to keep guests on-site and happy to be there. (V)