

# 2008 Facility Design Project of the Year: Harrah's Waterfront Buffet

**An equipment package raises the eatertainment in this hotel and casino buffet to a new level, making the dining establishment more appealing in an intensely competitive marketplace. The inventive, creative and risky approach to front- and back-of-house kitchen design earns this operation the highest honor as FE&S' Facility Design Project of the Year.**

**By Donna Boss, Contributing Editor -- Foodservice Equipment and Supplies, 5/1/2008**

Criteria for Harrah's Waterfront Buffet located at Harrah's in Atlantic City (HAC) were nothing less than “exciting” and “spectacular.” These lofty expectations weren't just pipe dreams. The 26-year-old property's new 630-seat, 26,000-square-foot dining establishment competes with buffets and restaurants at other Atlantic City properties, which have continuously raised customers' expectations for food, service and entertainment.

“We wanted to provide a great guest experience that would result in making this buffet a food destination experience,” says Bill McNulty, vice president of food and beverage, HAC. “We wanted the Waterfront Buffet to capture more contemporary food trends, while maintaining the seafood focus for which we are well-known.”

Opened in February 2007, the buffet's name refers to the dining room's location, which adjoins a 23,000-square-foot pool area. The dining operation and its companion back-of-the-house production kitchen reside in an entirely different location than the smaller, 380-seat buffet it replaced. HAC shut down the old buffet to accommodate the hotel's 961-room, 44-story tower addition and expansion of the casino floor. The addition brings Harrah's room count to 1,590.



Revolving dessert towers (below) not only add action to this station, they also allow cooks to engage in display preparation for cherries jubilee, bananas foster and crepes.

“We wanted to create a serious 'wow' dining experience with impressive food and the way it's prepared,” says interior designer Steve Anderson, chief designer for Steelman Partners.

Consultant and kitchen designer John Egnor, principal of JEM Associates, explains, “Twelve years ago, Harrah's, then new buffet, was state-of-the-art and the best in the city. When other casinos and resorts built new buffets, Harrah's began to look dated. So, like magicians, we had to bring a new rabbit out of the hat, add more action stations and menu variety and take the buffet to a new level. We also tried to keep labor costs minimal.”

*FE&S'* competition judges were impressed with the way the designers brought the “wow” factor into this operation. Among the many pieces of equipment, this buffet features a round, churrasco grill for cooking meat, poultry and fish on rotating metal rods over an open flame; a fire pit that rotates clockwise while terrets holding whole fish revolve counter-clockwise over the open fire; a wok station in which the cooks face customers; a Mongolian grill; a dim sum station where customers help themselves to hot, steaming products sitting in baskets; and a dessert tower with shelving rotating in opposite directions. Also contributing to the customers' experience are hot pans placed on a heated electric plate, which maintains dishes' steam and sizzle; seafood chills in an iced and refrigerated seafood display; and open air screens keep chilled food fresh while giving customers easy access to products it contains.



Curved overhangs, lattice-work ceilings, different tiles for each station and simple, yet distinctive counter decorations provide a sense of enormous space yet allow an intimate, interactive experience with the chefs and stations.



The Mongolian grill steps into action after customers select ingredients. A wok in which chefs face customers also offers action at this Asian station.

“The design team's willingness to embrace new technology and break new ground for use of new equipment is impressive,” one judge says. “The use of equipment in this type of setting will encourage others to use it elsewhere in the industry.”

“The use of new technology is possible because the budget allocated for the project allowed it,” another judge says. “But designers had to be smart. If the technology wasn't there it would be a minus, detracting from the project as a whole. They nailed the selection and arrangement.”

Another judge adds, “The arrangement allows a sensible flow. The space allocated for the servery allows customers to circulate easily through the room, but it's not so large as to be excessive. The stations aren't just huge troughs. They make sense in this environment. This, together with the equipment selection, goes above and beyond the casino 'norm.’”

The 630-seat, 11,700-square-foot dining area divides into separate and distinct sections. In the servery, downlights and spotlights offer a brighter hue and emphasize the food. Concepts in the servery include American, Italian Market, Rodizio, Down the Shore Coastal Cuisine, Asian Wok and Mongolian Barbeque, Sushi Bar, Dim Sum, Salads, and Desserts. An 8,800-square-foot BOH buffet kitchen supports the servery stations. Three service bussing stations comprising 1,900-square-feet.

At Rodizio, staff prepare Brazilian/Portuguese cuisine on a churrasco broiler that allows slow-roasted steaks, poultry and sausage to absorb seasonings. Staff then present the meats on Gaucho swords and carve them to order. A vertical rotisserie also provides visual appeal at Rodizio. A warming and holding cabinet, hot display counter and railed refrigerator also support food prep here.

At the American station, a charbroiler produces seasoned steaks, a pressure fryer turns out fried chicken and an induction cooker sautés vegetables.

Pizza baked in a brick oven attracts customers to the Italian Market. Pizza prep is a continuous event as cooks assemble ingredients. Cooks also prepare pasta to order with customers' choices of sauces and toppings.

In order to keep a constant rotation of fresh food, pans of food sit on electric plates that replace traditional steam table wells. “We now have more space to display food and can keep food hot without using water, which eliminates the need for a drain in this location,”

Egnor says. The “hiccup,” as Egnor points out, was the need to “make modifications to get heat to transfer evenly to each plate.”

A revolving grill that cooks whole fish over a fire pit brings customers to Down the Shore Coastal Cuisine, if not for fish, then to see the attraction. Staff carve the fish before serving to customers. A steam-jacketed kettle heats Alaskan crab legs while a griddle sizzles crab cakes. Seafood stays fresh on an iced and refrigerated display.

Customers desiring Asian barbecue find their way to Asian Wok and Mongolian Barbeque. A wok for stir-frying also provides entertainment.

A deep-fat fryer also supports this station, allowing cooks to prepare spring rolls. A Sushi Bar features chefs who hand-roll fresh sashimi-grade favorites while a rice cooker steams hot grains so it stays fresh for the chefs' use.

At the Dim Sum station, cooks prepare the menu fare at the station, then place it in the baskets. Customers select various dipping sauces.

At the Salads station, cooks chop ingredients, including 12 types of greens, various toppings and salad dressings to order. Two rotating dessert counters anchor the Desserts station.

From the buffet's inception, the staff and designers knew their inventiveness, creativity and willingness to take risks would be scrutinized by discerning customers, food critics and other designers. *FE&S* Facility Design Project of the Year judges agree their attempt to raise the bar on eatertainment is worthy of top honors and recognition.



A fire pit rotates clockwise while tongs holding whole fish revolve counter-clockwise over the open fire. Cooks then carve the fish onto customers' plates.



In the back-of-the-house kitchen, combi ovens, ranges and kettles allow staff to support the server throughout the day.



The 630-seat, 11,700-square-foot dining area divides into separate and distinct sections. This prevents customers from feeling like they are in a mess hall during busy dining periods, yet don't feel lost during slower times. Chandeliers with fluorescent bulbs and diffusers hang in each room to offer a warm, soft, indirect glow. Accent lights fill in where needed.

A door in the walk-in cooler is wide enough to accommodate a pallet jack so staff can disassemble large deliveries in cold temperatures. Cooler doors connect to allow staff to take products to their appropriate storage place — dedicated walk-ins for produce, meats and proteins, and desserts, and a walk-in freezer for crab legs and shrimp.

## **Judges**

**Thomas C. Laws**, principal, Alpha Design Inc., Elk Grove Village, Ill.

**Paul A. Mackesey**, FCSI, president, Mackesey and Associates LLC, Madison, Wis.

**Ed Norman**, president, MVP Services Group Inc., Chicago

**Eric Norman**, project manager, MVP Services Group Inc., Chicago

**Howard K. Stanford**, principal, Kamu Sage & Associates, Indianapolis

*All Facility Design Projects featured monthly are eligible to win Project of the Year.*

## **The Project Team**

**Ownership:** Harrah's Entertainment

**General Manager:** Scott Barber

**Vice President of Food and Beverage, Atlantic City Region:** Michael Bowman

**Vice President Food and Beverage, Harrah's Atlantic City (HAC):** Bill McNulty

**Director of Foodservice and Executive Chef, HAC:** Edward Batten

**Director of Food and Beverage, HAC:** Louis Dimino

**Waterfront Buffet Chef:** Edward Dagers

**Waterfront Restaurant Manager:** Robert Newcomer

**HAC Executive Steward:** Mario Chiong

**HAC/Showboat AC Executive Pastry Chef:** Deborah Pellegrino

**Interior Designer:** Steve Anderson, chief designer, Steelman Partners, Las Vegas

**Foodservice Consultants and Designers:** JEM Associates, Pleasantville, N.J.; John Egnor, president; Ron Alwine, project manager

**Equipment Dealer:** Thomas-United, Atlantic City, N.J. (furnished and installation)