



## Controlling Buffet Costs Casino Experts Share Their Secrets

Featured in the December 2011 issue of Restaurateur of Arizona Magazine.

Buffets have always been an integral part of restaurant operations, and can be even more prevalent during the holiday season. Created as a mechanism for handling large groups of people with minimal labor over relatively short periods of time, buffets serve an important role. But they also present significant problems, many of which translate directly to higher-than-optimum food costs. Casinos are among the most experienced buffet operators, so it makes sense to examine their approaches. And while some of their objectives are different from that of restaurants, the overall problems and solutions are surprisingly similar.

I interviewed three experts from the casino industry. Marty Miles is President of Casino Food and Beverage Solutions, LLC, a professional F&B consulting firm. Miles was formerly the Corporate VP of Food and Beverage for Harrah's Entertainment, Inc. Victor Gonzalez is the Executive Director of Food and Beverage for the Pascua Yaqui Tribe's casinos near Tucson, Arizona. The Tribe operates two casinos, one of which does not offer a buffet. And Russ Burbank was formerly the COO for Casino Arizona, which consists of two large casinos near Phoenix, Arizona.

Our three experts share some of their secrets for reducing buffet costs:

Gonzalez: "The manager or chef at the end of shift is key – they need to make sure production is reduced properly. Much of the waste happens at the end of the day."

Burbank: "Use theme nights and rotating menus. Proteins that have not been fired can be used in subsequent buffets with a different preparation consistent with the theme."

Miles: "I worked with smallwares manufacturers to develop hot pan inserts of varying depth. We started the buffet with shallow pans, moved to deep pans during heavy times, and then moved back to shallow pans near the end of day. In this way, our pans still looked full and we provided the same variety without all the waste associated with over-preparation to fill pans."

Gonzalez: "Use large drink cups to increase liquid intake – resulting in less food intake and less server labor to keep drinks filled. It is also more convenient for the customer."

Burbank: "Carvers must be trained to cut small slices. One carver might get only 7-8 slices out of a roast, while another could get 14."

Miles: "Avoid the use of cookies, whole fruit, individual yogurts, or anything with no mess that can be consumed later. I literally watched people stuff these items into their purses at their table or sometimes right at the line!"

Gonzalez: "Serve shrimp with the shell on. People take less if they have to work harder."

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Burbank: "Prep known quantities in advance. Keep track of prep, portions and fired quantities. Keep waste on the line to a minimum by using smaller containers and reducing batch sizes as closing nears. Use excess for employee dining on the same day if possible."

Miles: "Consider using a cook-chill approach. Recipes can be prepared weeks in advance and blast-frozen, reducing labor costs, product availability issues, and allowing for a ready supply, which can be re-thermalized as needed."

### **Serve It Up!**

All three gentlemen could have filled many more pages with suggestions and tips, but they all agree that forecasting and waste control is critical. According to Burbank, "The ordering forecast is where it all starts." Miles takes it a step further. "You need good data to forecast properly. Without it, I could never have been as confident in my forecasting, or in my determination of what was popular and what was not. And of course, knowing the cost of these recipes and the buffet as a whole helped us keep a lid on food costs."

Cover counts, usage consumption, recipe costs and menu performance are just some of the types of data provided by today's food and beverage management systems. Some go even further and develop actual forecasts based on this information, along with current inventory levels. Some provide production plans and schedules. Planned, operated and controlled properly, buffets can become very profitable!

*About the author: Bill Schwartz, is CEO of System Concepts, Inc. (SCI). Based in Scottsdale Arizona, SCI specializes in F&B procurement and inventory management, and is the developer of the FOOD-TRAK Food and Beverage Management System, which is widely used in foodservice operations around the country. Bill can be reached at 480-951-8011 or bills@foodtrak.com.*