



YOUR TABLE IS READY...

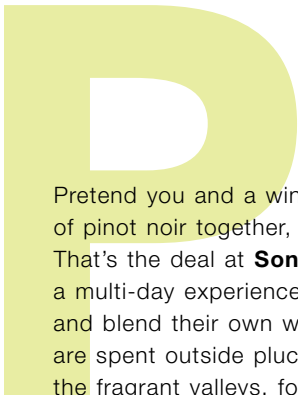
FROM BREAD TO THE BANANAS FOSTER, DINNER IS THE WORLD'S 2ND OLDEST TEAMBUILDING EVENT

HAMLIN SMITH

“WHEN EVERYTHING’S GOING RIGHT IN A RESTAURANT, YOU FEEL IT THE MOMENT YOU WALK IN THE DOOR,” SAYS ETTY SCAGLIA, PRESIDENT OF **ACCENT ON DINING**. “A PLANNER WANTS TO FEEL THAT. MAYBE THE BUS BROKE DOWN OR AN EVENT WENT LONG AND EVERYONE’S TIRED. YOU ALWAYS WANT DINNER TO BE SPECTACULAR.”

SCAGLIA REPRESENTS RESTAURANTS NATIONWIDE AND WORKS WITH PLANNERS AND DMCS TO TAKE THE HEADACHE OUT OF ORGANIZING GROUP DINNERS. “AS MUCH FUN AS PLANNERS AND DMCS LIKE TO HAVE WORKING WITH RESTAURANTS, EVERYONE IS SO OVERWHELMED,” SHE SAYS. “I’M LIKE THE GOOGLE OF DINING.”

SHE BELIEVES GREAT DINING EVENTS ALWAYS RESULT IN HIGHLY ENGAGED CONVERSATION, *CON BRIO*. WHAT MORE CAN YOU ASK FOR AS A PLANNER? SO HERE ARE SOME CREATIVE DINING EXPERIENCES THAT HAVE PEOPLE TALKING.



Pretend you and a winery owner are uncorking a bottle of pinot noir together, except you made the wine. That's the deal at **Sonoma County Grape Camp**, a multi-day experience where attendees pick grapes and blend their own wine during fall harvest. Mornings are spent outside plucking grapes off the vine in the fragrant valleys, followed by gourmet lunches at wineries such as DeLoach, Coppola, Russian River and Sonoma-Cutrer. Afternoons are spent touring more wineries for barrel tastings and cooking classes. And then everyone gets together for dinner at one of the local restaurants with a local winemaker.

"The winery tour has really changed from days past," says Robin McKee-Cant, meeting sales/services manager for the **Sonoma County Tourism Bureau**. "There's cooking and wine blending, and hiking through the vineyards to not only learn about wine, but how the winery is taking care of the land." She warns Grape Camp is quite robust, however.

"You do get the zest, that 'Ohmigod I'm doing something so spectacular'," she says. "But there is a bit of a rush to get the grapes in on time before the temperature rises." Outside harvest season, there are still myriad interactive experiences for wine lovers. Many wineries offer behind-the-scenes programs where groups learn the winemaking process and blend their own varietals ready for drinking, under the supervision of actual vintners.

"It's fun because the group creates something together and they're engaging with the wine lifestyle," says McKee-Cant. "There's that healthy connection with the earth that's so appealing."

One county over, Napa is considered the Ginger of wine country compared to Sonoma's Mary Ann. The **Napa Valley Wine Train** is basically three restaurants and a wine bar on wheels, inside three restored antique Pullman railcars that each have their own kitchen. After

pulling out of historic Napa, the wine tasting begins promptly with a local wine expert talking shop and taking questions. Two of the 3-hour tours include stops at the Domaine Chandon or Grgich Hills wineryards.

Last September, **The Westin Verasa Napa** opened in town on the river next to the new Oxbow Public Market, an artisan food hall. The Michelin 1-star **La Toque** restaurant, with private rooms for up to 200, was named one of "America's Best Restaurants" by *Wine Spectator*. Imagine a Creekstone angus beef tenderloin carpaccio with smoky aioli and grilled king trumpet mushrooms served with a 2007 Etude rosé of pinot noir.

"What we do particularly well is seasonal, market-driven cuisine that's French-inspired and served with exquisite wines," says chef Ken Frank. The night before this interview, Frank hosted a 400-person party for Google. He says one way he can add a touch of exclusivity for such groups is by providing a rare wine.

"We serve a lot of wines not available nationally," says Frank. "If we have one or two barrels of something special around here, it's not leaving the valley."

SAN FRANCISCO

Gene Holland and Jim Dondero operate **CORK & TEE**, a specialty travel company that customizes

culinary-themed golf trips for groups. For example, their *Golden Gate Golf & Grape Getaway* combines rounds at Half Moon Golf Club outside San Francisco with stays at **The Claremont Resort, The Fairmont San Francisco, Four Seasons Hotel San Francisco** or **The Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay**. Also included is a walking tour of San Francisco's historic Ferry Building Marketplace. Attendees stop in for hands-on cooking classes followed by wine tastings at a wine shop. Nearby, an artisanal cheesemaker will discuss his craft, with samples, naturally. A culinary guide would then take the group through the bustling Farmer's Market to meet with farmers and discuss issues like organic farming.

["IF WE HAVE ONE OR TWO BARRELS OF SOMETHING SPECIAL AROUND HERE, IT'S NOT LEAVING THE VALLEY."]

“Organic anything is huge these days, particularly in California, and our groups want to taste what we’re talking about,” says Dondero, adding, “We feed people pretty well on these excursions.”

For individual dinners up to 300, **E&O Trading Co.** is tricked out with all kinds of bamboo, burlap, lanterns, birdcages and other Asian accoutrements.

“It’s a cook’s tour around Southeast Asia,” says marketing manager Heidi Darling. “It’s unique and different because the space is so tactile and textural, and that carries over into the food, too.”

Based on “peasant food” from the streets of Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia, the menu’s intense spices, sweet soy glazes and citrus chili sauces leap over the palate. Darling recommends satays like the prawns with lemongrass and Thai basil mango sauce.

The seafoody **Waterbar** sits on a killer piece of real estate, where tall windows frame a panorama of San Francisco Bay Bridge—stunning when lit up at night.

“The entire second floor is designated for private parties with two separate outdoor terraces overlooking San Francisco Bay,” says Julie Ring, special events director, adding there’s a designated kitchen for interactive cooking demonstrations. “Meetings during the day are popular, too. Groups come for a continental breakfast and stay through lunch when we open up the French doors to the bay.” Waterbar’s menu is about sustainable, market-driven fish and crustaceans never overpowered by heavy sauces.

“The clambake is the most popular,” says Ring. “We put pots on the table and bibs on everyone. They just roll up their sleeves and dig in, so it’s a ton of fun.”





Left: InterContinental Boston
Opposite: Atelier & Saveurs, Montreal

BOSTON

Both **Ahla Brookline Food Tours** and **North End Market Tours** are sanctioned by the **Greater Boston CVB**, and each one offers private group excursions about food and American history for up to 60 people. Ahla focuses especially on the local Russian and Jewish communities and their restaurants. Michele Topor's North End tours are all about Italian food and wine. Her *La Dolce Vita* walk starts with espresso at her favorite trattoria, followed by tours through historic neighborhoods to learn the evolution of Italian-American cooking since the Revolution.

Situated on the site of the Boston Tea Party, **InterContinental Boston** has one of only a few outdoor terraces on the water available for large group gatherings, serviced by equally unique restaurants. Host an event for up to 100 at **Sushi-Teq** with salsa dancing and sushi/tequila pairing meals, where you'll match peppery Oro Azul Anejo tequila with tuna mozzarella rolls in spicy Korean miso. **RumBa** is a lounge venue paying homage to the region's rum trade with the Antilles, offering 100 rums. And **Miel Brasserie Provençale** is overseen by 2-star Michelin chef Jacques Chibois from Grasse, France. The restaurant just unveiled a new wine bar, where groups are booking tastings of southern France summer rosés and olive oil for up to 60 seated.

"The beauty of it is we're on two acres of gardens around the terrace, with views of the water and Boston cityscape," says Steve Juscen, F&B director. In winter, Juscen hosts rum tastings by the fireplace around old Louis Vuitton trunks. And look into VIP events in the champagne bar, behind the red leather doors.

It's an international tour of flavors at celebrity chef Todd English's **Kingfish Hall** in Faneuil Hall Marketplace, like a traditional Maine lobster boil with Essex steamers and kielbasa.

"Classic Boston cuisine is whatever local fishermen are catching off New England, like lobster, cod and oysters," says PR director Nicole Russo. "We highlight what's local on our menu to demonstrate our interest in supporting local fishermen and seasonal ingredients."

SANTA FE

The **Santa Fe School of Cooking** has added group classes that celebrate seasonal, local produce from the certified-organic gardens of Los Pablanos, and local organic meat suppliers Pollo Real and Shepard's Lamb. It's teamed up with **Cookin' Up Change**, a local operation that creates tailor-made teambuilding experiences for 48 people. There are classes for salsa, barbeque, tamales, chiles and fajitas. And a *Salsa Making Contest* pairs pro chefs with groups for a popular ice breaker at the school or any of the hotels.

Definitely look into the *Santa Fe Restaurant Walking Tours* that begin at the school with an introduction into New Mexican cooking techniques. A sample culture-themed itinerary includes the Los Mayas Mexican restaurant, The Institute of American Indian Arts, the La Boca tapas-style diner and Coyote Café to try New Mexican, Mexican and Native American fare.

"We want to teach people about the food of the Southwest, but especially New Mexico to emphasize indigenous cuisine," says Susie McClendon, assistant manager. She also recommends a series of *Opera Tailgating* classes. The recipes highlight regions represented in actual operas. So, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* class includes marinated artichoke hearts and manchego, Spanish olive tapenade and preserved lemon shrimp with jamon serrano. Verdi's *La Traviata* includes French herbed chicken/mushroom skewers, and rillettes d'canard confit with creamy brie.

“CLASSIC BOSTON CUISINE IS WHATEVER LOCAL FISHERMEN ARE CATCHING.”

MONTREAL

Ateliers & Saveurs is housed within Montreal's original telegraph office built in 1903 in the heart of the city's romantic, historic port area. The culinary school offers cooking, wine and bar classes for groups up to 100, who'll feel like they're hosting a house party.

“It's built like a house, it feels like a house, so there's a conviviality that's very different than going to a restaurant,” says partner Arnaud Ferrand. “People like that it's interactive because everyone is moving from room to room, cooking and pouring wine together, or learning to make, say, a cucumber and basil martini.”

A sample of the menu includes foie gras crème brulee with caramelized figs and port coulis. Although, Ferrand says US groups prefer to prepare classic French items such as rack of lamb or salmon tartare with spicy mayo and day cranberries.

One of the most celebrated chefs in *la belle province* is Jerome Ferrar, owner of the 4-diamond **Europea** restaurant in downtown Montreal. Last fall, he opened **L'Atelier Culinary Workshop**, offering classes teaching everything from modern vegetarian to cooking with children. Planners can book simple 1-hour demonstration sessions like *The Secrets of Sauces*, or more elaborate table d'hôte events with three courses and wine education, followed by dinner with the chef.

Considered one of the best seafood restaurants in Montreal, **Ferreira Café** highlights Portuguese cuisine with signature dishes such as porcini crusted, roasted black cod in a port reduction. The café is close to all the downtown business hotels and it's a favorite with Montrealers. Lunch is busy and couples take over at dinner, so you'll want the upstairs private dining space seating up to 60, with full a/v capability.

Also downtown, the 136-room **OPUS Hotel** touts its “uniquely stylish and always fresh” concept with lifestyle concierges for “foodie, fashionista and fitness fanatics.” Last year, the onsite KoKo Restaurant & Bar won Best Conceptual Design Award in 2008 from the International Restaurant & Hotel Association. Think leopard skin chairs and avant garde chandeliers mixed with a CB2-style modernist flavor—in a sexy-but-not-showy Canadian way. The Asian menu is eclectic: Thai curry grouper meets Korean ribs with kimchi veggies.

CHICAGO

The Chicago chop house is an American institution. So if the *Chicago Tribune* dubs you: “The best steakhouse in Chicago,” that's good enough for us. Designated landmark status in 2001, **Harry Caray's Italian Steakhouse & Bar** is named after the famed Chicago Cubs announcer, revered for his 7th inning renditions of *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*. The venue features three private rooms on the second floor for 400 diners.

The menu is dead center field: lamb chops and mash potatoes, pork chops with apple sauce, and a 16oz peppercorn NY strip. That was Harry's favorite.

Another all-American option is **Weber Grill Restaurant**. In an open kitchen, the cooks barbecue food over standard Weber grills hooked up to a special ventilation system. The mouthwatering smell of smoky charcoal, sizzling steaks and juicy chops are a definitive sign that beef, and lots of it, is what's for dinner. Three private dining rooms and a seasonal terrace host around 300 seated. We like the honey-mustard glazed, bone-in pork chops with bourbon/maple whipped sweet potatoes. Granted, not a popular place with the vegans, but seriously good eatin' and great fun otherwise.

In the theater district, **theWit Doubletree Hotel** opened this spring. The rooftop, 7,000-sf **ROOF** lounge is the newest in-demand venue with ga-ga views of the skyline, a 7-ft tall fireplace, firepits, telescopes and low settee seating with tapa dining for 150. Downstairs, **cibo matto** (crazy food) serves modern Italian for 120.





EMERIL'S BY THE BEACH

Of all the hotel restaurants lining South Beach, **Emeril's Miami Beach** might be the most accessible and comfortable for a large group. The wide open restaurant is located inside the historic Art Deco half of **Loews Miami Beach Hotel**, which isn't really a place full of "players." No yellow Lambos out front. Just good energy in an exceedingly airy and bright beach restaurant, and it's one of the few buyouts on the beach with capacity for 300.

Emeril's menu is "new" New Orleans, meaning "creole-lite" that's more in tune with the tropical temperature. Lots of grilled seafood with Caribbean spices next to simply prepared steaks and chops are served by no-nonsense waitstaff. For smaller groups, two private dining rooms seat 80 and 120, but consider the breezy oceanview terrace for 46.

emerils.com; loewshotels.com

MIAMI BEACH

Lots of American cities have cool restaurants in the city core, but nobody has a European cafe culture scene like Miami Beach. Everywhere is walkable or just minutes away by coach, limo or yacht.

At the very southern tip of South Beach, the 95-all suite **Hilton Bentley Miami/South Beach** anchors group gastronomie heaven. The legendary Joe's Stone Crab is joined by the stylish Nemo, fun Big Pink, the serious Prime 112 and Smith & Wollensky steakhouses, and sexy Nikki Beach restaurant next door, among others. Plus, the Hilton features an Italian steakhouse and an Italian Riviera-themed restaurant, to boot.

The beauty here is you're in South Beach but not consumed by it. The beach is steps away from the pool and the views are staggering on either side of the property. You'll like the Skyline Terrace for cocktails at sunset for up to 250, the Asian-inspired Spa 101, and the 1-bedroom, 785-sf oceanfront suites with big soaking tubs. Total meeting space is 5,000 sf. And, guests have access to **The Bentley Hotel**, the sister 39-suite property and Art Deco landmark nearby.

Also directly on Ocean Drive, **The Betsy** caters to small corporate retreats with 63 rooms available for buyout. The new **BLT Steak** restaurant is a modern American steakhouse with a comfy French bistro appeal in a Southern plantation building. On a tropical beach. Chef Laurent Tourondel, *Bon Appétit's* "2007 Restaurateur of the Year," is running the show. Also, check out the rooftop solarium for pre-dinner cosmos.

One Bal Harbour Resort & Spa lives about 15 minutes north in the exclusive enclave of Bal Harbour. There is a sense of uncommon calm here, where local residents appreciate the simple pleasures of life by the sea, good food and nice landscaping.

One Bal Harbour earns a spot on this list due to exec chef and James Beard winner Mark Militello. He put South Florida cuisine on the food lover's map two decades ago by insisting on clean, contemporary cooking using fresh ingredients, West Coast technique, Med/Carib seasonings and healthy calorie counts. The stylish **1 Bleu** restaurant is the zenith of that quest, with dishes like prosciutto wrapped tenderloin of veal. Try the wild mushroom risotto, and take your time with a glass of bubbly at The View Bar during sunset.



NEW ORLEANS

Located between the Garden District and French Quarter, **Café Adelaide** in the **Loews New Orleans Hotel** is named after Adelaide Brennan. To this day, she is revered for her uncompromising pursuit of the good life in the 60s, a sort of mascot for misbehavin'. When Brennan said "casual," she meant no sequins.

Co-owner Ti Martin points groups to the new Bar Chef Table, which is a fun take on a typical chef's table. A head chef and bartender confer with a planner to devise a menu and cocktail pairing, utilizing New Creole cuisine and special drinks from New Orleans' celebrated *Tales of the Cocktail* festival. Then during the night of the event, participants make their own drinks while learning about creole culture.

With a Caribbean/Casablanca décor, the room seats 210 for dishes like soy-painted muscovy duck with foie gras fried farro and bourbon chocolate pecan pie.

The historic heart of the genteel Garden District is **Commander's Palace**. It embodies the best of what New Orleans has to offer: a storied history, cozy yet classy confines, galactically good food, and the Joe Simon Jazz Band reveling in the sounds of Dixie. The fresh squeezed daiquiris and bloody mary's here helped give birth to N'awlins cocktail culture when the establishment opened in 1880.

Various rooms seat from 12 to 88 guests and all provide beautiful views of the botanic gardens. Try the Sportsman's Brunch: roasted pecan griddle cakes are topped with a confit duck debris, poached hen's egg, a viscous duck fat hollandaise, and muscadine preserves.

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