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Catering: It's Not Just For Breakfast Anymore

Littleton caterer expands to meet demand for non-traditional catering options

For people who love to entertain, Cañon Catering is the perfect fit. Prior to opening its new facility located in Littleton, one block north of Arapahoe on South Broadway, Cañon Catering specialized primarily in off-site catering to individuals, companies and non-profit organizations along the Front Range. Now, in addition to what Monte Johnson, the owner of Cañon Catering, calls their "core business" of off-site catering, an attractive new "Bistro Room" gives their clients a new, care-free way to entertain small groups. The charming venue lends itself to evening hors d'oeuvre parties, but is also available for breakfasts and lunches.

"Previously, our clients had two choices: either entertain their guests at their home or office, or at a restaurant. Certainly entertaining at home is the most intimate, but sometimes clients don't want the hassle of getting their house ready," said Johnson. "And restaurants can be a challenge, too. Special groups often have to compete with a restaurant's regular business for the quality of service that groups expect. At our Bistro Room, it's like renting your own restaurant for the evening, or having your own dinner party without the headaches of getting your house ready."

Cañon Catering now also features party food available for pick-up. Johnson explained that clients can drop off their own platters and trays, and the kitchen will arrange hors d'oeuvre or dinner items so clients can cater their own parties with Cañon Catering's food. Or, the company can provide the trays, too, if clients wish. "It really makes sense if you don't want the expense of full-service catering. It rounds out the number of catering options for people who want to entertain guests," commented Johnson.

A Cornell University study of off-site caterers determined that 67 percent of catering companies average a party size between 100 and 250 guests. The study also found that 17 percent of caterers average between 250 and 500 guests. The smallest percentage, 14 percent, reported that their typical party size was 100 or fewer guests. Cañon Catering has found its niche with groups of 100 or fewer, preferring a field of competitors that is a little less crowded.

"We frequently cater off-site events for 150-350 guests, so we are very comfortable with larger groups. Our largest event was for 2,200 guests. Our average guest count, however, is just under 100. We've chosen this market segment, because there are a lot of caterers that won't book events in the 50-75 guest count range. It's a niche that we are perfectly suited for," Johnson remarked.

Although Johnson won't divulge sales figures, he said their sales for 2004 were under a million dollars. He expects to continue to grow in 2005, at a rate of 14-17 percent.

For Johnson, the opening of the new facility is an anniversary of sorts. "10 years ago in January, I started culinary school, having decided to leave my career in menswear retail behind. I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do, but knew it was in the culinary field," he said. "Looking back now, it all seems perfectly choreographed. It sure didn't seem like it at first, though."

In 1994, Johnson and his family moved from North Carolina to Denver for him to attend culinary school at The Colorado Institute of Art. He dabbled a little in catering during school and decided to start his business right out of school in 1996.

In the early years, Cañon Catering operated in a "very industrial-type kitchen" that accommodated kitchen production, a little storage and not much else. Johnson longed for a more open space, similar to exhibition kitchens found in upscale restaurants. Now, guests can watch him prepare hors d'oeuvre as they sip wine and mingle.

"I believe catering customers should be able to see where their food is coming from, just like in an open restaurant. Whether we're preparing for an off-site event at a client's office, or cooking for an hors d'oeuvre party right here in our Bistro Room, our clients can see everything," stated Johnson.

In fact, several recent guests at the kitchen wanted to be a part of the action, so they put on aprons and helped grill beef tenderloin skewers and assemble small plate appetizers of smoked duck breast with fresh cherry and braised duck risotto.

Johnson expects that cooking demonstrations and corporate team-building events will evolve from their current roster of offerings. A small curriculum of cooking courses and activities are currently in the works, and should be in place by early summer.

For more information about Cañon Catering, located at 6518 S. Broadway, call 303-683-6878.