

ON THE JOB

CATERER

By Anne Brennan

As a full-time caterer, Bob Sferra of Culinary Occasions in South Euclid, Ohio, has experienced the highs and lows of the food industry. He's catered an exclusive holiday party on the 30th floor of the Terminal Tower, where guests took in panoramic views of downtown Cleveland. But he also remembers scrubbing floors in a high-end French restaurant.

Whatever the task before him – and as an entrepreneur in the food world, the tasks are pretty much never-ending – Sferra's enthusiasm about food and his business seasons the conversation.

"The main thing is a love and passion for food," he says. "I'm Italian, so when I was growing up, every celebration involved food."

Sferra's strong suit is desserts and wedding cakes; probably the most popular is his almond cake with espresso cream. A recent assignment had him creating a replica of One Bratenahl Place out of edible sugar dough. He caters a complete menu, specializing in French and Italian foods, and says his corn risotto and lamb tenderloin with fig and red wine reduction sauce are fan favorites.

Over the years he's learned that "catering" takes various forms, depending on the party. His services range from delivering make-ahead foil pans to full-service, formal plated dinners with tents, tables and patio heaters.

Cooking and baking may be in Sferra's roots, but he studied marketing at John Carroll University – training that came to serve him well in his catering business – until he felt called to practice the culinary

arts. Sferra started his food career at Parker's, the iconic French restaurant in the St. Clair-Superior neighborhood, where he worked for Parker Bosley, pioneer of local food sourcing. Within seven years, Sferra had moved up from cleaning and helping in the kitchen to cooking and managing much of the operation. When Parker's moved to Ohio City and opened Parker's New American Bistro, Sferra worked in that location as well.

He eventually attended the Cooking School at the Ritz-Escoffier in Paris and won a scholarship to l'École Lenôtre in Plaisir, France. He earned a grand diploma in pastry arts from The French Culinary Institute in New York City, then brought his skills back to Cleveland where he started his own catering business 10 years ago.

Clearly, Sferra loves his work because, he points out, catering is not a high-profit business. By any measure, his 28-year career conjures a recipe for success: a passion for food, the mindset of an air traffic controller, the stamina of an athlete, all with a side of the ultimate people person. How else could he manage a cocktail reception for 200 people, a bar mitzvah, a 60th birthday party and a bereavement reception, all in one weekend?

Then he rebounded almost overnight and hosted a dinner that Tuesday for 16 – just for fun.

Some of Cleveland's most prestigious organizations have called on Sferra's culinary talents; his catering clients have included The Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Cleveland International Film Festival, Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art, The LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland and the Huntington Carnival.

Here's a tasting menu of Sferra's offerings:

- The Culinary Occasions Shop, a pastry shop co-located with Culinary Occasions catering commissary
- Cooking classes, actually dinner parties with a culinary purpose, held at the pastry shop. Students get a meal, a glass of wine and recipes. "Grillin' like a Villain" was a recent sellout.
- Interactive dinner parties. Chef Bob brings his gourmet cooking classes to your kitchen, where you and your guests



Photo courtesy Culinary Occasions.

join in on the fun of learning, cooking and serving a great meal in your own home.

- Wedding and special occasion cakes.
- Full-service catering. Sferra employs "two amazing full-time chefs and about 50 independent contractors," he says.

Sferra's day, which often stretches into 18 hours, starts at 5:30 a.m. He walks his dog, reads the news online and visits the community garden near his house. Whole days off are unusual, but he allows himself the luxury of half-days off. "I try to schedule calm time," he says. "I try not to go to every event we cater, but clients expect me to be there."

One of the things that surprises people the most about his business is the labor involved. "What people don't realize about catering is that it's essentially 'a restaurant on wheels,'" Sferra explains. "They have no idea you have to carry all this food, implements, dishes and sometimes equipment."

It can be strenuous: it turns out steamers for clambakes (they're a thing in Northeast Ohio now, according to Sferra) require two people to lift them. Sferra learned that the hard way, after he injured his shoulder.

Still, off-duty, his favorite way to spend time is to go out for dinner. Two of his top picks are fire on Shaker Square and Spice in Gordon Square. "I go [to fire] once a month," he says. "It's the best brunch in Cleveland. And the food at Spice is fantastic."

He loves getting dinner invitations from friends, but says at times they're nervous about cooking for him. "People always say 'I can never have you over for dinner'" he says. But in reality, he will not turn down an invite.

"Feed me anything – a turkey sandwich," he says. "The hospitality is the fun part of it!"

www.culinaryoccasions.com



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