



## Mastering the Ingredients of a Successful Food and Beverage Operation

EXPERTS AND OPERATORS PROVIDE TIPS AND BEST PRACTICES

While food and beverage (F&B) offerings in the attractions industry can range from a hot dog and soda at a portable cart to high-end dining at a sit-down restaurant, the recipe for success always remains the same—finding the right mix of costs, quality, service, and choice.

For attractions, effective F&B operations can enhance revenue streams, improve the visitor experience, and increase competitive advantage, even at smaller venues where even simple dining or refreshment options regularly lead to longer guest stays. Plus, there's the nostalgia factor.

For many people, a trip to the amusement park or other attraction is associated with—and isn't complete without—the tastes and smells of treats like ice cream, hot dogs, and cotton candy. According to international branding expert Martin Lindstrom, these nostalgic foods are often essential to the industry's magic: "The more traditional, the better, if it matches the theme. People want to be seduced, taken back in time, and feel they're in another world."

So, to help you establish or fine-tune a successful F&B element at your facility, read on for some expert tips and available resources.

## Top Ten Tips

1) Food safety—for guests and employees alike—must be at the core of your F&B operations. Working with your local health authorities and other resources like the federal Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Points system, you can establish preparation areas and procedures that minimize the biological, chemical, and physical hazards in food production, from its raw state through to its consumption.

Particularly crucial, according to Fabian Torres of Mundo Aventura in Bogota, Colombia, is careful monitoring and maintenance of the temperature for cold storage products at all stages of handling.

Fundamental to success in this area is training that exceeds the minimum requirements, is conducted by skilled staff, and is kept constant through internal audits and periodic quizzes to stay fresh on areas of concern, notes Terry Riddle of Silver Dollar City in Branson, Missouri.

That means giving employees, who are often young and inexperienced, careful guidance on not only the how but also the why of things like stock rotation, food handling, temperature monitoring, and machine operation and cleaning. "Once they understand the risk, they get it," says Whiting of Whiting's Foods.

2) Technology is playing an ever-increasing role in food and beverage operations, from computerized staff scheduling to radio frequency identification (RFID)-based ordering and payment systems to point-of-sale inventory control to hand-held bacteria testers to plasma screen menu boards to self-ordering and checkout.

"In light of its flexible applications and improvements to customer service, we feel that the future of our F&B business is in the technology," notes Ralph Fernandes of Wild Wadi Water Park in Dubai, U.A.E.

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## Top Ten Tips (3-5)

3) Be open to new ideas and products, perhaps test marketing a sample shipment during a special event or on a portable cart. Even simple changes to the menu placement/description, ingredients, or presentation of current items can lead to a surprising uptick in sales, including putting a twist on traditional classics like a lemonade bar with fruit-flavored shots or apple fries with a dipping sauce.

“Guests are always looking for something new not only in our attractions, but in our food service as well,” observes Jonathan Vigue of Lake Compounce Family Theme Park in Bristol, Connecticut. “

4) A natural result of being open to innovation is often the creation of a signature F&B item, one whose uniqueness can help drive consumer interest and sales. “A signature item helps define your operation and separates you from the competition,” says Lenny Freund of Freund Family Foods in Newnan, Georgia. “It’s a cornerstone to the leisure food and beverage industry. You’re doing something special, and you’re creating something that becomes synonymous with your park. A facility is remiss if they don’t find something to hang their hat on and do better than anyone else in the business.”

Industry consultant Mark Wijman of Almere, the Netherlands, is the former F&B manager at Norway’s Kongeparken and relates his own successful experience with creating a signature item: “One of our best-selling items was waffles. We previously bought ready-made products, but then developed our own recipe for the batter, made them on site in the direct view and smell of our guests, introduced new toppings like fresh strawberries, and livened up its menu description, all of which worked very well.”

5) An open mind is also important in deciding what healthier and/or allergy-free options to carry, but it’s prudent to proceed deliberately and understand your market as much as possible beforehand. Healthy choices may be as simple as skim milk and fresh fruit, or they may range up to products that are organic, vegetarian, or transfat-free. Foods for allergy sufferers can cover a wide variety of ingredients.

The key is information, both that which you collect to make these decisions and that which you share with your guests to publicize the specialty foods you carry and how to access them. Utilizing this information, you can determine what recipes you might change, what new products you might begin to offer, what staff training will be involved, and what procedures are necessary to inform the public of these offerings and effectively deliver them.

For attractions that have already been addressing this issue, some of the latter procedures include partnering with relevant local interest groups, centralizing the production of these foods at one or a few locations in the venue, conducting a pre-season food allergy tour for the public, advance guest ordering, and even delivery of centrally prepared foods to different parts of the facility at a pre-arranged time.

Perhaps Kevin O’Brien of the Hersheypark Entertainment Complex in Hershey, Pennsylvania, sums it up best: “Only offer what you can confidently deliver, and spend considerable amounts of time on training. Monitor guest requests and feedback to ensure you’re making the correct decisions and offering appropriate products. Visitors who want or need certain types of food like to do their homework in advance, so make certain your specialty diet information is readily accessible on your web site. Consider an e-mail or phone hotline to personally respond to inquiries. If you can educate guests on their options before they arrive at your facility, you’ve already gone a long way toward making them happy.”

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## Top Ten Tips (6-9)

6) Fundamental to most F&B settings in the attractions sector is simplifying the menu and its presentation. A manageable number of food options presented in well-organized, readable signage helps keep lines moving and tables turning over, which leads to happier customers and more sales.

"In this market, you make your money when it's busy," says Ken Whiting of Whiting's Foods in Santa Cruz, California. "If your menu isn't set up to take advantage of peak sales periods, then everybody loses—your guests, your employees, your inventory, and your bottom line." Whiting recommends cutting any item that doesn't make up at least 5 percent of total sales.

7) Effective F&B requires beneficial R&N—research and networking. Bob Amoruso of Adventureland Amusement Park in Farmingdale, New York, knows that one of the best sources of information about new food trends is simply talking to his culinary counterparts at other attractions, whether over the phone or e-mail, in online forums, or at industry gatherings. More formal research is also available for those willing to seek it out. As Wild Wadi's Fernandes puts it, "We're always on the lookout for F&B-specific material in trade publications and hospitality reports, at industry trade shows and workshops, and via the expertise of specialty consultants."

8) Don't just leave things to chance—or hunger pangs—once your guests arrive; instead, boost food and beverage sales by getting guests' attention once they're inside your facility. Inform them of the day's F&B highlights or specials when they enter (as well as via text message for those who've elected to receive such updates from your facility), and place F&B maps or menus throughout the venue.

Make your F&B operations more noticeable as well, by turning production into a show unto itself through display cooking, incorporating smell whenever possible, and utilizing creative packaging, unique presentation, and theming.

Portable carts can also provide increased sales by placing them in underserved parts of your facility, as well as in strategic locations at opportune times (such as near the exit area at closing).

9) Improve your bottom line by rigorously controlling costs. Draw on the expertise and insights of your suppliers for suggestions about more cost-effective items, shipping efficiencies, and rebate programs. Make your purchasing process simpler and cheaper by using one prime supplier (locally based, if possible), buying in larger quantities, and committing to longer-term deals. To help maximize your storage space, suppliers with whom you have a good relationship may agree to temporarily warehouse items you'll eventually need.

In addition, reduce waste by identifying end-of-season returnable items in advance of ordering, tracking last-hour production at the end of each day, utilizing portion control utensils and packaging, and examining daily patterns. Regarding the latter, Jason Martin of Holiday World & Splashin' Safari in Santa Claus, Indiana, shares the following: "Our supervisors are required to document any and all waste daily, and submit the information to upper management at the end of the week. Trends are monitored and issues addressed based on these data sheets."

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## Top Ten Tips (10)

10) For family entertainment centers and other smaller attractions, the general rule of thumb when it comes to F&B offerings seems to be either “in for a little or in for a lot”—there is no in between. These two viewpoints seem to sum up the different strategies best.

“It’s just something to keep people here a little longer, to give them something to nibble on,” says Patti Moore of Baja Amusements in Ocean City, Maryland. “We never wanted to do anything larger. The snack bar is there to complement the rest of the park. It’s simple, and anybody can run it as it is now.” In contrast, listen to Brian Cohen of iT’Z family entertainment venues: “For some, food is secondary. For us, it shares equal weight with our amusements. If you’re coming to us, you’re coming in for both. The food must be high quality.”

## Web Resources

Customer Preferences for Restaurant Technology Innovations—This report from Cornell University’s Center for Hospitality Research provides insights on how your guests may react to certain technology-based food service changes.

Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Alliance—National food allergy groups in a number of countries that can help you find local partners to review your F&B operations for possible adjustments and additions.

IAAPA expo seminars, such as “Franchising, Branding, and Sponsorship Development in Food and Beverage” and “F&B Case Study: Castle Park,” at IAAPA Attractions Expos 2006 and 2008, respectively; many seminar handouts and PowerPoint presentations are archived in the Member section of the association’s Web site.

ServSafe—Programs for developing effective staff training and certification procedures in food safety.

Welcome to Food Service—This educational product from IAAPA allows you to customize your food-service training program in a seamless and professional way.



## Online Articles

“A Real Transformation,” FUNWORLD, April 2009—How Silver Dollar City turns food into a favorite attraction.

“Beware of Food,” FUNWORLD, April 2006—How attractions can minimize liability when handling, cooking, and serving food.

“Food Flow,” FUNWORLD, February 2009—An efficient kitchen means less labor and more revenue.

“Food for Thought,” Park World, October 2007—Design and operations insights for your food preparation and service areas.

“Food is Money,” FUNWORLD, April 2009—Balancing your F&B books requires some savvy management in a volatile worldwide commodities market.

“Fun Foods,” Tourist Attractions and Parks, April/May 2008—Zoos and aquariums keep classics but chase trends.

“Healthy Changes are on the Menu,” FUNWORLD, April 2007—What are trans fats and how do they factor in to the future of your F&B operations.

“How Food Adds to the Fun at Mini-Golf and Go-Kart Venues,” Tourist Attractions and Parks, April/May 2008—What’s worked and what hasn’t in F&B at several smaller attractions.

“Park Food,” Park World, February 2007—Using the theoretical cost of goods to maximize your F&B profits.

“Shaking Things Up,” FUNWORLD, April 2008—How a few small changes made a big difference in Graceland’s F&B operation.

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