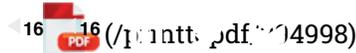


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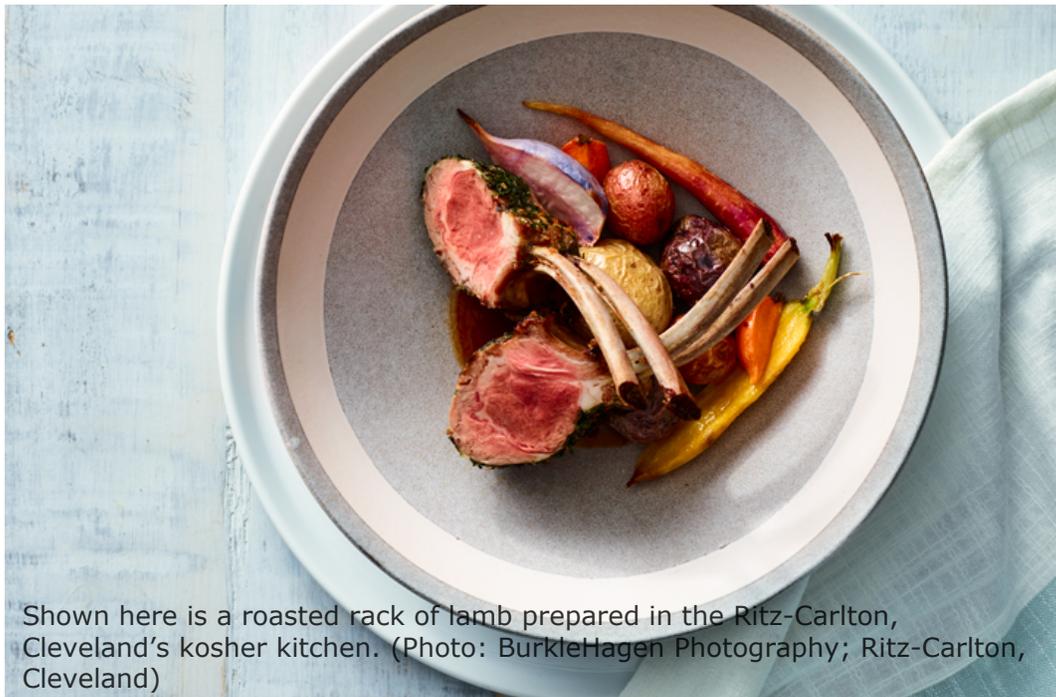


Kosher kitchens help group sales, community connection

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Although it requires a more finite operation, some hotels in markets with a large Jewish community are seeing a benefit to building dedicated kosher kitchens at their properties.





Shown here is a roasted rack of lamb prepared in the Ritz-Carlton, Cleveland's kosher kitchen. (Photo: BurkleHagen Photography; Ritz-Carlton, Cleveland)

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REPORT FROM THE U.S.—Hotels based in markets where there's a demand for catering kosher events are realizing the onus is on them to provide for their community. However, the operation behind it isn't as easy as it may seem.

Yael Ron, GM of the Ritz-Carlton, Cleveland, said operating a kosher kitchen can be complicated because of the preparation and training that is needed as well as having to coordinate with a local rabbi for supervision.

But with positive feedback from guests and support from Jewish communities, hoteliers are seeing a benefit to providing that special food-and-beverage service.

Surveying the demographics, demand

Ron said she saw a void that needed filled. There is a large Jewish community on the east side of Cleveland, but not many kosher kitchen options available—especially luxury options, she said. So the Ritz-Carlton, Cleveland began to look at ways to cater to that audience.

The hotel staff did a small study and spoke to about 30 different entities running organizations in the area and asked if they thought it would be beneficial to the city if the hotel added a kosher kitchen.

"The response was overwhelmingly positive," she said.

When her team was looking at the property, she said they noticed there was an extra unused kitchen and felt it was the perfect spot to operate a kosher kitchen. She said the hotel invested "a lot of money because we believed in it."

In 2018, the kosher kitchen was officially open at the hotel and began catering events.

"The idea was to start catering events and see how that will go and continue from there," she said. "Adhere to our customers, listen to them."

Jared Harms, executive chef at the Fairmont Dallas in Dallas, Texas, said his hotel has always done kosher business in its main kitchen, but in the last few years he realized it could be something more after getting feedback from guests and event clients.



This year the hotel added a dedicated kosher kitchen, which is essentially a 1,200-square foot island in the middle of the main kitchen that is “fenced off,” he said, and solely used for preparing kosher meals. The intent to build that was to cater for more events and groups.

“We decided to go for it, build a kitchen and see if we can start catering to this community quite a bit more,” he said.

The Grand Hyatt Washington is the only hotel in Washington, D.C., with a dedicated, permanent kosher kitchen, said Gene Hunt, the hotel’s director of events, in an email interview. The hotel has had that kitchen space since the property opened 32 years ago.

“At the time, we saw an unmet need in the local D.C. community for a kosher kitchen and wanted to fill that void,” he said. “The response of the local Jewish community has been overwhelming.”

He said the demand for the kosher kitchen stemmed from a few things, including the various local social events such as weddings and prominent annual events from local organizations as well as large national conventions that come to the D.C. area.

“Working in the nation’s capital has allowed us to be the forum for many national Jewish organizations with prominent speakers who come here to lobby, work and enjoy the uniqueness of Washington, D.C.,” he said.

Hunt said while having a kosher kitchen gives his hotel a competitive edge, it’s not the sole reason why there is one on property. Kosher catering is a central part of the catering and group services Grand Hyatt Washington offers, he said.

“It’s not a niche, one-off specialty market that we do occasionally as it can be for some hotels,” he said. “Our competitive edge comes from the knowledge and experience our culinary and operations team have that distinguishes us from our competitors who sometimes look at one-time kosher catering as an interruptive and disruptive operational challenge. For us, that is not the case, and that’s largely because of Hyatt’s culture.”

A close eye on operation

Sources said there’s a lot that goes into doing kosher catering. Ron said she brought in chefs from Israel who specialize in kosher meals and hotels to train the hotel’s culinary team. The team went through a two-week training period, she said.

The most important thing about a kosher kitchen, she said, is keeping meat and dairy separate. And equally important is having a rabbi on call to supervise the process.

“If there is an event and there isn’t a rabbi on property, we’re not allowed to use that kitchen,” she said. “That kitchen can only be supervised, can only be worked at when there is a proper personal rabbi who is standing there to provide everything (from food prep to clean up).”

Hunt said his hotel works under the auspices of the Rabbinical Council of Greater Washington and has a glatt-certified kosher kitchen.

“The local Vaad council of rabbis has been a great partner in our success,” he said. “Each and every detail must be strictly monitored for compliance from the local sourcing of our food to the culinary storage, preparation and cooking as well as the server tableside accommodating individual requests.”

However, it doesn’t end with the meal, he added. Dirty plates and supplies must be cleaned under kashruth Jewish religious laws. Keeping kosher is a moral obligation that requires a commitment to constant and continuing staff education, he said.

“Educating, advocating and communicating in order to foster inclusive and engaging culture and work environment has always been part of Hyatt’s values, so it’s what we already do naturally,” he said.



Shown here is the island that is used for preparing kosher meals at the Fairmont Dallas. (Photo: Fairmont Dallas)



Hunt added that guests who are devoutly religious should not have to worry about whether their culture, traditions or values are being respected when they eat at a restaurant or hotel.

ROI on kosher kitchens

For the Grand Hyatt Washington and its kosher kitchen, the math speaks for itself in terms of the return on investment, Hunt said.

“Our 32-year investment in our kitchen has surpassed our expectations,” he said. “...We have the ability to welcome groups with specific culinary needs that may not be able to consider other similar venues not equipped to meet their culinary needs, and that opens to larger opportunities and added group business.”

He said there is a perception that operating a kosher business is more expensive, which can be discouraging to individuals or groups who want to keep kosher—but that doesn’t have to be the case, he said.

The challenge is meeting the needs of customers while delivering unique and flavorful culinary experiences for guests.

“Whenever a group is uncertain about keeping kosher, we do our best to not allow price to be the obstacle,” he noted. “That requires extra care and conversation—but it’s worth it.”

Harms said the ROI is to be determined for the kosher kitchen at Fairmont Dallas, but he’s hoping word will get out and business will flow in.

“That’s what we’re in business to do, create revenue, but also from a culinary and hospitality perspective, we see it as an opportunity to cater to a community that doesn’t have a lot of outstanding options,” he said.

Ron said she isn’t focused only on the kosher kitchen being a financial revenue driver. It’s more about tradition for her. She is from Israel and is Jewish herself, she said, and she feels passionate about keeping this tradition alive at the hotel.

“I am very proud that we are able to do it here, and the more business that we get from the Jewish community, the more we will be able to develop it for that community,” she said.

From a business perspective, she said it is really only economical if there is substantial demand, and she is serving at least 10 plates and not doing one or two because of the expenses it incurs. So events such as weddings, luncheons, bar and bat mitzvahs are the sweet spot.

Her hotel will also cater off-site events.

“If there is a banquet taking place outside of the hotel, then we would cook in the hotel and then we would serve them in wherever they are,” she added.

For Passover, the hotel sold packaged Seder meals that serve up to four people. She said people like to stay at home for Seder and won’t typically go out to restaurants or hotels.

“We (thought) rather than asking them to come here, why don’t we bring the Seder into their homes,” she said.

