

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREW FEARMAN & JULIE CARD

The taste of EXCELLENCE

In winter or in green season, great food elevates everything

There are many factors that go into creating a successful event, but two remain constant: the venue and the food.

It doesn't matter if it's a formal corporate banquet, a big-and-casual wedding, or an intimate

family gathering, when you're hosting an event the room has to look and feel right and the food needs to be excellent.

"When we created our clubhouse, we designed it to function as a year-round venue that could host a wide range of events," says Kirsti Sautari, marketing at Alpine.

"We knew the space would be spectacular, and we needed to ensure the food would be too."

That can be a challenge for a ski club, where the kitchen traditionally goes from 100 miles an hour in winter to a virtual standstill in the green season. Staffing for that kind of volume change can be extremely difficult. Not only

that, but the skills involved in high-end event catering and high-volume cafeteria service can be quite different.

Many ski hills have opted for a minimalist approach, restricting the winter menu to traditional fare like burgers and fries, and hiring mainly seasonal kitchen staff.

Alpine has chosen to take a different path. They've partnered with Men With Knives, a Collingwood-based catering company owned by Julie and Gareth Carter. Men With Knives looks after all the food needs at Alpine year-round – running a busy cafeteria in the ski season and taking care of event catering the rest of the year – as well as catering off-site events. They even operate a mobile kitchen and run The Larder, an intimate venue in Collingwood that doubles as a test kitchen.

The combination allows Julie and Gareth to keep a large and multi-talented team busy year-round,

and offer an incredible range of food options at every function.

"They've done events here with designer poutine and build-your-own-sundae food stations, and they've done white-glove dinner service," says Kirsti. "We had a wedding here recently with all Indian food, and the families were blown away."

Creative team

Julie says part of their success comes from being willing to experiment, and to encourage their staff to be bold and creative. "We do special events at The Larder where we give creative responsibilities to people who might not otherwise get them," she explains. "You get a line cook involved in menu development, and suddenly she's researching international flavour profiles and testing new dishes instead of just flipping burgers all day."

That kind of creative opportunity keeps even seasonal staff coming back – every one of last year's winter staff have returned this season, she says,

which is virtually unheard-of in the food service world.

Julie and Gareth also draw on their own incessant curiosity about food. "We travel a lot, and almost every trip becomes about work," she laughs. "We're trying dishes and asking 'would this work at home? If so, where and how?'"

Cafeteria, elevated

The members at Alpine Ski Club certainly see the benefits of that inventiveness. "You always need to serve chicken fingers and fries, of course, but we also like to provide some things that are unexpected," says Julie.

That means fresh marché-style salads in the cafeteria ("They do an amazing brussels sprout salad with blue cheese and bacon!" Kirsti raves). On weekends last year it meant a pho and ramen bar. Buddha bowls, made-to-order tacos, smoked beef brisket and much more are on offer throughout the season.

Members can also pick up meals to go, either frozen or hot and ready-to-eat. "We even have insulated totes that people can use to take food back to their chalet or home," says Kirsti. "It makes the weekend ski experience so much more relaxing."

No matter when the event takes place, fresh, local ingredients are vital. That extends to the bar as well, where local beers, spirits and wines are offered alongside international selections. The creative spirit is also found in "Oscar's Caesar Bar," a winter weekend special where host/bartender Oscar Perez shows just how far you can stretch the definition of a Caesar.

Both the food and the venue have won numerous awards, including Readers' Choice awards for catering, wedding venue, event venue, and recreational facility. Alpine was also named as one of the top nine private ski clubs in the world by CNN Travel, one of only two clubs outside the US to be cited (the other is in New Zealand).

"Our members know we have superb skiing and excellent winter amenities," says Kirsti. "It just makes sense for us to extend those high standards to everything we do, no matter what time of year." **DS**

BY ANDREW WAGNER-CHAZALON



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From green season to ski season, from intimate business meetings to grand weddings, the quality of the food makes an enormous difference to the success of an event.

