

Catering as a strategic value at IFEMA events

Gastronomy is today a differentiating element that adds value to the positioning of tourist and congress destinations. Therefore catering has become a great ally of events that enhances the assistant's experience. Its evolution and the constant change in formats and gastronomic trends are a clear reflection of the needs demanded by the sector and that are affected by the economic and cultural environment.

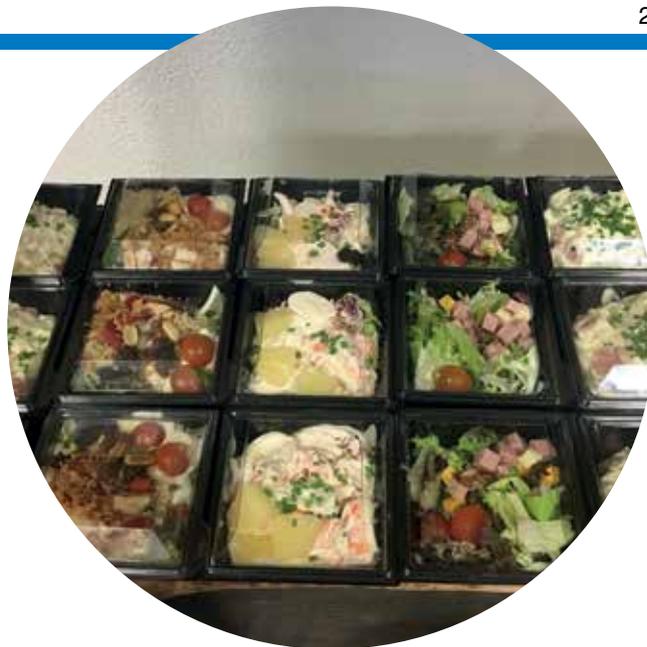
Belén Mann, Director of Conventions and Congresses of IFEMA, together with two of the collaborating companies approved for their catering service: Vilaplana and Mónico (present in the most important events, such as the 'Madrid Horse Week' or the Adecco convention), explain the evolution and trends that have been observed during the events that have taken place at IFEMA.

How has catering evolved? "Catering in congresses used to consist in big gala dinners and copious meals. Now? The trend has changed, and this partly has to do with the economic and social evolution of society", according to Belén Mann, "before the crisis, customers asked us for large meals with a high cost, but in the crisis, we had to adjust the menus to more practical and economic formats such as 'picnic bags' or cocktail-type services. It is true that now the customer is back to betting on higher quality products and is willing to spend a greater percentage of the budget on this item. But the simplest services prevail brought freshness: 'standing meals' that allow easy communication between attendees, lowering the formalism compared to traditional meals where attendees are seated."

Apart from the economy, catering formats are exposed to other factors: according to Carmen de Blas from Mónico, "it depends on the event; in the case of services for business meetings where there is little time to eat, the catering service must be fast, cocktail-type or finger food format. However, we continue to offer grand gala dinners, product presentation events or award ceremonies among others, in which the catering is dressed in their its clothes."



What has happened in recent years? “There has been a great change and evolution in terms of mise en scene both in congresses and events. There is also a great commitment to the look and feel, the staging increasingly handled with attention and increasingly personalized to the client, which generates emotional connection between who offers the event and the guest / participant, becoming a strategic tool, says Fran Benítez from Vilaplana.



Catering as a tool for creativity and communication. It is a sector in which flexibility, security, precision, dynamism, responsiveness, product quality, design and customization are essential. According to Fran Benítez, “more and more apps and other technological tools play a role in any type of event, since they generate dynamism and interest before, during and after the event, becoming a key element to promote networking between attendees. The staging is a clear trend in the sector, since with a careful and pampered personalization it is possible to create experiences and emotions among attendees. Without forgetting the sustainable events, since we give more and more importance to this aspect and to the origin of the products “.

Fusion between tradition and innovation. There is a trend that comes with strength, and is the mixture of traditional dishes with the incorporation of innovative or international flavors. According to Belén Mann, conventions director at IFEMA, “due to the cultural exchange between the different countries, new products and flavors are discovered that are being incorporated into the menus of congresses and fairs. In national congresses, the public demands more local food, and we can take risks with stronger flavors such as gazpacho or ham. In international congresses, the variety of products is more important, offering an international gastronomy, including on the menu foods such as pasta, meat, fish, vegetables and even sushi. It is also important to offer a variety of organic products and specialized menus for vegans, vegetarians; without gluten or without lactose. It is important to take into account these exceptions, since it is increasingly common for participants to have allergies or to not consume meat or derivatives ...”. According to Mónico, “the main difference is in the theme of special menus. It depends on the culture of each client: if they are international, some cannot eat many things within our Mediterranean gastronomy, others instead prefer to accentuate it”.

Make the most of the food: solidarity actions. There is a clear concern to reduce the volume of waste as much as possible. “There is an insistent action on the part of IFEMA to make the most of the food that is left over during congresses, and to develop actions such as donating food to foundations or preparing a recycling protocol,” says Belén Mann.

Examples? Grupo Mónico collaborates with Fundación Remar in its two soup kitchens within the Community of Madrid, which provide food to thousands of people with difficulties in feeding their families. Vilaplana works from the beginning in a management of all the previous process (estimation of needs, design of dishes, preparation...). In the case of IFEMA, having facilities in the same venue, we have the advantage of cooking on site. In addition, we work with specialized institutions for the subsequent management of food not consumed”.

The future of catering in congresses and conventions. “Where the sector is heading is a big unknown. What we are clear about is the growing importance of gastronomy in congresses and conventions, the request for thematic gastronomy, the design of food curt spaces, becoming an essential element in each congress. Unlike what happened before, the demand for a carefully designed gastronomy for each event is increasing, not being relegated this sensitivity exclusively to gala dinners. Gastronomy, one of the elements of value within the proposal of Spain as a tourist destination, also gains relevance to attract large international events. The client looks for complete experiences, not only to eat well and have a quality product, but has an attractive look & feel, that is, that also is attractive and has an attractive presentation”, according to Fran Benítez from Vilaplana.