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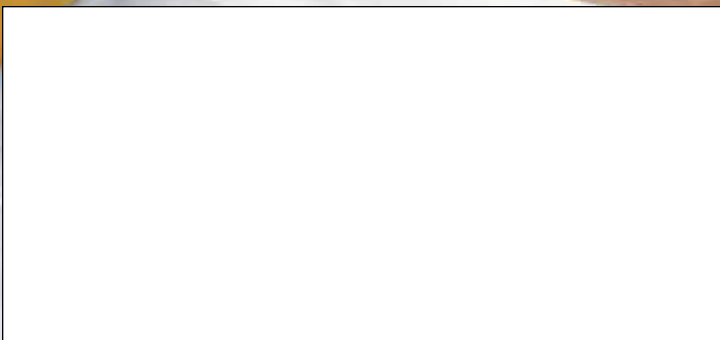
Corporate & Incentive Travel

THE MAGAZINE FOR CORPORATE MEETING AND INCENTIVE TRAVEL PLANNERS

Food FOR Thought

Using Brain-Friendly Fare
to Enhance Meetings

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Executive Chef Craig Mason puts BrainStrength Systems' food science into practice at The National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA.

Craig Mason
Executive

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Food for Thought

Using Brain-Friendly Fare to Enhance Meetings

As the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, “There is no sincerer love than the love of food.” But the challenge facing meeting planners is to not only choose foods their attendees will love — but foods that will help them stay mentally alert and productive during their meetings.

Andrea Sullivan, M.A., is president of BrainStrength Systems, an organization dedicated to improving learning and performance. She is also a speaker and consultant on how to plan brain-friendly meetings.

“Whatever we eat impacts our bodies immediately as well as long term,” she says. “For meeting planners, it’s really about the short-term effect, and it’s huge. There are different things that immediately give us energy or immediately drain our energy in a variety of ways. What we eat and what we drink affect our state, and state, of course, affects the way we’re going to be in our meetings.”

Brain-Friendly Breakfasts

She continues, “In general, (planners) want to choose foods that will maintain a steady blood sugar level. So for breakfast, they want to look for whole grains as opposed to white flour and sugar. Danish and pastries are the worst thing you can give to people.”

When serving muffins, Sullivan suggests that they be smaller in size than those typically served, and they should be whole grain or at least multi-grain. “The chef can throw in a little bit of ground flax seed, which is not expensive,” she adds. “It’s wonderful because the flax seed itself will slow down the sugar rush and nobody even knows it’s in there.

“Plus,” she adds, “flax seed has Omega 3s which help with information processing and clear thinking as well as brain health. Omega 3s are one of the few things that will have a short-term effect. A lot of things like spinach and blueberries are very good for your brain health in the long run, but they don’t really have an immediate effect. The ground flax seed, to me, is a hot tip. It’s easy.

“You also always want to offer protein, because when you balance protein with the grains it slows down that sugar rush,”

she continues. “The sugar rush is good for a few minutes, and then it creates this drop in blood sugar. That’s when you feel what we call brain fog. You feel drained and you can’t think clearly.” She recommends eggs as a good source of protein at breakfast, whether they’re served hard-boiled or in a burrito or sandwich.

Sullivan says that offering more healthful choices doesn’t have to be an all or nothing proposition. “I’m not one to tell people ‘don’t get any white flour,’” she states. “I don’t think that’s realistic. There are some who will want that, but the balance has changed. One of the things I’ve been noticing since I’ve been doing this is that the Danish and bagels are what are left over, and if there are any whole-grain options, they are snatched up really quickly.”

Sullivan says that fruit is another healthful option, although a lot of people will not pick up a whole apple or banana to eat at a meeting. “Make it user-friendly,” she says. “Cut it up or create little dishes of it. I personally love when yogurt is served in a beautiful bowl surrounded by fruit and nut options that people can choose.”

Lighter Lunches

“I would not serve beef at lunch,” Sullivan notes. “It ties up all of our resources. We have to remember that the brain needs fuel, just like the rest of the body. It takes a lot of fuel to digest beef, so we’re going to be tired. Lunches need to be light. It should be chicken or seafood, and then lots of vegetables.”

Craig Mason, executive chef at The National Conference Center in Leesburg, VA, has teamed up with Sullivan to put BrainStrength Systems’ food science into practice. He focuses on serving sources of lean protein that are grilled or

sautéed to let the true nature of the food come through. “We’ve found if you cook it faster at a hotter temperature, that you hold more of the nutritional value of the food in,” he explains.

The National Conference Center is located on 110 acres and includes 917 guest rooms and 265,000 sf of meeting space. The facility, which is accredited by the International Association of Conference Centers (IAAC), offers a Complete Meeting Package that includes breakfast, lunch and dinner served in an 800-seat dining room.

“We’re using probably 30-40 percent more fish than we were three years ago, and we’re really trying to feature the fish and the chicken during our lunch periods and then hit on some of the heavier things in the evening,” he adds.

Sullivan says lunches should include more lean protein than carbohydrates, even if they’re good carbohydrates. “When the ratio is such that there’s more lean protein, it creates an amino acid called ‘tyrosine.’ This is a building block of several neurotransmitters that stimulate the brain and are wonderful for alertness, for learning and for motivation. It’s just fantastic.”

Regina Mohr, CMP, manager, meeting and event operations for Courtesy Associates in Washington, DC, is seeing an increased use of smaller plates, both at the buffet table and for plated meals. “I was just at a meeting at the Ritz where for lunch they brought out big square plates, and on the square plates were four small plates with an appetizer, salad, entrée and a little dessert portion. There were four separate dishes, but they were dropped at one time. It was quicker to serve and it was a beautiful presentation. The people at the table were swapping dishes back and forth. It was a great idea. It’s something I plan on using in the future.”

Sue Whatley, president, meeting services for Premier Meeting Services in Trinity, FL, has seen a trend toward more healthful eating in the continuing medical education (CME) meetings she plans. “They want it simple, some Kosher, but

Brain-Food Basics

By Andrea Sullivan and Chef Craig Mason

Offer whole grains and proteins at breakfast to maintain a steady level of blood glucose throughout the day. Choose whole-grain muffins and cereals, yogurt, eggs, and/or oatmeal.

Provide energizing choices at breaks. Instead of the usual carbohydrate overload at breaks, provide protein options (hardboiled eggs, cheeses, yogurt), vegetable snacks, wheat pita chips with hummus or guacamole, or fruits and nuts. Ask your chef to incorporate ground flax seeds into baked goods: This slows down the sugar rush, while also providing Omega 3s, which aid thinking and information processing.

Provide a light lunch, with abundant lean protein. Digestion requires a lot of our resources, so keep it light, no beef at lunch; light sauces instead of fatty ones. Lean proteins, such as chicken, fish and seafood, provide the amino acid tyrosine, which stimulates the brain and increases alertness. Aim for a balance of more protein than carbohydrates.

Minimize salt. Salt has an almost immediate and damaging effect on blood circulation, reducing the amount of oxygen that reaches the brain. This inhibits our ability to think clearly. Ask your chef to use spices while reducing the amount of salt in their recipes.

Generate a sense of well-being at dinner. Dinner is a time when we want attendees to relax and bask in the success of the day. A balance of higher carbohydrates to protein produces the amino acid tryptophan, a building block of the neurotransmitter serotonin, which produces a sense of well-being and peace. You can serve beef, lamb and heavier sauces as attendees relax from the busy day.

nothing creamy. They’re more health conscious than they’ve ever been. When I first started doing these CME programs, there was every kind of cream sauce on the buffet you can imagine, but not anymore.”

Better Breaks

Chef Mason also focuses on providing nutritional breaks to help attendees stay alert. “We’ve all been in that meeting at 2:00 where you can just count people nodding off,” he says. “That’s what we’re trying to help people to avoid so that the planners and the companies who we’re ultimately working for will have more successful trainings and meetings.”

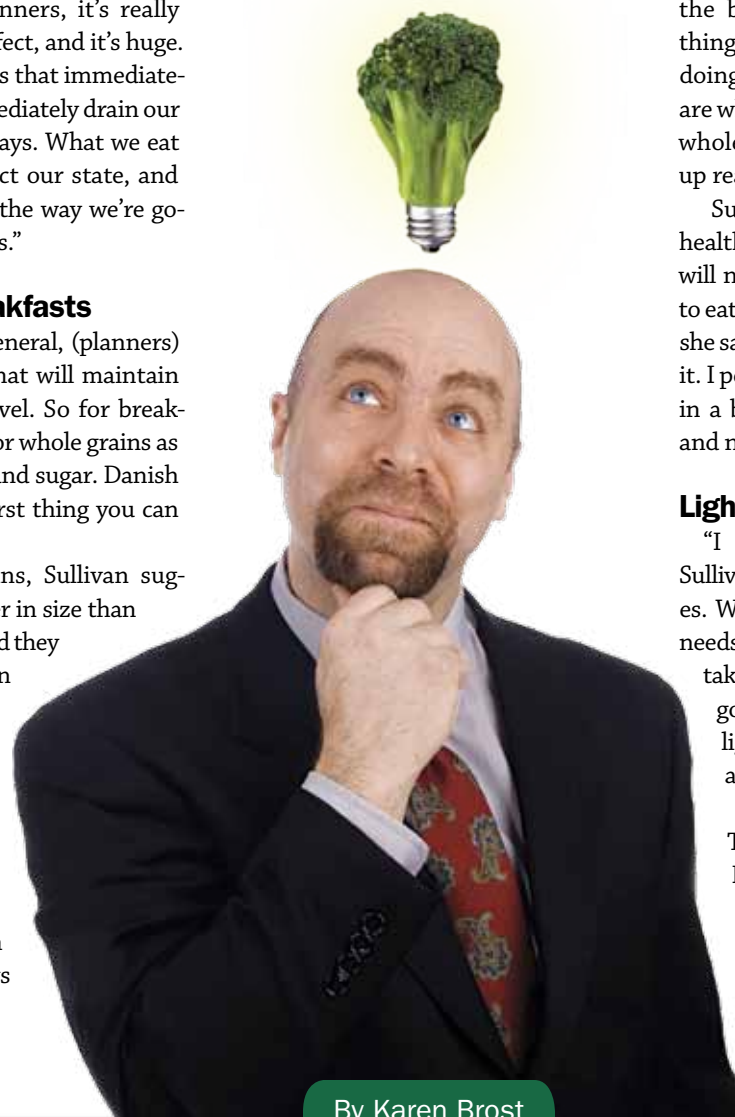
The National Conference Center provides preset break stations that offer attendees a variety of choices. “We changed from your typical gummy bears and chocolate-covered pretzel thing to a snack mix that we consider a lot healthier,” Mason says. “Now we’ve even reevaluated that snack mix and looked at going even further into this with grilled vegetable trays and hummus and tabouli versus your typical snack mix. On other days it’s something

as simple as hard boiled eggs with different flavored sea salts that give them that protein boost in the afternoon,” he adds.

“Salt has an immediate effect on state,” Sullivan says. “There has been some research done that shows that within 30 minutes, salt will have a damaging effect on blood circulation. If our blood is not circulating, we’re not getting oxygen to the brain. If we don’t have enough oxygen to the brain, we’re not thinking clearly.” She suggests speaking with the chef to limit the amount of salt used in dishes and snacks served to attendees. “They can add plenty of spices to get the flavor,” she notes.

Winding Down at Dinner

Sullivan describes how dinner menus can differ from meals consumed earlier in the day. “In the evening, we’re done with the heavy-duty thinking. We want to relax, we want to be social. When you have a balance of more carbohydrates to the proteins, it creates this amino acid called tryptophan. It’s a building block of serotonin, the neurotransmitter that they



By Karen Brost

TRINACRIA PHOTO/WWW.SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Sample Recipe Stuffed chicken breast is a favorite, and an excellent food-for-thought lunch entrée that will help to maintain your attendees' attention span throughout the afternoon.

From the Kitchen of Andrea Sullivan and Chef Craig Mason

For Corporate & Incentive Travel readers

Stuffed Chicken Breast with Asparagus, Red Pepper and Asiago Cheese (Serves Four)

For the marinade:

- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1/4 cup dry white wine
- 1/4 bunch fresh basil leaves
- 1/4 bunch fresh parsley
- Kosher salt & freshly ground black pepper, as needed
- 3 cloves fresh garlic peeled
- Pureé all ingredients in a blender.

For the chicken:

- 4 large boneless skinless chicken breast halves, about 7 oz. each
- 16 asparagus spears, blanched
- 3 large red peppers, each cut in strips
- 8 oz. Asiago cheese, shredded

Place chicken breast halves between pieces of plastic wrap. Pound carefully with a meat mallet to about 1/4-inch thickness. Lay chicken in a shallow dish and cover with marinade for 30 minutes. Place four asparagus spears across the chicken and add red pepper slices. Repeat with all of the chicken. Divide cheese equally among the four breasts. Roll as tightly as possible, use toothpicks to close if necessary. Place chicken roll-ups seam side down in a hot sauté pan, and sear until golden brown on all sides. Remove chicken and place in pan on middle rack of preheated 350-degree oven. Roast for 20 to 25 minutes to an internal temperature of 165 degrees. Let rest for 5 minutes before slicing.



Sample Menu This flexible menu is ideal for maintaining energy levels throughout the day. The main focus is a balance of proteins and complex carbohydrates for breakfast, and protein pairings for lunch and dinner.

Breakfast

- Local Honey and Vanilla Yogurt Parfait with Dried Pineapples and Mangos
- 12-Grain Banana French Toast with Blueberry Oatmeal Crumbles
- Grilled Turkey Bacon
- Fresh Squeezed Orange Juice

Morning Break

- Protein Energy Bars and Breakfast Bars
- Miniature Spinach Quiche
- An Assortment of Whole Grain and Flax-Seed Muffins
- Sliced Melons with Mint and Sea Salt

Lunch

- A Blend of Organic Field Greens with Grilled Artichokes, Goat Cheese Medallion, Sundried Tomatoes and Pine Nuts dressed with Virginia Apple Cider Vinaigrette
- Basil Marinated Chicken Breast Stuffed with Asparagus, Red Peppers, Asiago Cheese with Lemon Thyme Jus Lié
- Parmesan Brown Rice Pilaf

- Broccoli with Patty Pan Squash
- Miniature Dark Chocolate and Espresso Mousse Cups with Wild Berries

Afternoon Break

- Mediterranean Sampler: Assorted Grilled Vegetables, Roma Tomatoes, Feta Cheese
- Black Olive Tapenade, Hummus, Tabbouleh and Baba Ghanoush
- Garlic Pita Points and Whole-Wheat Flatbreads

Dinner

- Butternut Squash Bisque
- Beef Tenderloin Filet with Forest Mushroom Ragout, Paired with Chesapeake Crab Cake and Low Country Remoulade
- Pan-Seared Hoppin John Cakes and Braised Purple and Green Kale
- Fresh Fruit Tart with Apricot Glaze and Grand Mariner Crème Anglaise

— Andrea Sullivan and Chef Craig Mason

have in SSRIs (antidepressants). It creates a sense of peace, a sense of well-being, a little more social comfort. It's perfect for dinner. People have a sense of celebrating at the end of the day, and it's great."

That's why Mason prefers to save heavier meal items, such as beef, for the dinner hour. "You're having your last meal of the day, you want to feel full. It helps them to close out the day."

Reinventing Receptions

Mohr describes how tight budgets have had an impact on the cocktail receptions she plans. "With some clients, we're going more toward the cash bar rather than an open bar or drink tickets. A lot of times, we'll have just a beer and wine bar, and one signature cocktail that's usually tied to the theme of the evening." She describes one event that had the word "celebrate" in its theme, so they served a signature drink called a "Celebratini." During the welcome, waiters were there passing out these signature drinks," she explains. "People love it. They always ask 'what's the signature drink this year?'"

Whatley is seeing a call for lighter fare at cocktail receptions. "I'm doing a lot of shrimp cocktail, crabmeat cocktail," she notes. "Not too much meat. A lot of fish, some pasta, some pizzas. Not as heavy. I'm definitely lightening up the load a lot."

Just Desserts

People still love their desserts, but Mason is seeing an increasing number of people asking for sugar-free desserts. "Then, it's fruit, fruit and fruit," he says. "Especially for lunches, everyone is trying to keep themselves light. But, he notes, "we still have our diehards who want the chocolate cake and the raspberry sauce."

Mohr has discovered a new way to serve dessert that she's looking forward to trying. "I often do special events," she says. "One of the things I've seen, and I'm going to be doing it for an event this fall, is instead of having dessert at the end of the dinner, we'll have a dessert reception. We'll start with a pre-reception, go into

the dinner and program, and then have a dessert reception afterwards. It will be hand-held mini-type desserts with a coffee bar. It's a little more cost-effective, and it allows for more networking."

Farm to Fork

The farm-to-table movement is also playing a big role in meal planning for many group events. "One of our biggest things that we're pushing now is the availability of everything local," Mason says. He describes one of the great relationships he has with local farmers. "On Monday morning, he shows up with my 200-300 pounds of strawberries, and he hands one to me and says, 'I pulled this out of the ground this morning at 9:00 a.m., and he's on my property at 11. He'll actually call me up on a Friday and say, 'Hey I'm sitting up on my tractor. What do you feel like planting this week?'"

Mason compared buying local to purchasing produce from a commercial supplier. "Who knows when it was taken out of the ground, and who knows how long it was on the truck before it got to where it's going? And how long does it sit in their warehouse? (When I buy from local farmers) I know how long it's been out of the ground, and it makes a big difference. The sooner you can consume it, the more nutrition it's going to have. And, it's promoting my community. There are so many benefits to doing it, it's amazing that it doesn't happen more."

What about the cost difference of going local? "We've found some of the product is a little bit more expensive," Mason notes, "and we've found some of the product is less expensive. For us, it's a trade-off. We're willing, I think, to absorb a little bit of that cost because for us it's the right thing to do and because I think it's something that the clients are looking for."

The National Conference Center makes it easy for attendees to identify local items served on its buffets. "We label everything,



"We've all been in that meeting at 2:00 where you can just count people nodding off. That's what we're trying to help people to avoid."

Craig Mason

Executive Chef
The National Conference Center
Leesburg, VA

and we've got a new signage program," Mason explains. "When you come into the dining room, there's a list of what's local for the day. Each item (on the buffet) that is local also has our logo next to it."

Sustainable Seafood

California's Monterey Bay Aquarium operates a program called "Seafood Watch" designed to help consumers and businesses choose sustainable — abundant and well-managed — seafood sources. Planners can visit www.montereybayaquarium.org for a list of Seafood Watch's best choices and good alternatives as well to find out which seafood items to avoid. Seafood Watch also maintains a "Super Green List," which identifies wild and farmed seafood that's healthful for people as well as the oceans. A handy pocket guide is available for downloading from the site, and Seafood Watch now offers apps for tablet PCs and smartphones.

Offsetting Brain Drain

Sullivan gave a few more reasons why it's important for meeting attendees to consume foods that will provide that all-important brain fuel. "The other thing people don't realize is that mental (activities) use up blood glucose. I will often hear from people, 'I don't know why I'm so tired, I've done nothing but sit all day.' I say that's not true, you've been thinking all day, and you've been focusing in a way that you're not used to, because we don't multitask as

“What we eat and what we drink affect our state, and state, of course, affects the way we’re going to be in our meetings.”



Andrea Sullivan, M.A.
President
BrainStrength Systems
Media, PA

She also explains that in-action requires blood glucose just as much as action does. “When our blood sugar is low, our willpower is weaker. So at meetings, if you do breaks that are mostly carbs, you get to lunch and there are all of these wonderful foods that we’re trying to resist, but we

don’t have the fuel in our brains to resist it. Then we go into this ‘deserving’ thing. ‘I deserve to have something good. I’ve been working hard all morning.’ You think it’s going to make you feel better, and it does...for 15–20 minutes!”

When Sullivan speaks to groups about the connection between nutrition and brain function, she offers to do a free meal consultation so that the food served at the event will be in alignment with the educational content of her pre-

sentation. “That’s a value-add I will do with any meeting because I think it’s really important,” she says.

“People are beginning to understand that our brains matter,” she continues. “It’s not rocket science. You can make a big difference with little changes. You don’t have to go into deprivation. You don’t have to all of a sudden become a health food junkie. The balance thing (between lean protein and healthy carbohydrates) is easy enough. The salt thing is easy enough. So is having spinach instead of iceberg lettuce or having a handful of blueberries. Dark chocolate is fantastic for us. The hard part is having only one ounce.”

The results of ramping up nutrition at meetings speak for themselves. “People have told me they’ve gotten rid of their afternoon slump,” Sullivan says. “You can’t ask for more.” **C&IT**

much at the meetings. We’re paying attention to basically one thing happening at a time, which is really hard for us right now. It’s funny, but it uses up your blood sugars, and that’s when we have that tired and drained feeling. It’s hard to pay attention and be energized when there’s nothing in your body.”

Smart Solutions for the Brain-Food Challenge

By Andrea Sullivan and Chef Craig Mason

Meeting planners and chefs seeking to introduce brain-friendly menus often encounter challenges, from additional costs to sourcing fresh, healthful foods in quantity. Here are tips on how to meet some common challenges.

Research flexible venues. Choose a venue that already provides healthful food options and is willing to be flexible to accommodate your requests. If your venue of choice doesn’t offer food-for-thought options, request dietary accommodations such as smaller muffins. These requests should be made as far in advance as possible.

Be open to suggestions. Too often in the hospitality industry, we become accustomed to what we think the attendee will like instead of listening to what they really want. We’ve noticed that Danish and pastries are often left on the buffet table, while whole-grain options are quickly snatched up. Consider adding food preferences to the attendee registration form.

Utilize cost-cutting options. Smaller portions not only reduce cost, but also minimize waste. Tap water, bulk juices and portion-controlled glasses cut your costs while also being more healthful for attendees and the environment. Add nuts, a bit of cheese or ground flax seed to recipes for an inexpensive way to offset blood sugar issues caused by white flour and sugars.

Go local with your produce choices. Local produce

found within 150 miles maintains more of its nutrient value than non-local, providing greater beneficial effects.

Ask your chef to reduce salt content. Flavor can be gained without adding salt by using reductions and herbs prolifically.

Keep costs down by sourcing unique items. For example, costs can be reduced by sourcing lesser-known species of sustainable seafood. You can use this as an opportunity to educate your attendees and guests about the benefits of sustainable fishing.

Be conscientious of product choice. Select menu items that require less cooking time. The shorter the cooking time, the higher the nutrient levels.

Reverse engineering of menus. Typically a chef creates a menu and then sources the product. If a particular vendor does not have the product, then the chef searches for another vendor. As an alternative, work with local suppliers to discover what’s available, and then design your menus around their freshest items. This way of designing menus not only supports the farmer, but gives your guests the very best of the season and in particular, the benefits of food for thought.

Maintain flexibility and get started! The key to making this a success for everyone is flexibility. Start small with a few items, and watch the momentum increase as the buzz of food for thought reaches your attendees.

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