



# **The Science of Food for Thought: Enhancing Meetings Through Food**

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**M**eeting planners everywhere are always looking for the answer to this question: how can I help my attendees gain and retain the most from their meeting experience? One might answer that question by looking into conditional factors that may influence an attendee leading up to a meeting as well as during. Aside from sleep and stress levels, meals play a large role. The center of all brain focus at meetings comes down to: what are my attendees consuming and what is the timing of those meals?

Neuroscience research such as how food affects the brain can be very helpful. Research by Andrea Sullivan, M.A., of BrainStrength Systems has proven functional foods and timing both serve as a factor for productive meetings. Her research demonstrates that in basic brain chemistry, “Neurotransmitters are required for memory, cognition, learning, attention and action. Specific foods are a key component of these powerful chemicals in the brain, along with timing.”

### **What are the best meal and snack options to increase meeting performance?**

On an experimental level, we have taken a closer look at the meals and snacks we serve at The

National Conference Center in terms of creating meeting alertness and engagement. Our Executive Chef Craig Mason began by examining food items in our lunch cycle and on break stations. By exchanging the foods we serve, Chef Mason offers a solution of brain-friendly foods which he coined as The National Conference Center’s Food for Thought program.

Mason first reduced the quantity of red meat, replacing it with lighter options such as fish and chicken. He eliminated heavy use of red meat in meals for several reasons. First, he says, “It tends to slow our guests down, making them drowsy for the second half of the day.” He also recognized fish and chicken as healthier options that require less energy to digest, which prevents attendees’ energy levels from being drained.

In addition, Chef Mason invests a considerable amount of time ensuring the conference center is sourcing the best products. During each season of the year, he searches for local vendors and farmers within 150 mile radius who can provide in-season fruits, vegetables and ingredients. According to Mason, “Foods with the most nutritional value are always local, within a 150-miles of you, and haven’t spent much time traveling from the farm to your fork.” Mason

adds, “Cooking time and how you care for the product also translate to more preserved nutrients and an enhanced meeting experience.” The Executive Chef recommends reducing cooking time; for instance, the most nutrition can be maintained in vegetables by heating water to the hottest point before boiling the product.

### **What does Chef Mason have to say about morning and afternoon snacks?**

There is a significant difference between past items on our break stations and what snacks we’re currently invested in serving. At the conference center, break stations are replenished with snacks throughout the day and allow meeting planners the freedom to choose when they would like to break from sessions. Previous break stations served chips, cookies, gummy bears and pastries throughout the day. Chef Mason describes this as the ultimate sugar rush, “Guests experience an overload of sugar and suffer from a mental crash in their afternoon meetings.” Present break stations by Mason favor an array of fresh fruits, nuts, yogurt and energy bars (and the occasional gummy bears). When Mason established the new break station menu, he was

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ahead of the hospitality food and beverage curve, knowing guests would soon be asking for these items. The same correlation between food and mind alertness also lies within Andrea Sullivan’s research. As an organizational psychologist who studies the brain, Sullivan began speaking at conferences about using the brain to build executive leadership skills. During presentations, she noticed the breakfast and lunch menus did not feature brain-stimulating items. She began researching how food has an effect on the brain; Sullivan was able to drill down how food choices enhance mood, learning and performance.

Her research has led to several findings for improved performance in the meetings industry. “Breakfast should consist of a complex carbohydrate and a protein,” Sullivan states, “A whole-grain bagel helps to sustain energy along with a hard-boiled egg which contains Choline, a chemical building block to learning.” She suggests avoiding simple carbohydrates such as white bread, white rice and pastries which increase sugar levels and then crash,

making sustaining alertness difficult.

### **What does Andrea Sullivan recommend for lunch?**

Chef Mason and Mrs. Sullivan both agree local products play an integral part in Food for Thought. Sullivan recommends local because it’s green, the plants are fresher and have less nutrition loss. She suggests spinach as a great local product for short and long-term memory, “Also high in iron and foliate, spinach helps neural transmitters beneficial for thinking and learning.” However, she cautions buyers to research local products such as honey to ensure it’s made naturally without high fructose corn syrup.

Sullivan further explains lunch, “The main thing that impacts whether the brain is stimulated or relaxed is based on the balance between carbohydrates and proteins.” Lean proteins such as fish and chicken contain tyrosine, a building block of neurotransmitters that create energy, alertness, and motivational behavior. Meals that are higher in complex carbohydrates, such as whole grains or pasta produce the

amino acid tryptophan, which is a precursor of serotonin that tends to relax the brain and create a sense of well-being and peace. Other items that improve cognitive functioning, while also producing serotonin include yogurt, bananas, whole grains, beans, rice, peanuts and dark chocolate in moderation. This level of detail in Sullivan’s research supports Chef Mason’s trend toward functional meeting foods.

### **Top Brain Meeting Snacks:**

- H2O
- Granola
- Nuts
- Blueberries
- Yogurt
- Mangos
- Bananas
- Spinach
- Broccoli
- Whole Grain Breads
- Hard-Boiled Eggs
- Peanut Butter
- Dark Chocolate
- Energy Bars

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At The National Conference Center, one tool used in determining results of serving Food for Thought is through debriefing sessions with meeting planners. Debriefing sessions, regarded as one of the most effective ways for a venue to gain feedback from a planner or instructor, teaches us a lot about a group's overall meeting experience. These sessions are able to provide us with an astounding amount of feedback. We discovered that beyond returning clients such as "Group X, who noticed a significant difference in alertness among the group," a debrief with new clients affirmed results of, "Group Y who noticed a significant decrease of afternoon fatigue compared to their experience at other properties." The same kind of information is consistent with Andrea Sullivan's comprehensive research on the effects of the brain with food and timing.

As leaders in Food for Thought, Executive Chef Craig Mason and Andrea Sullivan give us a few things to take away from this study:

**1. Avoid a Sugar High** - Chef Craig Mason was able to show us white flour and simple sugars such as cookies are a no-no in the afternoon. Andrea Sullivan recommends fruits and nuts

for plant enzymes that fight off mental fatigue. Sullivan's advice to avoid a sugar high is to pair sugar with a protein such as a dark chocolate peanut butter cup. Dark chocolate is a power food that improves cognitive functioning for one to two hours. Not all sugar has to be banished if coupling it with the right items.

**2. Stay Light, Stay Awake**

- Meeting success is mainly impacted by meals served at breakfast and lunch. In our debriefing sessions, meeting planners who report more alert attendees compare their experience directly to meals with red meats that resulted in afternoon fatigue. Sullivan's research reveals lean meats produce more memorable meetings, while fatty meats slow guests down.

**3. Local** - Local farmers and vendors play a large role. Serving

less starches and more fruits and vegetables has proven to counteract the 2:00 afternoon blues. Sullivan's study proves local foods have more nutrients that counteract fatigue, increase memory, cognition, and oxygen in the brain. At The National Conference Center, fresher ingredients also reflect results of

more meeting alertness based on debriefing sessions.

Through this study, there are great possibilities of enhanced meetings and performance with menu choices that encompass the correct balance and science demonstrated by Andrea Sullivan's brain research, Executive Chef Craig Mason and The National Conference Center. When Andrea Sullivan was asked what she finds most interesting, she answered, "We often struggle with our body and mind, yet this science gives us insight and an understanding to apply in our daily lives. We learn to use our brain to be in charge of ourselves and become the person we want to be." As we fulfill our mission to deliver quality service to our clients, we strive to apply the authentic and powerful science of Food for Thought to help organizations achieve their goals.

**Meeting Discoveries:  
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Meeting Discoveries is a white paper series produced quarterly by The National Conference Center. Topics range from helping meeting planners produce more productive meetings to trends in the industry. The next edition of Meeting Discoveries will publish in June 2011.

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*The National Conference Center (NCC) is a full-service conference center and one of the largest eco-friendly conference centers in the nation. Located in Northern Virginia, 12 miles from Dulles International Airport and 35 miles from Washington, D.C., NCC has 917 guest rooms and over 250,000 square feet of meeting space. With 30 years experience in the hospitality and meetings industry, The National Conference Center has become a hub for productive meetings. For information call 877-363-3108 or visit [www.conferencecenter.com](http://www.conferencecenter.com).*

*Andrea Sullivan, M.A. is President of BrainStrength Systems, a learning and performance organization providing programs on brain-friendly meetings and learning design, performance improvement, leadership development and personal mastery. Sullivan is committed to educating people about their brain - their most valuable resource at work and in life. She can be reached at 610-891-7510 or [asullivan@brainstrength.net](mailto:asullivan@brainstrength.net).*

*Executive Chef Craig Mason brings his passion for cooking and knowledge of hospitality's food and beverage trends to The National Conference Center's 10,000 square foot kitchen each morning. As the Executive Chef, Mason is responsible for creating and implementing new menus and concepts for almost 6,000 guests a month. Mason's primary culinary focus is to promote eco-sustainability through environmentally friendly products, "food for thought" entrees, and farm-to-table initiatives. Chef Mason graduated with honors from The Culinary Institute of America and received his degree in Culinary Arts. Mason's talent has led him to obtain several certifications including Culinary Institute of America - Pro Chef Certification Level II and American Culinary Federation Certified Chef de Cuisine. To contact Chef Mason, please email [cmason@conferencecenter.com](mailto:cmason@conferencecenter.com).*