

GOLD-PLATED

From dishes at four-course soirées to cocktail-party hors d'oeuvres, three of Houston's society caterers share the dish on all things foodie related

By **DOUGLAS BRITT**
SOCIETY WRITER

WHETHER guests graze or pig out at the sizzling soirées and chic cocktail parties that make Houston's social season hum, nothing about the food on their plates escapes the attention of the hosts — or the people they hire to make the event a success.

We asked three foodies for hire — **Milton Townsend**, marketing director for Jackson and Co.; **Rachael Volz**, co-owner of A Fare Extraordinaire; and **Gary Mercer**, co-owner of City Kitchen — for the inside dish on all things culinary.

Q: What trends are you noticing through event requests from clients and party planners?

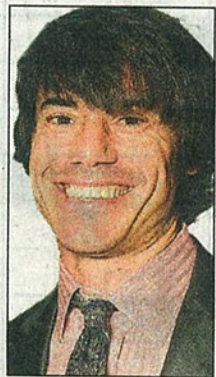
Townsend: There are so many specialty diets right now, and (the challenge) is just thinking of food that can entertain across the board. I often tell some of my friends when they go to lots of parties to get the alternative dish, because we have four or five alternatives, which is either salmon or vegetarian or vegan or gluten-free.

It's amazing what we have to do in the back of the house. It's not just the same plate of food or everybody anymore. One of our clients goes to everything, and she's on a special diet. The other day, she was going to three different parties and we had her dinner basically following her until she was ready to eat.

Volz: People are interested in action stations. They want more than just really great food. They want it presented in a cool way. They want options. A lot of times we'll put a chef experienced buffet attendant out in the open on the floor putting together something — for example, whitefish ceviche bar or a grilled-cheese station.

Another trend is global cuisines and mixing different ethnicities — so not necessarily doing all Indian food or all Asian food, but having a complex group of flavors. So you might do something like a pork dumpling, a tomato basil soup and a Tandoori chicken.

Mercer: Traditionally, Houston's been a very conservative market — pretty much meat and potatoes, but what I have seen is trend towards more of an openness to new ideas while still sticking to the classics. For example, we serve a lot more fish than we used to. We've done it at a couple of dinners for 300, 500, 1,000 people and gotten a great response, whereas



DAVE ROSSMAN

Milton Townsend



JASON VOLZ

Rachael Volz



STEVE HENRY

Gary Mercer

in the past people would be scared to serve fish to such a large group. Same thing with something like duck.

Also, we've seen that whereas Texas was famous for huge portions of food — which I had fought for a very long time, but they wanted it — we're not going to nouvelle cuisine-size portions, but we are getting a little bit more reasonable, especially with regular clients. They may go to events four nights a week, so they want good food, but it doesn't have to be this 4,000-calorie meal every time.

Q: What types of events present the biggest catering challenges?

Townsend: Probably weddings because everybody has a particular idea of how they want it done. It's one thing to go in and do a gala — the same event over and over — you kind of know what you're doing; everything's in the same place.

When you're doing a wedding, it really is different every time, and you usually have an abundance of people working with you, so there's almost too many chiefs instead of one chief and a lot of Indians getting it done. Plus, some people only ever do one big party in their family's life, and it might be the wedding, and you want to make sure everyone's walking around with smiles.

Volz: We did the Buffalo Bayou Gala on the Sabine Street Bridge, and a lot of people don't know that you actually can't start setting up the tent and having things delivered until 7 a.m. that morning. So it all happens that day, and it has to be broken down that night. So you have a very strict timeline of how many people are on site and where they're delivering things. And meanwhile, the city requires us to have a lane open on the bridge for emergency vehicles. So



AMY VOGEL

DELICATE: A Fare Extraordinaire's Summer Salad in a Parmesan Cuff and Watermelon Gazpacho in a mini martini glass.

it's not like you can even completely close it, and there's bikers and roller bladers and runners running through.

Mercer: When you're going into a new type of space — for example, an office building that's not up and running. It's the first event being held there, and they may not have a power supply, and you're having to work with the building itself, the contractor who's building the building, the power company, everyone working on board. You're having to really think through from the very beginning.

Q: What might really surprise people if they went behind the scene?

Townsend: The fact that their dinner came from a stairwell. Usually at our larger functions, we work at big venues that don't have a kitchen, and we have to work in alleyways and streetways. What shocked me at first was how you cook the food. You may start with your steak at our kitchen in Montrose and grill it



COURTESY PHOTO

PRESENTATION: Jackson and Co. adds impact to its visual presentation by using whole fruits and vegetables such as apples, avocados and tomatoes as edible containers for a particular dish.

first, and then you put it in a hot box. It continues to cook in that box, even though it's cooking very slowly, and it stays in that box as it's transported to the Wortham Center. Then it's time to come out of the box and go into a stronger oven for a certain amount of time, and then it has to come out and be put on a plate and carried 500 feet.

Volz: Nobody ever thinks about power. The people who are the chairs or who are planning the event or the hostess think, "Oh, we can just plug in

here and plug in there and plug in there." We did a wedding in a tent at somebody's home, and the client decided to pull the power from our bid the week of the wedding because she thought she could get it cheaper. She did save \$500 by getting a generator on her own, but it wasn't enough power, and you need a distribution panel to plug everything into, and she didn't have that. So it made the vendors really stressed, and it was pouring down rain, and a lot of the lights went out in the tent, and it was just a disaster in my opinion.

Mercer: We spend a lot of time not only focusing on getting the food from the oven to the guests as quickly and efficiently as possible, but literally from the supplier to the guests. For example, I'm doing a Peruvian dinner tonight, and we have some scallops that were harvested in Peru yesterday. They went on a plane and got to the airport last night, and they were here this morning.

And then at the event — there could be a seated dinner for 300 people — they may not realize that in addition to all the waiters, there could be 30 or 40 people back in the kitchen helping get all this food ready and plated and out to the customer. Whereas a restaurant might have from 6 to 10 p.m. to serve those 300 people, we're serving them within a period of 20 minutes when all of the lamb racks have to be carved, put on a plate with risotto and gotten out to the guests.



COURTESY PHOTO

THEMED TREAT: Jackson and Co. presented this chocolate torte with a Salvador Dali-inspired drooping clock face for 2010's surreal-themed Ballet Ball.



COURTESY PHOTO

PRETTY ON THE PLATE: Jackson and Co. often presents classic, timeless flavors in fresh and creative ways, as in the case of this Coquilles St. Jacques done in a real scallop shell resting on a bed of multicolored sea salt.



DAVE ROSSMAN

AHOY: City Kitchen and A Fare Extraordinaire created pirate-themed ale and grub for guests such as Diana and Ron Gordon at the Houston Museum of Natural Science's VIP preview of *Real Pirates: The Untold Story of the Whydah from Slave Ship to Pirate Ship*.