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Herb N' Renewal

Guests want to grab, sit, take, or have
F&B delivered—and can, p. 21

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ON THE COVER

From left: Jason Tresh, director, F&B, New York Hilton Midtown; Shawn McGowan, senior director, F&B, brand initiatives and programs, Hilton Worldwide; Tony Lajara, server, New York Hilton Midtown; Kang Choe, executive sous chef, New York Hilton Midtown; and Flor Diaz, server, New York Hilton Midtown.





Licensing and insurance for mobile concessions in the area "tends to be about 75% less expensive than for a brick-and-mortar restaurant," says David Fuhrman, owner of Great Events Catering.

Blind Ambition

Faced with opening with zero foodservice space, the Gates Hotel in Key West found a porcine partner. BY JANICE CHA

When Highgate Holdings opened the Gates Hotel, a boutique property in Key West, Florida, they wanted to add a foodservice outlet to complement Rum Row, their full-service poolside bar. The only problem: there was simply no space.

So Gates management reached out to local chef/caterer David Fuhrman, owner of Key West-based Great Events Catering, for ideas. Fuhrman's first suggestion was to bring in a mobile concession in the form of a food trailer.

"I came on board in September 2014, a few months before Highgate opened the [at the time] 100-room hotel," Fuhrman says. "We toured the property and saw what the previous owners had used for their 'grill' area. It was a home-style Weber grill with

a nearby kiosk selling raw ingredients for guests to grill by themselves."

Fuhrman came up with various ideas, but a food trailer was the top choice.

"We described a unit that would be custom-built, user-friendly, and far less expensive than building a full-on foodservice operation at the hotel," Fuhrman says. "The menu would be a tapas-style selection of Cuban, Bahamian, Caribbean, and Floridian flavors, with daily specials. It would be supported by our kitchen at Great Events Catering."

The concept is convenient, and licensing and insurance for mobile concessions in that part of Florida "tends to be about 75% less expensive than for a brick-and-mortar restaurant," Fuhrman says.

"We wanted to bring an authentic experience to our guests," says Gates' GM Eugenia Simons. "That's why we believed [a food trailer concept such as] the Blind Pig would be able to offer a great selection of conch fusion—small plates and tapas—right in the heart of our hotel."

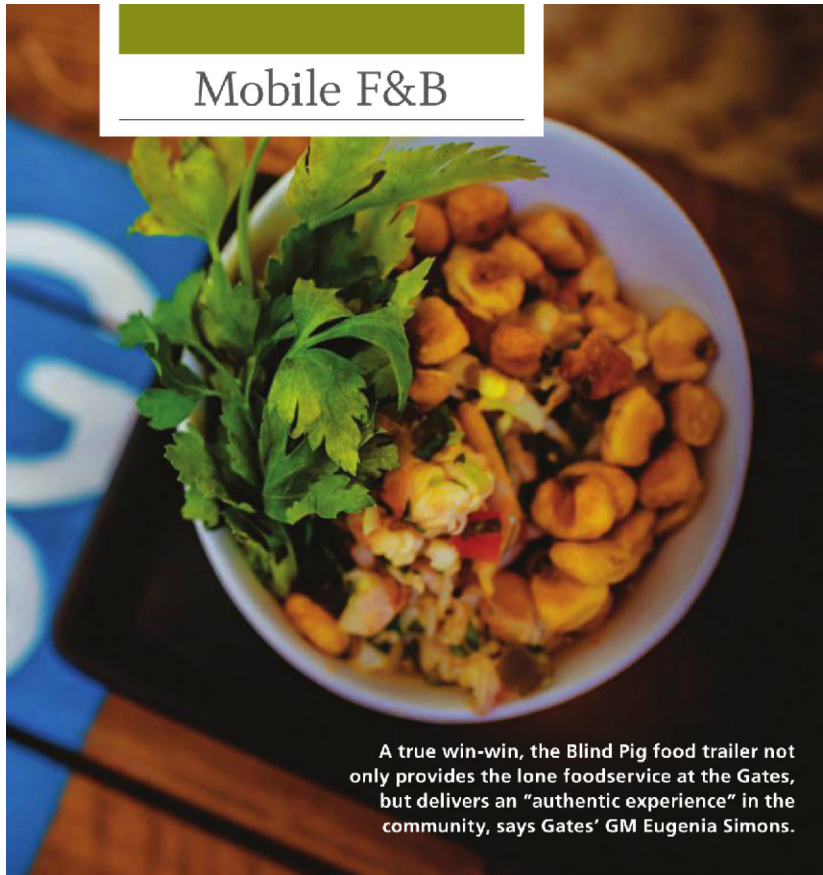
Highgate company heads did a tasting of Fuhrman's proposed menu, considered the options, then gave a green light to a partnership between the Gates Hotel and Great Events Catering for an onsite food trailer.

Creating the Blind Pig

Fuhrman contacted Concession Nation, a Fort Lauderdale-based firm specializing in custom-built food

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A true win-win, the Blind Pig food trailer not only provides the lone foodservice at the Gates, but delivers an “authentic experience” in the community, says Gates’ GM Eugenia Simons.

trailers and trucks.

“We opted for an 18-foot trailer, 8½ feet wide, that has space for three people to work comfortably—one at the window as the server/cashier, one in expo filling orders, and one as cook,” Fuhrman says.

To equip the kitchen, Fuhrman chose from options offered by the firm. “Then they created a spec sheet to take into account weight distribution and layout,” he says. “Once we approved it, they built the unit in about two weeks.”

The resulting trailer includes a seven-foot hood covering a grill and flattop, four-burner range/oven, and fryer. A full-size refrigerator, under-counter refrigerator and freezer, sandwich prep table, microwave, hot water tank, three-compartment sink, hand sink, and work tables—plus an air conditioning unit, propane tanks, and a generator—complete the setup.

Menus and Food Supplies

“There’s enough equipment to prepare just about any menu item we want to,” Fuhrman says. Indeed, the only changes made since the Blind Pig opened in May 2015 have been to the menu rather than the kitchen. “Guests wanted larger portions than what we offered on our tapas menu, which was an easy change to make.”

The food trailer is permanently docked on a concrete slab near the hotel pool and about 10 feet away from the hotel’s watering hole, the speakeasy-themed Rum Row. “The Blind Pig offers easy ordering and fast preparation of cuisine inspired by Key West’s Cuban, Bahamian, Caribbean, and Floridian roots,” Simons says.

The Blind Pig serves throughout the day. Morning favorites include Cuban-inspired breakfast sandwiches, fresh fruits, and omelets. For lunch and dinner, the menu shifts to daily-changing tacos and ceviches made with fresh local fish, hearty sandwiches, and arepas [South American corn pancake sandwiches], as well as snacks such as truffle



popcorn and housemade chips. The menu's fresh, eclectic spin has proved a perfect match for the Gates Hotel's urban, younger clientele.

So far, guests enjoy the food trailer, which aligns with the offbeat vibe the rest of the hotel exudes. A guest review on TripAdvisor.com in September 2015 reads, "The pool area was well maintained and the food truck has very good food for reasonable prices." Another commented, "The restaurant is a food truck, yeah! we ate there a couple of times, the lobster cevice was delicious."

Bulk food prep is handled offsite at Fuhrman's 2,000-square-foot Great Events catering kitchen, located a mile from the hotel. Delivery runs throughout the day keep the Blind Pig well-supplied during its daily 7 a.m.-to-10 p.m. hours of operation.

Behind-Scenes Details

At four months into operations, and despite opening at the start of Florida's hot, steamy off-season, The Blind Pig is generating about \$1,000 per day in revenue with a check average of \$8 per person.

"The results have been extremely positive, not only for our guests, but for our community as well," Simons says. "The food truck offers a compact, fully equipped kitchen that allows Chef David Fuhrman to vary his menus and offer amazing specials."

The rental agreement between Gates Hotel and Fuhrman includes a sliding-scale percentage that is based on sales figures. The Gates Hotel is responsible for the trailer's design, logos, branding, and marketing.

Looking ahead, Fuhrman will be considering the possible upgrade to a larger trailer as business increases.

"The Gates Hotel [opened] another 145 rooms this October," Fuhrman says. "We will see how things go with the 18-foot truck, but we may want to expand into a 24-foot trailer instead, with walk-in

cooler capacity. But for now we'll run with the trailer we have." ❧

Janice Cha has covered the foodservice industry for more than a decade.

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