



Creating the perfect backdrop is essential to the success of a dish.

Tabletop design is one of the fastest-growing components of the foodservice industry. Nowhere was this more in evidence than at the Futurist Conference held during the 2000 International Hotel/Motel & Restaurant Show in New York City where designers and consultants shared their views about products that make a restaurant stand out. Panelists included restaurant consultant Clark Wolf, architect Adam Tihany, event caterer Liz Neumark, designer Lois Bloom, Plaza Hotel food and beverage director Jeffrey Jacobs, and restaurateur Alan Stillman.

"Glassware is critical," Wolf said. "You can freshen a table quickly with glassware." He personally scours antique stores and raids closets at the back of hotels to find interesting pieces for the table and looks for unique glassware that works well with the ever-popular cocktail. Unusual sizes are popular in catering, he said. "Weird butter plates can change the whole look of a table."

Where flatware is concerned, some tables are set with far too many utensils, Tihany said, emphasizing that dining out should be a pleasure, not a lesson in fork etiquette. And, while European clients may have certain table expectations that exceed that of the average American client, "if you have a casual restaurant, you can overpower the guest with too much silverware," Jacobs said. "There's no need to use that many pieces." Wolf prefers to add pieces as the meal progresses. "It's fun to bring in a piece of silverware in the middle of the meal," he said. "Having a brilliant knife is great."

Jacobs, who oversees a property that handles more than 1.2 million meals annually, said he tries to stay ahead of cuisine trends. "We need products that look good and are accessible," he said. "The elegance of tabletop is in the image."

The choice of tablecloth evoked strong sentiments among panelists, who agreed that the breadth of products available has made the selection of table linens more interesting—if not more challenging. Bloom prefers the softer-looking sand and pale-yellow napkin colors. "We want the tabletop to be a backdrop for the chef," she said. With off-premise events, event caterer

Neumark likes to use linens that create what she called the "wow factor." It is not unusual for her to do a room with each table set up completely different.

Even with the predominance of black as fashion's standard color of choice, Wolf believes black napkins don't look good on the table, even though "they do look good on laps," he said. As for materials, he prefers microfibers, which produce less lint and always look crisp.

No matter the event or function, carefully chosen, uniquely designed tabletop pieces are readily available on the market and can turn a basic room into a stylish setting, without necessarily having to break the bank.

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