

Taking a Seat At the Table

HOSPITALITY: Art Manask's niche consultancy feasts on guiding nonprofits on food service.

By **KAREN E. KLEIN** Staff Reporter

It's easy to mistake consultant **Art Manask's** client roster for a must-see list of American cultural venues.

The National Gallery of Art, the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, Hearst Castle, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, the Norton Simon Museum, Zoo Atlanta – Manask has advised them all plus hundreds of other nonprofit venues, including nearly every major Los Angeles destination from the Getty Villa in Pacific Palisades to Descanso Gardens in La Cañada Flintridge.

Despite the range of cultural offerings, all of these attractions have one common element that Manask focuses on: food. And that's where his consulting firm, Burbank's **Manask & Associates**, comes in.

"Food service is the most highly visible aspect of running a cultural institution, it's subject to the most criticism or praise from the public and it's often the biggest challenge an institution faces in its daily operations," said Manask, who founded his niche consultancy in 1993.

It took a while to get started as a consultant after a career as a food service operator, but today – with two employees and a network of about a dozen food and restaurant experts he calls on to help clients – the company has steady work, Manask said. While he won't disclose specific numbers, he said his company generates an annual revenue total in the low seven figures and has just one direct competitor, **JGL Food Service Consultants** in Princeton, N.J.

Special service

Many of Manask's nonprofit clients contract with local restaurateurs, regional caterers or national food service companies to run their restaurants, cafés and concession stands.

Most museums are nonprofits, and based on a 2012 report from trade organization American Alliance of Museums, nearly 37 percent of their revenue comes from private and institutional donations, with an additional 24 percent from government. Retail revenue

from food, admissions and gift-shop sales accounts for 28 percent, with the remaining 11 percent from investments.

The major difference between consulting for nonprofits versus for-profit food operations comes down to the bottom line, Manask said. Because zoos, gardens and museums are financed largely by donations, the food they offer is primarily for visitors' comfort, rather than to generate revenue. In many cases, a venue's onsite food service just breaks even, or is a money-loser, subsidized by the institution to keep visitors comfortable and entice them to stick around longer. That way, they're more likely to become members.

What can boost finances, however, is onsite catering for events such as weddings, corporate meetings and fundraisers, which can have profit margins of 30 percent or more, Manask said.

Yet capitalizing on that opportunity is not something many nonprofit executives prioritize, said **David R. Brown**, executive director at Descanso Gardens.

"I go to meetings and talk with other (directors of) botanic gardens, but almost never about their cafés. There are occasional sessions at conferences about rentals or weddings, but in general, when plant people get together they want to talk plants," he said. "They're botanists. Their relationship with food is, 'What are the plants in it?'"

That focus, or lack thereof, opens the door for Manask's business. Brown hired Manask when Descanso's long-term contract with **Patina Restaurant Group** of Los Angeles came up for renewal three years ago. At the time, Brown said, the relationship wasn't working well for either side and some people, including influential board members, suggested a change was in order.

Manask spent several days assessing the contract and listening to both sides. In the end, he recommended contract renewal with new parameters for each party, Brown said.

"He came forward with a plan that rebooted the relationship, dealing with menus, pricing structure, furniture, cleanliness, turnover,



PHOTO BY DAVID SPRAGUE

Well-Served: Art Manask with lunch at Descanso Cafe in La Cañada Flintridge.

kitchen facilities – everything," said Brown. "Now we have a new chef, a new general manager and a two-person team that does nothing but market and manage special events."

The results have paid off, he said, with Descanso on track to host 60 weddings this year, bringing more revenue for Patina and Descanso, which gets a share of the catering income, as well as exposure to 9,000 guests who might not otherwise set foot in the gardens.

In his blood

Manask got into consulting after a long career as a food service entrepreneur. He literally grew up in the business, working from the age of 7 in the corporate cafeterias his father ran for L.A. entities such as the Metropolitan Water District and **Mattel Inc.** of El Segundo.

Descanso Cafe's menu, featuring watermelon and feta cheese salads with toasted pistachios and fancy PB&J's, is a far cry from what was typically served in cultural institutions in those days, Manask recalled. Opening the food-service operation at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the 1960s is a par-

ticularly vivid memory.

"It was a traditional cafeteria line, with trays and slices of apple and cherry pie," said Manask.

He became president of the family company, which was eventually sold to a competitor, then ran his own business operating attorney dining rooms for L.A. law firms. During the 1984 Olympics, the company supplied food for the L.A. Organizing Committee, the ABC International Broadcasting Center and venues near the Los Angeles Coliseum.

In 1989, a larger operator acquired the company as it looked to get a toehold in the L.A. market. But Manask wasn't ready to retire.

That's when friends suggested consulting. It took several years to find his niche, but he said things took off once he settled on serving cultural institutions, with clients appreciating both his financial know-how and inside knowledge of food-service operations.

"Art is like a walking benchmark for successful institutions' catering relationships," said Brown. "He knows how it feels to be on the caterer's side. And what's great for us is he's right over the hill in Burbank."