

Upper-Crust Food Fight?



Forget about art for art's sake. There's currently a "food arms race" going on in the unlikeliest of places—museums.

"Historically, museum eateries were considered pretty much just places to grab a bite, not...unique destinations," says Arthur Manask, president of the Burbank, Calif.-based Manask & Associates, an operational and financial consultant to museums and other nonprofit institutions.

But now, a kind of "food arms race" is taking place, Manask said, as museums battle for membership. "Since the mid-1990s, museum officials have seen that better food makes a better impression on visitors," and that leads to more memberships," he says, adding that museums are more than recovering the cost of high-priced chefs. The American Association of Museums says that 32% of its 3,000-plus members had food service in 2009, up from 22% in 2006.

Sensation

Museums are hiring high-priced chefs to lure more members. Some cafés don't charge general admission.

Indeed, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art now boasts a pastry chef: Caitlin Williams Freeman, a former co-owner of the prized San Francisco café Miette.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art recently picked Starr Restaurants Catering Group to operate its restaurant and café, and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art selected Restaurant Associates for the same thing. Both the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim Museum have opened higher-end café and dining facilities within the past year. Dinner at the Guggenheim can now set you back more than \$100, matching many of Manhattan's priciest restaurants.

And some museums—such as New York's Whitney and the Philadelphia Museum of Art—open their restaurants to those who don't view, or even pay to view, the art. —DANIEL GRANT