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New York

Flavors of the Empire State

by Marlene Goldman

New York puts its diversity where its mouth is. According to the New York State Restaurant Association, New York claim to more than 37,000 eating and drinking establishments. The projection for 2009 is that the food and beverage industry will post sales of more than \$27 billion.

The state is home to the Culinary Institute of America and the New York Wine & Culinary Center, as well as a plethora of celebrity chefs, award-winning wineries and microbreweries.

Groups can experience all New York has to offer with culinary tours, Iron Chef competitions, private dining rooms and unique food venues, from ski jumps to dinner boats.

New York City

Taking a bite of the Big Apple can be a daunting experience, with nearly 25,000 dining establishments throughout the city. One option is planning a meeting around New York City Restaurant Week, with more than 250 restaurants participating—a cross section of the city's culinary scene. **More Coverage**

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Manhattan itself is a haven for celebrity chefs, such as Daniel Boulud of restaurant Daniel and Bar Boulud, among others; Bobby Flay of Mesa Grill and Bar American fame; Alain Ducasse at the St. Regis New York; and Craft Restaurant's Tom Colicchio.

"New York is the culinary capital of the world," says Karen Shackman, president and founder of DMC Shackman Associates New York, offering culinary tours, dinners and events, as well as team-building options.

"Culinary tours take into consideration themes. Right now, cupcake wars is a big theme—a variety of cupcake shops have opened with their own flavors and icing," Shackman says. "We can customize a tour that incorporates cupcake tasting."

Other culinary tours include Chinatown for its dim sum, bakeries and grocery shops; Little Italy, which lends itself progressive tasting tour; and a citywide chocolate tasting extravaganza.

According to Shackman, a burgeoning trend is the rooftop experience, including a number of hotels, such as the Empire Hotel, Gramercy Park Hotel and Hotel Gansevoort in the uber trendy Meatpacking District.

Team building is another trend, according to Shackman, whose DMC organizes cake-making activities with groups competing for the best cake. After being judged, they can bring their creations to local disadvantaged children and have a party with them.

Empire Force Events, another DMC, organizes a progressive dining experience in various neighborhoods. While the options are endless, an example would be the first stop at Tribeca Rooftop for cocktails, dinner at a hot spot like M Batali's Del Posto and dessert at Battery Gardens Restaurant for a view of the Statue of Liberty.

New options include Shake Shack in the New York Mets' new Citi Field ballpark, as well as dining at the Sterling Club in an area behind home plate. Not to be outdone, the new Yankees Stadium is offering its Legends Culinary Series, which brings in New York's top chefs during select games to create a meal for diners in the stadium's new Legends Suite Club.

Long Island

Waterside venues abound throughout Long Island.

The Montauk Yacht Club offers group dining in its Gulf Coast Kitchen or the Turtle Lounge, a replica of the landmark Montauk Lighthouse.

For a slice of history, groups can head to the Upper Marine Room overlooking Greenport Harbor at Claudio's, which first opened its doors in 1870 and is recognized by the National Restaurant Association as the oldest same-family-owned restaurant in the U.S.

Renowned chef Todd Jacobs heads up the kitchen at Tierra Mar, a classic oceanside dining space at the Westhamp Bath & Tennis Hotel. Groups can also charter a yacht from Freeport-based Nautical Cruise Lines for a dinner banquet.

The Suffolk County Community College Culinary Arts & Hospitality Center features a demonstration theater. Hands-on cooking classes are a team-building option for up to 32 students.

Westchester

For a sampling of the Hudson Valley's myriad restaurant choices, the Hudson Valley Restaurant Week is an annual opportunity to test some of the region's best eateries.

Westchester is home to a number of top chefs, including Peter Kelly of X20 fame, a restaurant located in Yonkers on the banks of the Hudson River. Zanaro's restaurant in White Plains features chef Joe DiMaggio Jr., a distant relative of the late baseball great.

One of the region's most unique experiences is an outing to Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, located in the Pocantico Hills. The agricultural center demonstrates the farm-to-table dining process at its on-site restaurant, Hill, set in a landmark 19th century townhouse.

"Everything they grow on the site, from herbs to animals to vegetables, is served in the restaurant," says Kim Sinistore, director of tourism for the Westchester County Office of Tourism.

Albany

The state's capital has its share of star chefs, such as certified master chef Dale L. Miller, who heads up his own Dale Miller Restaurant. For an exclusive experience, the penthouse-level private dining club caters to groups.

Carmine Sprio's award-winning Carmine's Restaurant, subject of the behind-the-scenes cooking television show Carmine's, caters to groups at its downtown location, or he can cater a small event in person.

The Albany Aqua Ducks and Trolleys hosts a chocolate tour, traveling to places where groups can enjoy a chocolate demonstration and chocolate treats, and get their hands dirty with a chocolate-making adventure.

North of Albany, River Stone Manor sets its private banquet space along the banks of the Mohawk River. Dining options on-site include the Manor House itself and The Terrace, a seasonal outdoor banquet facility.

Saratoga Springs is home to more than 100 restaurants. One of the stalwarts is Panza's Restaurant, which is located on Saratoga Lake and caters to groups with a ballroom and a more intimate dining room.

Buffalo/Niagara

Buffalo has left an indelible image on the culinary landscape with its world-famous Buffalo wings. The best place to dine is at the Anchor Bar, original home of the Buffalo wing. The group-friendly eatery features live jazz and blues.

Another signature option is a floating banquet aboard Buffalo Harbor Cruises, chartered from the Erie Basin Marina.

On Buffalo's trendy Elmwood Avenue, a cooking school called Delish! promotes its hands-on cooking parties and team-building activities.

"There are a lot of independent restaurants and a lot of chefs trained by classic chefs. People are surprised at our culinary options," says Doug Sittler, communications manager of the Buffalo Niagara CVB.

Niagara spices up the group dining experience with a number of unique venues, such as a power lunch at the Pow Vista, perched atop the Niagara Power Project's main plant and overlooking the Niagara Gorge near Niagara Falls.

Rochester

Home of the Rochester white hot, a variation of a hot dog created in the 1920s, Rochester dining does have a more sophisticated side, with many local restaurants, such as the Grill at the Strathallan Hotel, offering wines produced from Finger Lakes vineyards.

A newcomer to the scene, Pier 45 at the Port is located at the mouth of the Genesee River where it meets Lake Ontario and has a second-floor balcony that provides a view of boats cruising in and out of the port.

Tastings Restaurant, part of famous Wegmans Grocery Chain, is located adjacent to Wegmans' flagship store in Pittsford Plaza and offers groups a fine dining experience using fresh ingredients from the market.

Syracuse

The local flavor of Syracuse is its salt potatoes, invented by local salt mine workers in the 1880s. Syracuse is also home of the famed Dinosaur Bar-B-Que, renowned for its biker atmosphere and live music. The eatery recently added a group space upstairs and can cater events at the Oncenter Complex convention space or other locales.

The historic Mission Restaurant caters to groups. Built in the 1840s and formerly the Syracuse Wesleyan Methodist Church, it was also an important 19th century way station on the Underground Railroad.

In Downtown Syracuse, the Armory Square district features a number of independent restaurants as well as breweries, and is suitable for a dine-around.

Binghamton/Central Leatherstocking

Binghamton is known for a delicacy called the spiedie—marinated meat on skewers, cooked over an open pit and served on Italian bread. Lupo's S&S Char Pit is a classic spot for spiedies, and they also cater group events.

Groups can also arrange a clambake at Mountain Top View, boasting views of the entire city. Downtown, the popular Number 5 Restaurant, located in a historic firehouse, caters to groups.

For a more elegant setting, the Otesaga Resort Hotel's main dining room serves grand buffet breakfasts and lunch as well as a five-course dinner, with imaginative cuisine that emphasizes foods from central New York. The adjacent lobby bar and the Otesaga Veranda overlooking Lake Otsego can stage sunset cocktails or a reception prior to dinner.

Lake Placid/Adirondacks

Lake Placid opens its ski jump towers built for the 1980 Olympics to groups, and caterers can set up a full bar and carving station in view of Nordic jumping competitions.

At the Olympic Center, groups can arrange for dinners on the same rink where the Miracle on Ice took place at the 1980 Olympics.

In the Adirondacks region, The Boathouse Restaurant, built in 1876, is located on Lake George. Additionally, The Sagamore Resort offers dinner cruises aboard a replica 19th century touring boat.

Warren County's Inn at Erlowest provides an elegant castle setting for group dining.

Catskills

The Catskills may be known for its outdoor pursuits, but it is also flooded with top-tier chefs trained in New York City. In addition, many of the ingredients used in restaurants in the Big Apple are grown in the region.

Restaurant 15 in Narrowsburg takes advantage of local produce, as does the popular restaurant 1906. Both offer a personal and intimate setting where groups can meet the chefs, according to Herb Clark of Sullivan County Tourism.

Groups can also take a cooking class at North Branch Inn or just watch their food being prepared in the large open kitchen.

In Greene County, the award-winning Prospect Restaurant at Scribner Hollow Lodge emphasizes regional fare and features one of the largest selections of wines in the Hudson Valley. Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz makes use of its gardens for group lunches.

Meanwhile, Stoutridge Vineyards in Marlboro offers an event room for 100 and underground barrel room for 30.

"What makes them unique is that they are all about green—eating local, sustainable food and featuring slow wine making," says Lisa Berger, director of marketing and group sales for the Ulster County Tourism Office.

Finger Lakes/Ithaca

New York's Finger Lakes Wine Region is the second-largest wine-producing region in the country. Bully Hill Vineyard on Keuka Lake offers a walking tour of its wine production facility and vineyard, followed by a wine-pairing dinner on-property, as does Sheldrake Point Winery on Cayuga Lake.

The historic Gaffer District in downtown Corning is especially suitable for dine-arounds. The area is home to the new Tony R's, which is located in an old bank building and bills itself as the first upscale steak and seafood restaurant in the Gaffer District.

An hour from Corning, Canandaigua boasts the New York Wine and Culinary Center, specializing in food grown and produced in New York state.

"The tasting room features cider, beer and wine, and they have a demonstration theater," says Danielle Roman, director of sales and marketing for the Steuben County Conference and Visitors Bureau. Groups can watch a cooking demonstration and eat what was prepared onstage for them, and cooking classes are offered for groups of up to 2

Ithaca is also a culinary haven and boasts more restaurants per square block than New York City, according to Ma Rachun, director of sales for the Ithaca/Tompkins County CVB.

One notable option is the signature restaurant at the Statler Hotel at Cornell University, Taverna Banfi. Its Tuscan-style cuisine features local ingredients from nearby Finger Lakes region farms.

1000 Islands

Dubbed the Garden of Great Spirit, the 1000 Islands region takes advantage of its aquatic setting for its culinary escapades.

"Our calling card is privately owned, on-the-water dining," says Gary DeYoung, director of tourism for 1000 Island International Tourism Council.

Options range from a traditional waterfront fish fry to private dining at the Jacques Cartier Fine Dining Room, local at the Riveredge Resort Hotel.
