

Chef Spotlight
Jason Harrison
Bellagio

Jason Harrison Doesn't Gamble on Banquets at the Bellagio



There are few places in the country where you can find a multitude of restaurants that serve a \$6.95 prime rib, alongside AAA 5 Diamond-rated venues. Las Vegas is one of these places and in the middle of the three mile stretch known as the Strip, is the Bellagio hotel, where Jason Harrison has been executive banquet chef for the past four years.

“If I work at a smaller property, I tend to get bored after 18 months,” Harrison said. “I haven’t been bored here.”

The Bellagio is one of the most well-known hotels on the Strip, and it is easy to understand how Harrison hasn’t been bored during his tenure. The banquet staff puts out an average of 70,000 covers a month, according to Harrison, including in house, off premise and pool-side events. They also recently took on the catering responsibility for the sales office for the new City Center development, scheduled to open late next year. However, Harrison doesn’t let the volume compromise the quality he and his staff of 48 put out on a daily basis.

“We’ve managed to transfer great food into something we can feed 2,000 people with,” he said.

Harrison and his staff work off an 80 page banquet menu, but that doesn’t mean that he isn’t constantly coming up with new ideas, writing 20 to 30 additional menus each week.

“There’s a lot of custom work and a lot of playing around for us,” he said. “That’s when it’s fun.”

Harrison came to the Bellagio without any banquet experience, having been a restaurant and executive sous chef at Ritz Carlton and Fairmont properties before making the move to the city that never sleeps. He likes the variety that being in a banquet position gives him.

“It literally changes every day and that’s what keeps it fresh,” he said. “With restaurants, within reason, you know what’s coming. Here, you don’t see it coming.”

Having been used to smaller size parties, Harrison quickly adapted to his new property where they can accommodate thousands of people at one event.

“When I started here, I thought we were busy when we’d have 500 to 600 people,” he said. “Now if it’s 500 to 600 people we can do anything for them. You sort of adapt to the environment.”

Fortunately for Harrison, his core staff is able to adapt quickly to last minute curve balls and if he is ever in a bind, he can borrow from the 16 outlets on the property, which employ a total of 900 kitchen workers. Though there are a total of 9,000 employees at the hotel, Harrison says it still feels like a smaller property.

“You don’t feel like a number,” he said. “I kind of know everybody.”

Though the hotel has only been open for nine years, it has already been through two renovations, the most recent being three years ago. Those updates added 1,000 rooms, a new ballroom and more meeting space. Harrison said the nature of the business in Las Vegas is the reason for the frequent renovations, not only at the Bellagio but at many of the hotels on the Strip.

“The market here demands you stay current and stay ahead of the curve,” he said.

In terms of trends, Harrison said Las Vegas tends to be on the cutting edge of what is going on in the food world.

“The good thing about Las Vegas is there are a lot of places to go for dinner and a lot of people who are trying new things,” he said.

As for the Bellagio, trying new things means changing the way banquets are served to give diners fresher food and almost tableside service. Instead of starting to plate lunch at 10 a.m. just to make his life easier, Harrison figures out exactly how long it will take to plate each meal and then brings the entire set up to the room and plates right outside the doors. He knows that the added difficulty for himself and his team is worth it in the long run.

“Sometimes we make our lives more difficult than they should be, but at the end of the day, it feels good,” he said. “That’s how we guarantee we’re going to do better than someone else.”

But that doesn’t mean they don’t face challenges in the kitchen. Harrison works hard to stay ahead of the game and set the precedent for other properties in Las Vegas and around the country.

“There is a constant sense of ‘we did that before – what can we do to make it better’,” he said. “A lot of other hotels come here to hold their corporate events, and then we get a lot of letters and phone calls saying ‘I wish we could do that at our property’. That means a lot to us.”

Harrison makes sure every meal he turns out is of the highest quality and made from the best ingredients he can get.

“I have the opportunity to work with some really great products,” he said. “We use the best we can get because our customers are demanding that we do.”

Though he is intent on getting the best ingredients, he knows there has been a lot of recent focus on sustainability and using local products, something that is harder to accomplish in the desert of Las Vegas.

“People are willing to wait for what’s in season,” he said. “It is a challenge getting stuff and making sure it’s in season, but it’s my responsibility to know what the seasons are and what’s available.”

Though he seems quite at ease being responsible for such a large operation, this Canadian didn’t get to the top without a lot of hard work along the way. Trained at the Algonquin Culinary Institute in Ottawa, he then worked his way across Canada after graduation, before moving to the United States. Though the culinary attitudes are basically the same on either side of the border, he said there is one important difference.

“There’s more emphasis put on whether or not an employee has gone to culinary school there than there is here,” he said. “Culinary schools [in the US] have changed. They run it like a business.”

Between culinary schools leaning towards making a profit, not turning out quality chefs, and the explosion of food programming on television, Harrison thinks there are a lot of people who are getting into the business for the wrong reasons.

“It takes a long time to get to a point there you feel comfortable in the knowledge,” he said. “I didn’t get into this because I wanted to make a lot of money. You have to get into it because you love it.”

