

Joe Carlino, sales manager, and Andrea Tencza, marketing director for the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Show, cut the ribbon to open the show. Behind them are Restaurant Events LLC partners Glenn Celentano (middle) and Tim von Gal (second row, far right) as well as event staff and staff from the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association.



Success in the Sunshine State

The Florida Restaurant & Lodging Show, co-located with the Pizza Tomorrow Summit, attracted more attendees and exhibitors than last year

BY SARA PEREZ WEBBER



Under new management and co-located for the first time with the Pizza Tomorrow Summit, the 2023 Florida Restaurant & Lodging Show in Orlando put on a strong showing in November, attracting thousands of attendees and hundreds of exhibitors—both an increase from last year's numbers.

"We had really nice expectations coming in, and they've been exceeded," said Tim von Gal, partner in Restaurant Events, LLC, in an interview at the show on Nov. 9. "But the thing that has been the most palpable has been the energy. We are seeing so many smiles and enthusiastic connections out there."

Von Gal and business partner Doug Miller purchased the Florida show in May, along with The International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York (sponsored by the New York State Restaurant Association) and the Western Foodservice & Hospitality Expo (sponsored by the California Restaurant Association). Von Gal and Miller previously owned the shows under the banner of Urban Expositions, before selling them to Clarion Events in 2016.

Von Gal praised restaurants' resilience post-pandemic. "That's one of the things that made us so excited to get back into this industry," he said. "I can't think of an industry that's more creative in terms of the nimble pivoting that everybody had to do to get through that."

Two Shows, One Badge

This year's Florida Restaurant & Lodging Show—a two-day industry-only event sponsored by the Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association—returned to its longtime home at the Orange County Convention Center, after being held last year at Orlando's Caribe Royale Resort. With much more space, the move allowed registrants to visit two shows at once and gave exhibitors more reach. With one badge, attendees could access both the restaurant show and the Pizza Tomorrow Summit, an event geared toward independent pizza operators that debuted last year and is also produced by Restaurant Events.

Restaurateur attendees, for example, could take a closer look at the pizza category "and learn—even if they're doing it currently—how they might be able to do it better," said von Gal.

"We were thrilled with the great energy and excitement that was created on the show floors by bringing these two incredible industry events together," said Glenn Celentano, a Restaurant Events partner, who founded the Pizza Tomorrow Summit last year. "We received such positive feedback from the exhibitors on the quality and quantity of qualified buyers who attended."

Registrants for either show could attend any of the 30 educational sessions offered. Examples included "Growing Your Restaurant Through Your Chamber of Commerce," "Pizza Dough Boot Camp" and "5 Secret Social Media Moves That Will Get Your Guests to Spend Even More." Dozens of restaurant professionals also participated in the new Restaurant Management 201 Workshop.

Many sessions were standing-room-only, including "How to Boost Catering Sales," with tips from Mickey King, president of Like a King Hospitality, a wedding and event planning company that includes two venues in New York. According to von Gal, catering has become an even more important category among members of the state associations he works with and is an in-demand educational topic.

Positive Feedback

Attendee Allison Fonseca, co-founder of The Salt Smokehouse in Tampa, asked King



Show attendees could sample products (opposite bottom) and watch a bartender competition (above).

questions during the session about a catering issue her company was facing and wrote notes to take back to her team. "I can't wait to share all of the helpful tips and encouragement he shared!" said Fonseca.

The combined shows provided a "really good customer mix" for exhibitor Truffle Systems, said Stephanie Simpson, vice president of sales-US division. The company had its GoBox on display—an automated food locker, which customers who've placed a pickup order can unlock with a QR code, in order to access their food. The system also helps restaurants manage their third-party delivery orders.

Seeing Truffle's product in person helps potential customers buy into the concept, said Simpson, who added that the Canada-based company started marketing in the U.S. this year. "The show was huge exposure for us," said Simpson. "We had an overwhelming response and will absolutely attend next year."

Culinary Feats

Attendees could also watch culinary competitions. The pizza side featured the '23 Galbani Professionale Pizza Cup & Acrobatic Trials, including a pizza-making contest and competitors showing off their skills in spinning and tossing pizza dough. Prizes were even awarded for fastest pie-maker and fastest box-folder. The American Culinary Federation's Central Florida chapter presented two events

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with local chefs and bartenders—the Rapid-Fire Challenge: Hot Sandwich and Sides Competition, and the bourbon-focused Hip Sip: Battle of the Modern Bartender Competition.

In-person events are especially critical for the restaurant industry, noted von Gal. “Trade shows are platforms for gathering, and when a show is serving an industry that is crucially dependent upon gathering, it’s like a double whammy,” he said, adding that the team at Restaurant Events plans to stay on top of industry trends so its

programming is especially relevant. “We’re a very small group; if there’s a good idea, we can implement it immediately.”

For example, the 2024 Western Foodservice & Hospitality Expo, taking place Aug. 25-27 in Los Angeles, will now feature the Pizza Tomorrow Summit Pavilion. The two events will be co-located with Coffee Fest Los Angeles. Coffee Fest, which is owned by Clarion Events, will also continue to be co-located with the International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York, which takes place March 3-5, 2024.

The combination of exhibitors and education made the Florida show a must-attend event for The Salt Smokehouse’s Fonseca. “My partners and I really enjoyed the in-person contact with some of our suppliers and software systems folks,” she said. “Getting to taste the new products available was priceless. And, hearing from experts in the industry was simply invigorating. We left with great connections, new ideas and encouraging solutions!”

The next Florida Restaurant & Lodging Show and Pizza Tomorrow Summit take place Nov. 6-7, 2024, at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando. For more information, visit flrestaurantandlodgingshow.com.

Mickey King from Like a King Hospitality led a catering-focused educational session (top). Attendees could watch competitors show off their pizza dough tossing skills (left).



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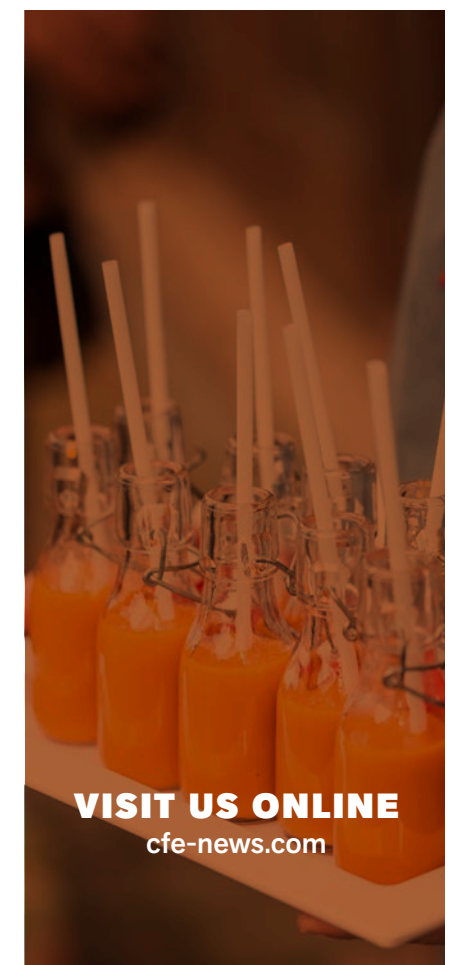
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