

From the Dallas Business Journal:

<http://www.bizjournals.com/dallas/news/2017/03/14/dallas-restaurant-management-firm-gets-thumbs-up.html>

Dallas restaurant management firm gets thumbs-up from James Beard

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Mar 14, 2017, 7:14am CDT

Dallas-based [Culinaire International](#) has grown from a spin-off dining service to a national food and beverage firm, managing, consulting and targeting unique venues, like museums and performing arts centers.

It's the company's boutique, alternative approach to restaurant management that might have helped two of its restaurants earn James Beard Awards nominations this year.

American museums have often been locales associated with overpriced and under-thought out food – a factory of mass production and dated ideas, even – but Culinaire has reversed those trends through hands-on management and an individualized, hyperlocal approach to each dining destination.

Two of the company's latest ventures – both coincidentally under the label of New American cuisine – have been dubbed as Beard Awards finalists. [Esker Grove](#) at Minneapolis' [Walker Art Center](#) has been named a finalist for Best New Restaurant, and Chef [Sonja Finn](#) of [The Café Carnegie](#), located at the [Carnegie Museum of Art and Natural History](#) in Pittsburgh, has been nominated for the coveted Rising Star Chef of the Year award.

"Being cited by the [James Beard Foundation](#) for our two newest endeavors will help solidify our position as a nationally recognized, niche player in the museum world," said [David Wood](#), senior vice president of Sales & Marketing for Culinaire and a hospitality industry veteran.

In just the past 18 months, Culinaire grew revenue in cultural and leisure accounts by more than 35 percent, Wood said. This growth chiefly stems from new acquisitions and an increase in sales for existing accounts.

Wood told us more about the company's role in developing these award-winning concepts and how Culinaire manages concepts across the United States, below.



COURTESY OF CULINAIRE INTERNATIONAL

Esker Grove at The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota

What does it look like for a food and beverage management company to have a hand in a James Beard Award finalist, like Esker Grove and The Café Carnegie?

It looks like we are doing something right! We have an unusual business model for our museum and performing arts centers' restaurants. Since they are such an integral part of the fabric of the local community, we search out partnerships with local chefs who most seem to capture the spirit of the city. Most of them are thrilled to partner with us to develop a concept specific to the venue, and enjoy displaying their culinary talents inside a landmark celebrating the arts.

Since they're two very different restaurants in two geographically different locations, is your role with each of these restaurants different?

We manage the entire food and beverage department in both museums, which includes upscale catering, concessions, bars, and cafes. We struck an agreement with Chef Doug Flicker to create the concept, develop recipes, and work with the culinary team on an ongoing basis at Esker Grove in Minneapolis to ensure his vision and the DNA of the restaurant would remain pure. We used the same identical strategy in Pittsburgh with Chef [Sonja Finn](#) at The Café Carnegie, so the restaurants are unique and emblematic of each region.

How do you and restaurant stakeholders collaborate on guest experience?

First we look at different customer groups who might be attracted to the restaurant and what their specific needs are. Certainly museum-goers are our first priority, then the residents of the surrounding neighborhood, then the business community, and perhaps, the "Ladies Who Lunch." Our chef partners create a concept and menus that satisfy those needs, and we involve museum leadership in all important decisions regarding design and style of service. Opening a restaurant in an art museum is much different than opening a standalone restaurant on the street. If you want the sleek, timeless design of an Eames chair, most restaurateurs would find an acceptable knock-off. In an art museum, however, if you want the look of an Eames chair, it has to be an Eames chair, which is exponentially more expensive.

What was one of the most difficult challenges that you navigated with these restaurants?

I would not say the challenges are difficult, but they are certainly different than opening a restaurant on the street. For instance, if you want to offer patio service during pleasant weather, numerous humidity tests have to be undertaken to insure that the art hanging in the museum is not compromised. Similarly, ventilation and oven temperatures have to be monitored. If you are on the second floor of a museum and can smell food, that means there are particulates in the air, and particulates can adhere to paintings or sculpture, and in time, damage them.

You have a hand in restaurants all over the country. How do you keep track of and regulate operations from a corporate perspective?

We operate in regions, with strong leadership in place in each of them. We meet with our clients frequently to ensure we are still meeting their needs and augmenting their mission. We do not have one way of doing things; we customize our approach for each venue to ensure our clients and our shared guests are happy and appropriately well-fed.

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