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## Hello, Dali: museums strive to make their restaurants part of the overall guest experience

[Nation's Restaurant News](#), [Feb 21, 2005](#) by [Paul King](#)

Visitors to the Philadelphia Museum of Art for a special exhibition of the works of Salvador Dali, which began earlier this month, will find themselves immersed in the artist's world: the art, the history and the food.

The food? Exactly.

Museumgoers who visit the Museum Restaurant or one of the museum's two cafes during the exhibit, which will run through May, can choose dishes from a menu filled with seafood and tapas items inspired by the region of Spain where Dali lived.


Tracey Hopkins, executive chef for Restaurant Associates, the company that manages the museum's foodservice facilities, spent several weeks in Barcelona and Figueres, Spain--Dali's hometown--to create an "art meets gastronomy" experience for museum guests.

Hopkins' efforts are indicative of a gradual change in the way museums view foodservice that has occurred over the past few years. Menus and restaurant decor today are much more likely to reflect either the theme of the museum or the beauty of the art displayed in the museum, and they are helping to boost business at museum-based eateries.

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"Dali was passionate about food," Hopkins explained. "I went to Spain because I wanted to demonstrate that passion in a special menu that reflected the area in which he lived. I felt I needed to appreciate the culture of the land and make the cuisine as authentic as possible."

Hopkins' menu at the Museum Restaurant features such items as a "DALI" catessen, an antipasto plate with Iberian ham, cured sausages, white asparagus, artichokes, olives, sardines and marinated mushrooms; a Serrano ham-wrapped trout with arugula, capers, olives, grilled oranges and Romesco sauce; and an orange flan with a pistachio nut cookie.

"Museums look at us as a partner," said Gina Zimmer, director of marketing for Restaurant Associates. "They want us to give visitors as complete an experience as possible, to hit all their senses. They want us to be an extension of the museum in one way or another."

Duane Keller, executive chef for Guest Services Inc. in the Washington, D.C., area, agrees. He recently revamped the menu at the Hillwood Museum and Gardens in Washington, D.C., home of Marjorie Merriweather Post's collection of French and Russian art.

"We are becoming more specialized," Keller said. "Our museum clients want the feel of the cafe to be as seamless with the feel of the museum as possible. So for the Hillwood's 50-seat cafe I wrote a very simple menu reflecting Old World cuisine."

The new menu includes such items as borscht; warm walnut-crust Brie and fresh fruit; Golubtsy, which are cabbage leaves filled with seasoned beef and rice and baked in tomato sauce; and an Old World Charcuterie, garlic sausage baked en croute and served with a variety of mustards.

"The museum is all about service and elegance, and I hope the menu reflects that," he added.

Some museums have placed such a high value on the food experience that they are signing on well-known restaurateurs to operate their cafes. For example, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York reopened last November after a major renovation, museum directors brought in Danny Meyer's New York-based Union Square Hospitality Group to operate new restaurant, The Modern, and two cafes.

"Our guests tend to spend several hours with us, so dining has become very much a part of the museum experience," said James Gara, director of operations for MoMA. "They want the dining experience to be commensurate with their museum experience. It doesn't have to be the most formal food. Even if it's just sandwiches, but the quality is there and the service is there, we've met their expectations."

The International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., which opened in August 2002, also hired a local restaurateur to operate its small cafe. Dan Mesches, owner of the Star Restaurant Group, which operates the well-known Red Sage restaurant in Washington. runs the Spy City Caf6 as well as Zola, a freestanding restaurant adjacent to the museum.

Both boast elements of the spy theme embraced by the museum. The Spy City Caf6 is decorated with photos of spy-related sites throughout our nation's capital, and the featured menu items are the Spy City Dogs, hot dogs with names and toppings that reflect the history of espionage.

For example, the MI-5 Dog--representing British Secret Service--is topped with onions, bacon and English Cheddar cheese. The Red Square Dog has mustard, chili sauce, red-cabbage slaw and red peppers.

Mesches said the dogs may be a gimmick for tourists, but locals come in as well for the paninis and wraps. The cafe handles about 350 people a day, with a check average of about \$8.50.

Zola, which is named for Emile Zola, the French writer who once saved an accused--but innocent--spy, features one-way mirrors that allow guests to peer into the kitchen as well as declassified spy documents displayed as artwork.

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