



# Leveling UP

Delicious and delightful ways to enhance the food and beverage displays at your reception

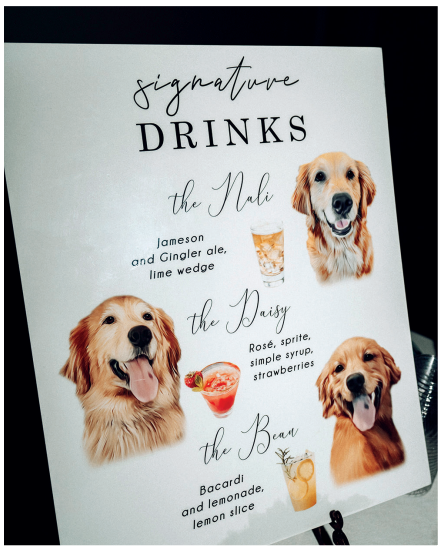
*By Christina Cush*

Give your guests something photo-worthy to satiate their cravings while mingling with other wedding-goers. For the most fun interactive food and beverage ideas in Northwest Florida, Courtney Morgan, director of events for SunQuest The Event Company in Santa Rosa Beach, and David Penniman, owner of Classic City Catering in Pensacola, spill the tea.

## Make cocktail hour a moment

Morgan: “We’ve done an oyster shucker, a person passing out caviar, and a cannoli guy, which is unexpected during cocktail hour. For drinks, guests ring a bell for champagne, and a server passes glasses through an interactive wall, or couples create signature drinks at the bar named after their pets. We have had customized espresso martinis with the wedding date or the couple’s names. We’ve used rice paper with logos or photos that dissolve in martinis. There are interactive martini stations and mimosa bars with juices and toppers.”

Penniman: “Who doesn’t love gourmet passed appetizers, charcuterie tables, oyster bars, and seafood stations? We make a lot of paella, with a four-foot pan that makes a splash. We greet guests when they arrive with a signature cocktail or glass of champagne, which takes pressure off the bar.”



Name signature drinks in honor of your favorite Fido.



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Late-night or after-party bites from fast-food joints are often favored.



Satisfy a sweet tooth with an array of bite-sized desserts that are deliciously displayed.

### Turn dinner into a social mixer

**Morgan:** “During dinner, we do stations to get guests up from their tables and interact with each other and the chefs. We just did a wedding for an Italian bride who shared her family recipe for chicken marsala, and our chef nailed it. We’ve done Caribbean weddings, and they shared family recipes, too. Stations are a creative way to tell a story about who the couple is. We see couples introduce foods from their home city, like St. Louis pizza, or a version of what they had on their first date.”

**Penniman:** “Our stations are escalated. Our taqueria station has braised duck breast and a 5-pound smoked grouper that has become a selfie superstar. Don’t expect boring lettuce and tomato because you’re getting microgreens and cabbage slaw. Even things like cheeseburgers and chicken fingers, we do them our way. Our burgers are featured in a sliders station and are so good that they don’t need ketchup.”

### Keep dessert sweet and memorable

**Morgan:** “Lately, there are smaller wedding cakes, which are more for photo opportunities, accompanied by dessert bars. We offer little tarts, brownies, a scoop-your-own candy bar, or a chocolate fountain. In any of our dessert displays, we pull in the wedding florals. Some brides want a long sheet cake with candles, flowers, and fresh fruit. A nice touch is a

coffee cart person. Now, everyone wants an espresso martini tower, where the couple pours from the top, and it trickles down. This is for the last hour of the party to keep it going.”

**Penniman:** “The biggest wow factor is our bananas Foster set up with the chef cooking, ice cream in martini glasses, and tons of bite-sized desserts. We have tiny carrot cakes, mini key lime pies, and crème brûlés in demitasse cups that are just two spoonfuls. We have a blast with a crème brûlée station and do flavors such as Meyer lemon, double vanilla cream, and more. Our bread pudding bar is fun and flavorful. We’ll have double vanilla, chocolate, bananas Foster, and more. We have done pie bars with little hand pies, like coconut cream, with fresh berries. To end the night, there’s a praline guy with a copper kettle, and he drops the praline on a white marble slab for the guests to take home in white boxes.”

### Bring after hours back

**Courtney:** “We did something adorable with grab-and-go pizza slices in heart-shaped boxes with the couple’s monogram on a sticker, plus pizza cutters as a favor. We see a lot of Whataburgers in the South and pretzels filled with nacho cheese.”

**Penniman:** “Some couples want fast-food burgers, but we cook on-site and produce something much better, like a triple grand cheeseburger with truffle parmesan fries

or fried chicken and waffles with bourbon maple syrup and hot honey. We do our own corn dogs with Conecuh sausage from Alabama, the best sausage in the world. How about a mini muffaletta wrapped in butcher paper and chef’s twine to stick in your pocket and eat on the way home?” ■



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**Courtney Morgan**, director of events for SunQuest The Event Company in Santa Rosa Beach