

How to serve as host away from home

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Annabel Hawksworth is an old hand at business lunches and dinners. As president and owner of Vancouver-based PR firm Hawksworth Communications, she regularly hosts groups of journalists and other "influencers" in New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, Toronto and Calgary in order to generate interest in the West Coast tourism properties she represents.

When choosing a restaurant in her home town, Ms. Hawksworth has a confident grip on the restaurant scene - her husband is a chef after all. But when away from home, she has to be a little more creative to ensure the event goes off without a hitch.

Read on for advice on how to arrange a great business lunch or dinner when you're not on your own stomping ground.

Do your research Start by calling friends and foodies who can recommend a restaurant that's generating some buzz. "You're guaranteed a better response if you pick a place that everybody wants to try," Ms. Hawksworth says. Don't know a local who can suggest a great restaurant? Check out newspapers and blogs to find food writers in the know, suggests Amy Rosen, a National Post food writer and acting food editor at Chatelaine magazine. You can read their reviews or try contacting them by email for a recommendation.

Another good source Trip Advisor lets you sort by the best business restaurants. Concierges, on the other hand, can be iffy when it comes to resto advice. "For certain things they're magic," Ms. Rosen says. "They can get tickets to just about anything. But I do find they send me to the same restaurants all the time that are not necessarily the best in the city. I would take their advice with a grain of salt."

Consider the proximity factor Sometimes the hottest new restaurants can be in out-of-the-way locations, Ms. Hawksworth says. "After I've gathered some recommendations, I check on where the restaurants are located to be sure they're convenient for my guests."

Reservations required "As soon as we've determined our travel dates, we make reservations," Ms. Hawksworth says. "That can be as early as four to six weeks out."

"There's no such thing as booking too early," Ms. Rosen affirms. "There are restaurants in Toronto you have to book more than a month in advance." Never, never, never,

arrange a business meeting at a restaurant where you can't make reservations, she warns. "You could end up eating a hot dog on the corner."

Keep a lid on costs "We have a responsibility to our clients to spend smartly," Ms. Hawksworth says. For a larger group, she often arranges a set menu in advance to save costs. "Many restaurants have amazing feature dishes, but they can be topped with caviar or include rare or exotic ingredients," she says. "You never want to be in a position at the dinner table where you're dying because your guest has chosen something that is \$300 per portion." By pre-ordering wine, a choice of perhaps three different appetizers, mains and desserts for your guests, you ensure things move along smoothly (because no one has to pour over a long menu or wine list) and you stay within your budget.

Don't take a vegetarian to a steakhouse Make sure you know and take into account your guests' dietary needs, says Joanne Blake, president of Edmonton-based business etiquette trainer Style for Success. "If you're looking to build relationships, you probably don't want to invite a vegetarian to a steakhouse."

By the same token, she advises, you can offer alcohol, but don't push it as there may be dietary, religious or health reasons for a client to decline. And eschew hefty sandwiches that require you to bare your dental work when you take a bite, as well as spaghetti and linguini. "No matter how skilled you are it's almost impossible not to slurp or get some sauce on you," Ms. Blake says. "Order penne instead."

Be an early-bird Arriving at least 15 minutes before your guests allows you to check out and perhaps adjust seating arrangements, as well as offer a few quick directions to the wait staff about how long to leave between courses. You might also want to make arrangements to take care of the bill so there's no awkwardness at the end of the meal. But the primary reason for arriving early is that "you're there to greet your guests when they arrive," Ms. Blake says.

Observe local etiquette If you're hosting a dinner in China and you're less-than proficient with chopsticks, you might want to practise beforehand, Ms. Blake advises. But your contacts are likely to be forgiving if you have to switch to a fork. More importantly, you should know the tipping policy and etiquette of dealing with wait staff. "The way you treat the wait staff is part of your brand." If you're abrupt, over familiar or rude, "your guests will assume that's your standing operating procedure," she says. "And that's not good for business."

Camilla Cornell is a business writer and intrepid traveller, who nonetheless appreciates a little comfort when away from home. She can be reached at camillacornell@gmail.com