



# Blasts from the Past

**Andrew Spurgin** delights his clients and their guests with imaginative, immersive Culinary Time Travel events

Andrew Spurgin, chef and founder of San Diego-based Andrew Spurgin, Bespoke event styling & menu design, has a thing for old cookbooks. He loves perusing classic ones—such as Escoffier's *Le Guide Culinaire*—and leafing through vintage menus from formal state affairs, restaurants and ships, many digitized by the New York Public Library. "Not only do they provide a taste of the bygone table," he says, "but it's a wonderful 'down the rabbit hole' experience."

Over the years, Spurgin would find himself taking some of the ideas he gleaned through his research and incorporating them into personal dinner parties. Then he had an epiphany: "Wait, why can't we do this for events?" And the rest, as Spurgin says, "is history."

For the past seven years, Spurgin has been crafting Culinary Time Travel events for clients who want to be whisked away to another era. Vegas in the '60s, 15th-century Kyoto, a 1930s Parisian brasserie... they've all been visited by Spurgin's clients and their guests, complete with period cuisine, décor and costumes. "It's a chance to sell more than the plate, and instead, to sell the experience," he says. "Catering is not just about the plate anymore."

Spurgin and his team pitch Culinary Time Travel—a term he's attempting to trademark—after asking clients a series of questions during an event's early-planning stages. "Many times the answers can drive the end design and creation," he says. If a client's answer triggers a Culinary Time Travel event idea for Spurgin and his team, they'll suggest it. "It's actually amazing how many times we get the response of, 'Wow, that sounds like so much fun, can we do that?'" says Spurgin. "Then you proceed to mention how inviting guests

to come in costume can liven up the party and literally save a few dollars on décor. Everyone knows when people dress up it's kind of like it's not really them, so they get a free pass to misbehave, and everyone knows that parties are much more successful with a little mischief afoot!"

For example, a large law firm hired Spurgin for their annual holiday party. Spurgin learned that employees of the firm kept telling the head partner that they didn't want to have yet another party that took place in the office. So Spurgin turned that on its head—they wouldn't have a party in the office, but they would have an office party, 1960s-style. Guests checked in at a vintage reception desk, where their names were confirmed on a Rolodex. They could leaf through old *Life* magazines or strike a pose with fake cigarettes. Craft cocktails were dispensed from water coolers, where a server—dressed as a *Mad Men*-era secretary—asked guests if they preferred "Dixie or classic," handing out Dixie or cone-shaped cups.

Culinary Time Travel works well for both social and corporate events, and for big and small affairs, according to Spurgin. He says the concept generally doesn't require more staff, but staff members' shifts can be longer to account for hair, make up and attire. "It's akin to readying for a play, as opposed to a catered event," he says.

"Creating theater of any kind that whisks your clients and their guests away, even if for a matter of hours, to a place where all is well and full of conviviality, where one can indulge, revel, de-stress and have fun, celebrate and reflect is always a good thing," says Spurgin. "And, as with all good theater, if it is, they will be back, and tell two friends along the way!"

*Memorable Culinary Time Travel events have included:*

Opposite: Cait Graham from Spurgin's team gets into the swing of things for the 1960s office party; Spurgin with one of his beloved classic cookbooks.



This page: The Louis XIV-themed gala featured servers dressed up as ladies-in-waiting (left and bottom middle); a "Let Them Eat Cake" dessert table (below left) and macarons (below right); drinks crafted by Snake Oil Cocktail Co. (bottom left); and delicately crafted eggshells filled with sea-urchin custard, and topped with salmon roe and gold leaf for an extravagant first course (bottom right).

## Versailles Comes to San Diego

For a not-for-profit organization looking to boost attendance at its fundraising gala, Spurgin dreamed up a Louis XIV-themed spectacle fit for a Sun King. "The only theme we had to work with was the title 'Feast!'" says Spurgin. "I mentioned to them that no one did feasts like Louis XIV, and we were off!" The lavish banquet included servers dressed as ladies-in-waiting and footmen, with a stage set up to look like a table in the royal court. Each chef involved in the event "presented" a course to King Louis in a scripted skit that included lighting and sound effects. When the king bellowed "bring me some eggs!" Spurgin appeared, presenting what was supposed to be a Fabergé egg. Then the footmen rolled out carts to present guests with their own "Fabergé" eggs—intricately decorated eggshells filled with panna cotta with local sea urchin, lemon gelée and trout roe, topped with gold leaf. Spurgin also invented palanquins—recalling the enclosed litters with poles borne on men's shoulders—to help serve the long tables family-style. Main dishes were brought to the tables "with much pomp" on the velvet-clad palanquins, decorated with golden tassels and rich brocade. Tickets for the extravaganza sold out "virtually overnight," says Spurgin, adding that the event lived up to the expectations: "The guests went wild."



TOP AND FAR RIGHT PHOTOS BY SUBETA/ALM. ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY ROBERT BENSON.



## Escoffier Meets Victorian England

Guests may have felt as though they were in the last scene of "A Christmas Carol" at an "Escoffier meets Victorian England" holiday fundraising dinner. "We completely transformed a wonderful venue into an ode to a Victorian holiday. When César Ritz opened The Ritz in London in 1906, he also engaged chef Auguste Escoffier to partner with him, so it seemed like a natural." The staff, culinary crew and guests were all dressed in period costume; "we even had a Tiny Tim," notes Sturgin. Silver candlesticks, fresh still-life fruits, pine garlands and Christmas crackers adorned the tables. San Diego mixologists Lucien Conner and Ian Ward created cocktails befitting the occasion, such as hot toddies heated with red-hot fire pickers. The three-hour multicourse dinner included pickled whelks and oysters, scallop mousse, consommé de boeuf à la royale served tableside from bronze samovars, game bird and mince meats, canary carts with prime rib served tableside, and Yorkshire puddings. "Naturally little Christmas puddings were in tow, and one actually had a real sixpence inside for a year of good luck!" says Spurgin. ●



Guests, chefs and staff members dressed to the nines for this event (top left, below left and bottom), where the elaborate table décor included classic Christmas crackers (left). The menu featured quail eggs (below), seafood glee (below middle) and beef consommé, poured from a bronze samovar by Spurgin (bottom left).



## A Night at the Moulin Rouge



Yes, we can-can! That was the attitude of Spurgin and his team when a biotech firm asked them to create an event with a Moulin Rouge theme. "Rather than just have a fun invitation and maybe have some guests 'dress up,' we pulled out all the stops!" says Spurgin. "We completely embraced the spirit of fin de siècle and Belle Époque, and recreated the club, ambiance, optimism and theatrics." The event took place in a private home, where—after a moving company removed all the furniture—Spurgin and his team redecorated with period furnishings. Spurgin's business partner,

Mindy Denison, who has a fashion background, arranged the hair and makeup for the staff. Mixologist Mike Yen created period cocktails, including an absinthe bar, while dinner—served by can-can girls—featured foie gras torchon, skate wing with brown butter and capers, haricots verts Lyonnaise, duck confit with duckfat crisped potato toumé, and "naturally, a chariot de fromages!" says Spurgin. "When possible we always like the show of an open kitchen; in this case, we ended the evening not only with that but with yet more flames ensconcing the Crêpe Suzette."



Clockwise from top left: Staff members (from left to right) Lauren Quijano, Mindy Denison and Shihomi Sakai-Borillo dressed as can-can girls for the event, which featured an absinthe bar, gougères, period décor, and skatewing with brown butter and capers.