



ARE YOU BEING



The landscape of VIP hospitality dining is changing as venues put more emphasis on delivering high-end and on-trend experiences



THE VAULT



Hospitality in UK sports stadia used to take place in large white rooms with Formica furnishings and stodgy food. But high-profile stadia are starting to see a transformation. The quality revolution, which started in the US, affects all levels of food from fine-dining to concessions, but the premium experience sets the tone, offering Michelin-starred quality, luxurious interiors and panoramic views. In the UK, this trend has reached new heights in exclusive premium hospitality packages and suites at the new Tottenham Hotspur Stadium.

However, sports stadia are belatedly following wider social trends, according to Roy Westwood, founder of Forward Associates, which has provided creative advice for venues such as the Tottenham Stadium, Wimbledon Championships and The O2 Arena in London.

(Above) The H Club at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium offers a premium experience where members can dine before and after a game

Westwood believes millennials and Generation X have moved away from purchasing commodities to buying experiences. “What people are willing to spend on experiences compared to 15 years ago is phenomenal,” Westwood says. “The desire for Instagrammable moments has driven a new way of socializing.”

Millions of people are eating out multiple times a week and the quality on the High Street has raised expectations. “British food used to be an international joke and now we have one of the world’s most vibrant scenes,” claims Westwood. “We see similar trends at airports. Passengers go to Heathrow’s Terminal 5 hours early to shop and eat.” At the same time, there’s a realization that not everyone wants the same experience in a stadium. When Forward Associates give advice now, they don’t provide one concept,



NORTHERN CHARM

English Premier League soccer side Everton FC is giving its premium areas and hospitality suites a renovation in the 2019 off-season where it will not only upgrade furnishings and technology, but also test out new hospitality concepts ahead of the club's proposed move to a new stadium at Bramley-Moore Dock.

"Premium hospitality suites, boxes and seating are vitally important to new stadium projects as they generate considerable revenue whilst accounting for often less than 10% of the capacity," says Oliver Wright, head of hospitality and sales at Everton FC.

"Demand comes in different forms as some fans want a VIP matchday experience, or a wide choice of catering and beverages, a better pint, a better seat, surroundings that appeal to their personal requirements, or facilities that encourage networking and community. Whether these are exclusive restaurants or sports bars, value for money and return on investment are key to fans and businesses engaging with these products," he adds.

"Through testing new concepts, which includes a move to a more informal sports bar as well as an exclusive fine dining lounge, we can demonstrate what our approach to hospitality in a new stadium could be like, whilst broadening our appeal to a new demographic."

but five or six ideas for separate demographics and price points.

Fine dining

The greatest amount of thought goes into creating the top tier, which sets the tone for other levels. For English soccer side Aston Villa's premium experience, Westwood ran workshops and brainstorming sessions searching for a concept that justified the price tag. The idea that emerged places the club directors at the heart of the premium lounge in a glass box. "Psychologically it adds value because you feel like you're having dinner with the directors. At Aston Villa, we also designed a beautiful modern lounge using natural materials such as marble to give it the feel of a private members club in London's Mayfair," he says.

It is vital to get the tiering strategy right, Westwood explains. The highest tier should be restricted to





STAND AND DELIVER

Food and beverage concessions are also an important component of the fan dining experience, and with a crowd seeking more sharable content or a client seeking more bang for their buck, Iowa Rotocast Plastics specializes in creating more interactive and custom branded kiosks. Novelty carts and kiosks, such as a New Orleans street car placed in the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center or a Chicago L train car placed in Guaranteed Rate Field can increase fan engagement while also increasing food and beverage revenue.

a maximum of 200 members to create exclusivity, while at higher price levels, more square footage should be allocated per person. It's important to avoid gaps in the ladder, so if the premium experience costs US\$5,000 and the level below is US\$1,000, those who could afford to pay US\$2,000 to US\$4,000 are inevitably forced downwards, depriving the venue of revenue.

Finding the right concepts for premium spaces requires collaboration. On the Tottenham Hotspur project, the club worked with Forward Associates, F3 Architects, Populous and Levy Restaurants to develop a range of options for the top-tier H Club. A key idea was to rotate celebrity chefs for each game, including Chris Galvin, Bryn Williams and Dipna Anand, so members never get bored as the menu is always changing. Other experiences include the Chefs' Table, where guests interact with chefs as they cook, and the Players' Table, where they dine with club legends. "We created flexible options, including fine dining, a brasserie and a lounge, so it becomes like a private members club. It's

(Above) Wembley Stadium's new members-only Number 9 Club styled by KSS Design

(Below) Headingley Stadium's premium hospitality area offers panoramic views over both its cricket and rugby pitches



important to allow upgrades, such as more expensive Champagne," Westwood says.

As the sport experience in the UK evolves into a more American model, rather than see fans quickly leave the stadium after a game, premium members are encouraged to stay. The H Club is open three hours before kick-off and by the time members have dined afterwards, they've been there seven hours.

"These bucket list events allow guests to use the space as a base for a day. They have breakfast and drop off a jacket, then watch sports and keep returning throughout the day," he says. "Soccer games are over much faster than a day's tennis, or cricket, but the sport is slowly moving closer to the US model of tailgating at American Football games where they arrive four hours early."

Social influence

The modern social trends influencing hospitality are evident at Wembley Stadium, in London, where its Number Nine members club will open in August 2019. Menus are inspired by famous London food destinations, such as Brick Lane, Billingsgate and Smithfield markets. And there will be an echo of trends in the capital's eating habits with the provision of international street food. The interiors of Number Nine have been styled by KSS Design to create the feel of a luxury retreat. It has plenty of greenery, Herringbone floor tiling, lattice screens and bright brass metalwork.

The move to create premium dining experiences is not just evident in soccer. In Leeds, for example, interior design specialists Nanu Soda has created premium dining spaces for the Emerald Headingley Stadium, which is shared between the city's cricket and rugby teams. Bespoke lighting, natural fiber wallpapers and parquet flooring create a far more luxurious feel than the previous hospitality spaces.

VIP HOSPITALITY



Insta famous

In the US, the same millennial desire for experiences to be shared on social platforms has been influencing stadia for years, according to Jeffrey Kingman, lead management advisory services consultant and chef in residence to Camacho Associates, which has provided food services facility design services for venues including the Mercedes-Benz Stadium and the State Farm Arena in Atlanta. Kingman believes the trend is universal across pro leagues with an emphasis on creating a sense of place by using local ingredients.

“In the US, ‘farm-to-table’ isn’t just a trend anymore, it has become *de rigueur* by fashion, etiquette and usage,” says Kingman. This trend is about to go a step further, he believes, with the ‘farm-inside-the-kitchen’ concept. “The next evolution will happen through biophilic design, which increases connectivity to the natural environment, and also [food] growing cabinets right inside the kitchens. Sports stadia will use as much space as possible to grow their own produce. We’re exploring these concepts right now with our clients.” Kingman predicts, too, that technology will soon play a greater role in premium experiences as robots and micro-drones start to fulfill orders.

In the US, stadium operators have abandoned the old belief that all fans will be transfixed by the beauty of the game. There’s a realization that many prefer to

The Atlanta Falcons’ Mercedes-Benz Stadium serves food made from locally-sourced ingredients



use it as a place to party, listen to music, or dine out. The Hard Rock Stadium, home to the NFL’s Miami Dolphins, offers several private clubs with all-inclusive menus, as well as a branch of LIV, the beach-side nightclub venue. At Safeco Fields, the Seattle Mariners’ stadium, the ‘Pen club offers a cocktail lounge and a fire pit. “No one wants to sit in a stadium seat to watch the whole game anymore,” says Chris Bigelow, president of stadium consultants The Bigelow Companies. “They want a place to hang out, enjoy better food and beverage options, local specialties and local beverages and still keep an eye on the game on multiple TVs and their phones.”

Food technology

As well as determining how to provide hospitality to their various demographic groups, stadium operators face tough choices about technology, Bigelow says. “New equipment is invented daily, so do owners make a significant investment for experimental technology that may not be relevant in three years?” From a purely technical standpoint, the biggest foodservice engineering challenge is always cooking ventilation. Older venues rarely had enough kitchens and cooking locations but it can be complex to retrofit them by adding exhaust shafts. One solution is to use newer ventless equipment but it requires a lot of electrical power and can be expensive.

Brett Daniel, project manager at Camacho Associates, has to solve technical challenges when planning kitchen installations. He used the ventless solution for a project in Georgia, USA, where he had to convert a back-of-house pantry area behind a bar into a kitchen. “We didn’t have room to get an exhaust system and associated ductwork in so we had to go with ventless cooking equipment with integrated smoke and odor scrubbers and fire suppression. We were still able to support the requested menu options without a huge cost impact to redesign the floors above,” Daniel says. On the Mercedes-Benz Stadium project, the biggest technical challenges for Camacho Associates related to the coordination of all the beer and soda conduit-stub ups, he says. “There were a lot of beams we had to work around and limitations with the number of holes we could put through the slab per so many feet. We did all of that coordination and clash detection through Revit and Navisworks models,” he says.

All the US trends will continue to influence sports stadia in the UK, Roy Westwood claims, but he also believes that the UK now has a benchmark premium offering of its own at Tottenham. “It sets a marker and other venues will want to equal, or better it, so it can act as a catalyst for the whole industry,” he says. ■

DATA HUNGRY

With stadia and arenas no longer standalone venues, mobile and wireless connectivity plays an important role. Concourses and even afar as outdoor plazas will need to connect fans to the indoor action. “In today’s mixed-use developments, sports venues provide a hub for year-round entertainment and gathering,” says Ron Tellas, Technology and Applications manager at Belden, a leading communications and networking company. “Even on days when there are no sporting events, surrounding restaurants, shops and hotels also need mobile and wireless connectivity to support a seamless experience across the entire area.”

“The new capabilities of 5G will enhance employee and customer experiences, improve safety and streamline building operations,” he believes. “But to make it a reality, a robust network that can accommodate the needs of a densely packed, data-hungry venue will be required.”