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The making of a Waldorf Astoria wine dinner

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Katie Hatzfeld - August 1, 2025



Executing a multi-coursed, wine-paired dinner is, essentially, an on-stage performance. These performers are chefs and servers, and instead of memorized lines, notes and dance steps, it's the placement of a garnish and the delivery of a dish to a particular diner that must all come together for a, hopefully, flawless meal.

Tuesday night, Waldorf Astoria Park City's culinary team took that stage. Pairing up with Sonoma, California-based Freeman Vineyard & Winery for a summer wine dinner, the most recent in their series of vintner dinners, the chefs created a five-course meal centered around a portfolio of the winemakers' favorite drinks.

Seated at a long, communal table set on a second-story balcony, diners sipped through a rosé, a dry riesling, a chardonnay, chatted with old and new friends, oohed and ahed over the series of dishes and heard stories from the vineyard's founders and makers, husband and wife Ken and Akiko Freeman.



But “back stage,” the kitchen ebbed and flowed with the flurry of activity.

The kitchen’s biggest challenge for a coursed dinner is timing. And a wine dinner even more so, when it’s not just dishes served and chefs speaking, it’s also wine served and winemakers speaking.

So each dish and element is meticulously timed out, a script for the night created in collaboration with front and back of house. Executive Chef Stuart Roger is the director of this project, with decades of experience leading culinary teams through events like these. He checked in with each of his chef leads overseeing the different courses, assessing their needs and triple-checking their timing.

An hour before “curtain,” all the servers, cooks and chefs gathered to cover the game plan.

All five courses were plated and lined up on the finishing table in the kitchen, and Executive Sous Chef Josue Baca-Gutierrez talked through each dish, from the first bite “amuse-bouche.”

“For the entree, we have a halibut that’s 4.5 ounces. There’s corn, scallion and serrano, that’s been sautéed, as well fresh black truffles on top. And this is cilantro right here, so make sure the guest knows cilantro in case there’s a preference for cilantro,” he explained, like he had for the previous dishes. “Any questions?” he paused at the end of the overview.

Pastry Chef Thea Malinao described her dessert course, a blackberry and sage pavlova filled with lemon verbena cream, as well as a quartet of miniature tarts added to the menu last minute.

Each dish is tasted at this point to do a final check on flavor. The fish needs more salt, Stuart said, and the broth, too.

Luis Rivera, manager of food and beverage, showed the gathered servers a color-coded seating chart, as well as a blank grid showing all 32 seats.

“First of all, thank you for your effort and hard work in the kitchen. They’re the ones that started working in this, and it’s now our turn to help them shine tonight, right?” Rivera said. “This is a very simple and easy service we have; we don’t have to take any order. What do we need to take? Allergies and preferences or food restrictions.”

The colored chart showed each server which eight seats were their responsibility for serving wine, then another eight for serving the food. The blank chart would be filled out after each guest was seated, marking the consolidated allergies and food restrictions, as well as empty seats.

The goals? No long waits, no interruptions, don’t let the food get cold — or soggy — and make sure all 32 people get their next glass, next dish, all at the same time.

To achieve this, the kitchen becomes an all-hands situation, an assembly line with little room for error. And with a smaller-than-expected kitchen for its volume, the Waldorf Astoria kitchen demands its chefs get creative.

Take, for instance, the fish course: a poached halibut.



Chefs and cooks form an assembly line to plate a course during the Waldorf Astoria wine dinner.

The delicate fish and sauce can cool quickly, so plates are warmed to preserve the heat. Then each component is plated separately by chefs lined up against two stainless-steel countertops — a spoon of corn, a ladle of sauce, a drizzle of garnishing oil, artfully placed bean sprouts and cilantro, grated black truffle, and then it rests under heat lamps, inspected for any missing components or spills to clean.

Servers stand at the ready, instructed to grab three plates each, numbered corresponding to the seats they serve.

Between each course there are stretches of down time, a hurry-up-and-wait pace where every minute matters. Start the next dish too early, or too late, it's ruined. And those start times are ever shifting with the pace of the diners. How quickly they finish one dish and its accompanying wine dictates when the next dash starts. A watchful eye on the table relays this crucial timeline back to the kitchen as it shifts.

Brian Reeder, the hotel's director of food and beverage, was the primary go-between, calling out how much time was left to get the food moving toward the table.

"Six minutes chef, six minutes," Reeder tells Baca-Gutierrez, who then relays the time to the rest of the kitchen."

"You ready?" Reeder asks, "You're sure?"

"Will we be ready in six minutes?" Baca-Gutierrez asks the chef overseeing the course.

A pause. Then, "Yeah."

"Six minutes? Don't lie to me, eh?" Baca-Gutierrez half jokes.

If the chefs need more time until pickup, there's half-brewed strategies to stall, a few wine refills perhaps, but mostly hoping the winemakers start telling stories about the next drink course.

For one of Powder restaurant's lead servers, Shelby Fitzgerald, who's worked at the hotel since 2018, dinners like these are an exciting challenge.

"Doing these fine-gardening events, like in terms of tasting, it's unique, it's more fun, it's curated. I get to conduct the timing of it, which I like more so than anything," she said. "It's always great to learn through mistakes ... Tonight is supposed to be pretty seamless, pretty fun, and we have all the tools that we need."

Hers are one of those watchful eyes, always attentive to the needs of the guest. She said it's near impossible to pull these off perfectly, but that's what she strives for.



A blackberry and sage pavlova was the final course, a sweet, savory and tart dessert designed as a “wow” moment with edible gold garnish.

By the end of the night, all the servers and chefs were invited to the balcony to receive a round of applause from the guests, their chance to take a bow.

Chef Baca-Gutierrez said they try to do wine dinners like these at least once a month, a chance to continue to improve.

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