

CALIHAN CATERING

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calihan

More than 26 years ago, John Calihan, while working for a catering company thought that he could provide better cuisine and service to customers if he were the person in charge. After gaining a partner, he created Calihan Catering, which today is a high-end catering business known not only for its inventive and excellent cuisine, but also for its commitment to top-notch service. Today, Calihan is still presided over by John Calihan, but is very much a family business, with the inclusion of his children Lee and Nash Calihan working side by side as Vice President and Office Manager, respectively.

Calihan has been at its Goose Island facility for 11 years, which they appreciate, due to its location in the Goose Island PMD. Because it is situated in a purely industrial area, there are no complaints from neighbors decrying the smell of different kinds of foods being cooked, trucks running at odd hours of the day, or congested streets during weekend evenings (as most businesses on Goose Island operate from Monday to Friday). As Nash Calihan says: “(everyone) on Goose Island is a grown-up” and is focused on conducting business. The close proximity to downtown coupled with expressway access doesn’t hurt either.

Some of the challenges that Calihan faces are IT infrastructure issues and the fact that catering, like many hospitality and entertainment industries, depends on how much disposable income people have access to. Dealing with the first issue is tricky, as Goose Island does not have dedicated ultra-high speed (fiber-optic internet or T-carrier lines) internet pipes running to the island, and the cost for a small business to purchase them tends to be prohibitively expensive. Currently, Calihan is using a high-speed wireless connection beamed from downtown Chicago, but would welcome increased build out of high speed pipes that go to the area.

The second issue is not something easily solved, as certain social and economic phenomena such as 9/11 and the recent recession have affected businesses such as Calihan, requiring them to become more innovative in terms of raising revenue. Luckily, Calihan is a very innovative company, due in part to John Calihan's style for "classic with a twist" food and service, leading to Calihan being



well known and sought after by many of Chicago's high society members. Recent events include the opening of the Hermes location on Oak street and being the caterers to the Graham Room at the Chicago Lyric Opera.

Some of the ways that the LEED Council has assisted Calihan Catering are through its instrumentality in helping Calihan obtain funding (especially TIF and SBIF funds) to grow and maintain older buildings. In addition to the valuable technical assistance that LEED provides Calihan, they have also referred Calihan's catering services to other businesses, which in turn have utilized Calihan for their events.

Most of Calihan's staff (around 90 people total) are comprised of service staff, followed by kitchen staff and delivery staff. Calihan prides itself on employing highly trained staff members along with haute cuisine, in fact becoming the 1st, and one of two Chicago based catering companies to be members of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, an international gastronomic association known for fine cuisine, wine and dining. According to John Calihan, the word "no" should not be in the server's vocabulary, and servers are expected to handle their clients' every need, no matter how much advance warning is given.

One of Calihan's unique culinary creations is the Deconstructed Martini, an olive surrounded with Bavaria bleu cheese and includes a small bottle of vodka; it is literally a martini that you eat. As a testament to the creativity of the kitchen and marketing staff, Nash Calihan credits the ingenuity of an edible cocktail that features "surrounded olives instead of stuffed ones"

Favorite lunch places of the Calihans include Kiki's Bistro for John, Lula Café for Nash, and the Bongo Room for Lee.