



AWARD WINNING CUISINE

by LINDA DECKARD

Banquets at the Puerto Rico Convention Center, San Juan, are more upscale, more expensive and more profitable than the norm. The reason is David Padilla, food and beverage director for SMG Savor at the venue.

Padilla brought resort hotel quality food service to the convention center, then spread the philosophy into the convention center district surrounding the venue, namely the Ficus Café, and then to baseball stadiums in and around San Juan.

His impressive accomplishments led to winning the 2008 *Venues Today* Hall of Headlines Award for Concessions. And he has been manufacturing a lot of headlines. In nominating him, his peers and supporters noted: "Excellent food leads to numerous accolades and repeat business."

In recent months, he has won two Best in Puerto Rico food awards, both times competing with top-of-the-line restaurants. On Sept. 13, after three months of judging and voting, the Ficus Café was selected by Bacardi from a group of 30 restaurants as the winner of the "Best Mojito Original" competition. On Oct. 12, Padilla and his staff took first prize in the "beef category" at the Cattleman's BBQ Competition, held by the Puerto Rico District Authority.

Padilla believes in seeking recognition for work well done and capitalizes on it unabashedly. It's part of what he considers the key to success in the food business. "It's all about quality; it's all about consistency. And hiring the right people to do things for you. You have to be passionate about your work. Passion goes with everything; that's my quote."

Padilla has been working in food and beverage for 19 years, mostly in the hotel industry. He was hired by SMG in 2005 prior to the opening of the Puerto Rico Convention Center and went right to work on menus, equipment and personnel. He studied the market to determine competitive pricing and product. He incorporated the most advanced food technology in the Caribbean. His first observation was that the direct competition was hotels. There was no convention center in Puerto Rico before his.

"People don't look at us as a convention center," Padilla said. "They look at us as an upscale resort. They expect Ritz Carlton



The Ficus Cafe, San Juan, Puerto Rico

service at a convention center."

The Ficus Café was given to Savor SMG by the Authority, their client, with the idea it would continue as a hot dog and chips concession stand. Instead, Padilla converted it into a sit-down restaurant. The Ficus Café is located outside the convention center walls in the "district," which includes hotels, government offices, a park and a fountain comparable to a small-scale version of the one at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

Local business comes to the Ficus Café, which is open Thursday through Sunday, six hours each night, and includes a tapas bar. It is now famous for its mojitos, the oldest drink made with rum, and involving lime juice, sugar and mint leaves. Padilla said his secret, award-winning ingredient is "consistency of quality. You have to have the right amount of mint leaves, the right amount of lime." He personally tweaked the recipe.

The awards showcase the product and the good service and consistency seal the deal. Food service at the Puerto Rico Convention Center is not cheap, he said. "Our prices are similar to Moscone Center and the Hawaii Convention Center," he said of the San Francisco and Honolulu venues. "We are an expensive destination, believe me."

At the 100-seat Ficus Café, meal prices range from \$7 to \$20. The venue has seen as high as \$1.1 million in annual sales, which is considerable considering it's only open four nights a week.

At the convention center, prices range from \$12 to \$80 per person. "I'm doing a gala right now where the food is \$95 per person," he said. The convention center posts about \$11 million in annual food sales. "We are number one in our size in the company. We bring 40 percent to the bottom line," Padilla said of the 580,000-square-foot center.

"We're not a layback island; we're workaholics," he said.

His success has led to more business. Now he has taken on baseball in Puerto Rico, working with the winter league starting last month. He will be bringing fine dining to the suite holders for the first time in San Juan history.

Already he has driven per caps to \$6-\$7 per person, up from \$2-\$3 when the venues mostly had mom-and-pop vendors with fritters, beer and chicken wings. And he is returning 30 percent to the bottom line, which means "you're a hero," he said.



CONCESSIONS