

# Venues

## TODAY



# Every Day They're Shufflin'

Party rock the dance floor with the 2012 Hall of Headlines Winners







# COMPLIMENTS TO THE CHEF

by JESSICA BOUDEVIN

**O**n a typical day at McCormick Place in Chicago, Chef Vincent Lai of Savor serves about 5,000 convention center visitors. On a not-so-typical day, he serves the leader of the Free World.

"I was serving the POTUS, the President of the United States, myself," said Lai, of the May 20-21 NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) Summit that brought U.S. President Barack Obama and dignitaries from all over the world to Chicago. "I also served the secretary of state. They both really enjoyed the fish."

"The president actually came to the back hallway and shook my hand, which was a surprise," Lai added.

It was the feat of serving politicians and press from around the world that earned Chef Vincent Lai *Venues Today's* 2012 Hall of Headlines award for Concessions.

More than 7,500 individual delegates attended, along with about 5,000 foreign ministers and support staff. Local and international media descended upon McCormick Place also, with about 2,000 in attendance.

According to a document from Savor, SMG's culinary branch and the company responsible for food and beverage at McCormick Place, the NATO Summit had a \$128-million economic impact on Chicago.

To say McCormick Place is kind of big is a serious understatement. It is made up of four buildings, with 2.6 million sq. ft of exhibition space.

"For the culinary team, having to figure out logistics to still have a phenomenal product is a challenge," said Connie Chambers, GM, F&B for Savor Chicago at McCormick Place. "In order to make sure his guests have the best product, he figures out where he needs to do it, what time he needs to fire those products, and how it's going to be transported."

Lai said that, foodwise, the NATO group was business as usual. The menu consisted mostly of traditional Chicago flavors and the size of the group was something he handles often. However, there was one particular challenge.



"The security issue was hard," said Lai. "We had to figure out which routes we could use to move food and how we would deliver it. We had to figure the timeline on how and when we prepared the product to make sure it was at the locations properly."

He added that there were a lot of employees arriving late on the first day as everyone got used to going through four security gates to get to work.

After attending culinary school in his hometown of Vancouver, British Columbia, Lai knew that he wanted something different from the usual restaurant routine.

"I found that in restaurants the volume is just not there, compared to a hotel or convention center. I never like the pressure, trust me, but when you're working for a big company there's a little bit more freedom in the product you can work with," said Lai.

Lai added that November will break the record for F&B revenue for the month, having grossed more than \$6 million.

Lai previously worked at Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre, then spent nine years at San Jose (Calif.) Convention Center. He has been at McCormick Place for about two years.

Shaun Beard, senior VP of Savor, met Lai in 1998 when he was a sous chef and both were working for Centerplate.

"Through the years, even after I had left Centerplate, and he had left, too, we stayed in touch," said Beard. "When I went to bid McCormick Place, I put together what I referred to as a dream team of the best in the industry, and Chef Vince was one of the key players."

"I called him and I think out of mutual respect and the energy we create with each other, he just said 'I'm in,'" added Beard.

Lai has implemented menus that focus on seasonal ingredients and gets his product from local farms whenever possible. He said he considers this time of his life a great chapter and a good challenge.

"I remember when I went to cooking school more than 20 years ago in Vancouver, my instructor told us that if we wanted to see where the big league is, we needed to work at McCormick Place in Chicago," said Lai. "That was back then, and now I'm the director of culinary services here."

CONCESSIONS

Above: Chef Vincent Lai in the kitchen.