

Hospitality



The Taste of Sweet Hospitality

An Interview with Julie Rose,
Founder, Sweet Hospitality Group



A Sweet Hospitality concession stand (left) and some of their tasty creations (above)

EDITORS' NOTE In 1986, Julie Rose was given the chance to handle the food and beverage service at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center Theater. From there, Sweet Hospitality Group (sweethospitalitygroup.com) was born. Today, Sweet Hospitality Group handles the food and beverage needs of almost two dozen theatrical venues and also does remarkable, delicious catering for corporate, non-profit, and private events.



Julie Rose

How was Sweet Hospitality Group created?

Originally, the intent wasn't starting a company. I have a music education degree and to support myself while my career developed, I worked for a catering company that did film and television shoots. I started as a prep cook but they kicked me out of the kitchen quickly because my vegetables weren't cut evenly.

I would go on jobs, bring the food, and talk with everybody. That firm was the number-two catering company at the time and I wanted to figure out why the number-one company was ahead of us.

I went on a photo shoot that got me on the set of *Legal Eagle*, and I had an epiphany – what makes a successful catering company is the presentation. The food was good enough quality, but the caterer had silver urns, real flowers, and white table clothes, and for some reason that struck a chord with me.

Around that time, a friend of a friend knew I was involved in catering and called me to see if I was interested in providing concession services at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater at Lincoln Center.

Handling that kind of operation was not my original career focus, so I referred the offer to the catering company that I was working for, but they did not have any interest. A bit later, I read in *The New Yorker Magazine* that David Mamet was doing a play at the Mitzi, and he had just won a Pulitzer Prize. So I researched what other theater concessions were doing, called Lincoln Center, gave them a one-page proposal and after a bit of negotiation, we agreed I would operate the concessions personally.

I spent \$500 on housewares, making it look pretty, and I started baking. I started doing it every night – eight performances a week. I didn't realize I was starting a company; I was just trying to do things well.

What was the product being offered before that?

That theater hadn't been active for seven years. When they were open, they served basically Coke and M&Ms. That particular time was the dawning of specialty items, and I wanted to serve wonderful tasting items that I might enjoy: Lindt chocolates, Soho sodas, truffles, brownies, and lemon squares. No one had those items at the time.

I brought in coffee. We didn't have a liquor license at the time, so it was all non-alcoholic beverages.

How broad could the offerings get?

I was very lucky; I had carte blanche and could field test anything I wanted to. We were offering chocolate-covered matzoh for Passover at one point.

We tried fresh fruit a hundred times. I was the person behind the counter so I heard firsthand from patrons what they would like to see at the concession counter. If it sounded like it could take off, I'd try it; some ideas would work and some would not, like the fresh fruit.

From there, how did the business grow?

When *House of Blue Leaves* moved into The Vivian Beaumont Theater, I pitched a proposal, which was accepted. I thought I would take it on only until the end of the show's run. Sometime during this period, I started to think about managing concessions in places like BAM, and when I received an unsolicited offer from City Center that's when I began to see this as a career and started to sell our services.

Do the offerings vary or are they consistent throughout?

All locations have the basics: alcohol of all types, three tiers of wine, candy, and snacks, and we still carry the baked goods I started with so many years ago.

Other than that, each place is a little different. We were the first to offer specialty drinks on Broadway, so each theater and each show has its own cocktail to tie in with it. We work with non-for-profit theaters, for-profit theaters; small theaters and big theaters. We even provide full table service for a show like *Cabaret*.

Just as we update our theater visual displays a few times a year to keep the look fresh, we always look for new food and beverage ideas. It helps us adhere to our mission statement – to enhance the entertainment experience through food, beverage, presentation, and hospitality.

How did you focus on the customer experience and how much does quality matter?

I'm from the Midwest and that forms the basis for everything I do. We just like to be friendly to people and we're all about hospitality. When we started I was standing behind the counter, so I shared that friendliness with the patrons. Now when we hire, we seek out employees that have that same open, hospitable nature. At this point we have 140 people working for us and they're all really wonderful.

As part of our mission, we strive to keep quality levels high. A Coke is a Coke, M&M Peanuts are M&M Peanuts, but we offer many more options, like baked goods, gourmet nuts, and designer popcorns. We're always striving to make sure the product is the best it can be. I still tell people that when I'm not there, you have to taste the Coke, and you better taste the coffee. If the cookie is stale, get rid of it.

Has there been a natural extension into catering and corporate?

We do quite a bit of on- and off-premise catering. A big corporation might buy 200 tickets for a show and we will cater the pre-show event; we might do something special for intermission or have a post-dessert. It's thrilling to make these types of events happen in our venues and elsewhere. This availability of clients provided through the theaters has allowed us to grow naturally into catering and corporate areas.

How great is the corporate opportunity?

It's significant, but we don't particularly focus on lunch-meeting drop-offs; we like the party aspect of an event. Our food is great, our visual presentations are beautiful and, for me, the fun part is the event-planning, which requires a considerable amount of coordination.

How hard is it to build awareness for the company?

People in theater know us. Corporations find us by going to an event at our theaters. We offer our Intermission product line, which includes candy bars, snack mix, popcorn, and peanuts, so some theaters across the country are buying from us. They find us because all theater people come to New York.

Is your focus now on increasing venues or innovating product?

Right now, I want to be the best company we can be. Growth and innovation will come organically if you bring the right people together, all working for the best possible results. We have been doing this for almost 30 years, and I wouldn't want to come to work without the entrepreneurial spirit. ●