

Corporate tents help feed relationships at U.S. Open

By Jeff Mills/News & Record jeff.mills@news-record.com | Posted: Wednesday, June 11, 2014 8:00 pm

PINEHURST – At the U.S. Open’s exclusive Tufts Village corporate hospitality area, business as usual for companies, their clients and guests includes gourmet golf and championship food.

It’s expensive. Costs average \$500 to \$750 per person per day.

It’s private. Don’t have the proper ticket? Security will politely-but-firmly turn you away.

It’s luxurious. Air-conditioned, carpeted tents feature three good meals, open bars, high-definition TVs, Internet access, even a “Gelateria” gelato bar.

Above all, it’s an investment.

So says Mimi Griffin, the U.S. Open’s director for marketing and corporate hospitality.

“It’s relationship building. And that’s the way business works,” Griffin says. “It’s crazy for anybody to think this is a boondoggle or an extravagance. Because it’s not. If you took a client to a really nice restaurant and then a big-time college basketball game, you’d spend far more per person than you’d spend here.”

Maybe. Maybe not.

But the one thing those corporate dollars buy at Pinehurst No. 2 that they wouldn’t buy at any other game is time.

On average, Griffin says, corporate hospitality food and drink costs run about \$150 to \$200 per person per day. That includes breakfast, lunch, a late-afternoon snack, an open bar and finger foods from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. All of it served up in comfort.

“For the corporate client, it gives them a chance to get a lot of quality face time with their clients,” Griffin says. “If they were sitting at a Major League Baseball game, or an NBA or NFL game, there’s screaming at the action on the field and it’s, what, three hours?”

“Here, it’s about the action on the course except you can stay in your own hospitality area, sit in your rockers, enjoy the golf and spend the entire day with your client. It’s like a beautiful walk in the park, with quiet time to have quality conversation.”

In all, U.S. Open corporate hospitality this year includes the gigantic, 130-table Champions Pavilion, 44 private tents, 230 corporate clients and roughly 5,500 guests per day.

Smaller corporate clients buy tables in the Champions Pavilion that include 12 tickets per day. Big spenders buy packages that include 200 tickets per day.

And they bought for the U.S. Open and the U.S. Women's Open.

“We approached everything as one event covering two weeks,” Griffin says. “... We didn’t allow people to buy for just the men’s or just the women’s championships. It was not a hard sales pitch at all. After 1999 and 2005 here at (Pinehurst) No. 2, I’ve never worked in an environment where an entire state embraced the event the way North Carolina has.”

Griffin estimates “55 to 60 percent” of all corporate sales were to businesses in North Carolina, South Carolina or southern Virginia.

One thing is certain: Those corporate clients will eat well.

Ridgewells Catering’s kitchens, from Bethesda, Md., will serve 60,000 meals this week, says Susan Lacz, who has been with the company for 27 years.

“There are no shortcuts,” Lacz says. “Everything is made by us. We boil the potatoes. We shred the cabbage. We sear the meat. You’re not going to find in anything in our kitchen that you just open up a carton and dump it into a big bowl. Everything is made fresh here.”

The catering company did make a few concessions. It has no baking ovens, so it gets bread from local bakeries.

“And we did sub out our usual barbecue for Parker’s,” Lacz says, “because you all know how to do it best down here. We always try to find the best people for local specialties and let them do what they do best.”

The most difficult part of the process, Lacz says, is hiring and training 600 local people to work during the tournament.

“We go to the local culinary schools and bartending schools. We’re on the ground a good 11 months in advance, spreading the word,” Lacz says. “... It’s tough to hire that many people and hope they have the same pride that I do. But through the proper recruiting and training, we empower them and make them proud to represent us.”

Some continue to work Open after Open. Lacz has chefs and supervisors she found in places such as Oakmont, Olympia and Merion who take vacations from their regular jobs to serve at the U.S. Open.

There’s a relationship built there. Which is exactly the point of corporate hospitality in the first place.