

# Restaurant owners cashing in on convention business

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Afterthought: Rathbun's meeting space was a late addition, said Cliff Bramble.

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As Atlanta continues to build its reputation as a convention destination, city restaurant owners are cashing in visitors' need for good food and meeting space.

According to the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau (ACVB), Atlanta hosted 3,068 conventions in 2005 that attracted 3.1 million visitors. Spending an average of \$315 per day, visitors arrive curious, and hungry.

Savvy restaurant owners are taking advantage of these opportunities by putting a new twist on serving the business and convention community. Restaurants now are designing event space into their dining facilities, offering customers the necessary business environment along with fine dining options.

"There's a huge demand for event space in the city of Atlanta," said Lea Brueckner, sales director at TROIS in Midtown. "Not only do convention groups regularly come into town, but there are a large number of companies located in this area that have their own event needs."

The owners of TROIS -- a Bob Amick restaurant -- designed a three-level building with private event space on the top floor with views of the Atlanta skyline. It seats 150, with standing room for 200, and includes audiovisual equipment. For large events, the entire facility can be reserved, offering a total capacity of 600.

TROIS has been booked consistently since its November 2006 opening, and Brueckner estimates corporate events make up nearly 80 percent of the bookings to date.

"It's a much more relaxing environment than you find in standard meeting space," she said of restaurants. "There's also a higher level of dining quality and food service, which leads to a more memorable event."

Event space wasn't in the plans when Rathbun's Restaurant, located in Inman Park, opened in May 2004.

When adjoining space became available several months later, the partners decided to incorporate private dining facilities into the overall design.

"We had several advantages to work with -- an outside patio, the look of old brick and lots of windows," said Cliff Bramble, partner and general manager. "By bringing all that together, it ended up being the best of both worlds for dining. It's an intimate space but with the feel of alfresco dining."

The inside area can seat 40; it can accommodate about 90 people when the outside patio is opened.

Working closely with the ACVB and other meeting planners, Rathbun's has been very successful in marketing the event space. Bramble estimates that 80 percent of the private bookings are business-related.

At a cost of about \$150,000 for the build-out, he and his partners feel the building modification has more than paid for itself.

"We hit on something we really didn't expect with the demand for private dining space," he said. "But we're glad we rolled the dice and put it in. In fact, we'd really like to have another just like it."

That's a feeling that Rodney Wedge and his partners at Sweet Lowdown in Midtown hope to soon share.

The 11,000-square-foot Sweet Lowdown, located on Peachtree Street near 10th across from the Metropolis, fit their plans for a restaurant and private dining facility perfectly. With upper and lower levels of 5,500 square feet, the opportunity was there to create a unique, tailored meeting space.

The second floor accommodates meeting space and features high-end audiovisual components, including a large 10-by-12 viewing screen, additional plasma screens and wireless microphone technology.

"We have to be able to compete with convention facilities, so it was important to include high-end audiovisual capabilities," Wedge said.

