

Crave sees growth in catering

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Lance Hamlin, right, executive chef of catering for Crave, with Marnie Girard, director of catering and special events for Crave, at an event at Morrie's Maserati in Minnetonka.

Crave is creating a business division for its expanding catering operations, the latest expansion channel for the fast-growing restaurant company.

Crave, which has three Twin Cities restaurants and plans for a fourth, launched its catering services about nine months ago and has since catered hundreds of events — everything from small house parties to the 1,000-person Hope Rocks charity event last fall. Crave Catering recently landed the catering contract for the [Mall of America](#), and the division's sales now are growing at a faster rate than sales at the company's popular restaurants.

“It's our fastest-growing vehicle right now,” Crave owner and CEO **Kam Talebi** said. “We expect to double or triple our growth this year. There's no limit to what you can do in catering because you can do multiple events at the same time.”

Crave Catering has added three catering veterans to lead the growth: **Danielle Mathey**, director of operations; **Olia Heinecke**, director of catering and special events; and **Lance Hamlin**, executive chef. They join **Marnie Girard**, who helped launch Crave Catering and will stay on as a director of catering and special events.

Those four employees have roughly 60 years of combined experience in catering, which should help Crave Catering ramp up quickly, Talebi said. Those employees will tap into their connections to identify potential clients, and the reputation of Crave's restaurants also should help drive business through word of mouth.

"We're fresh and new," Talebi said. "When you look at the competitive landscape, the same players have dominated the marketplace for years. New restaurants pop up all the time, but you don't see that in catering."

Of course, Crave isn't the first restaurant company to venture into the catering business. Minneapolis-based [D'Amico & Partners Inc.](#), Eden Prairie-based [Famous Dave's Inc.](#), Bloomington-based [Leeann Chin Inc.](#) and St. Paul-based [Green Mill Restaurants Inc.](#) all have extensive catering operations.

Catering can have a big impact on a restaurant's sales. Green Mill, for example, generates roughly 10 percent of its \$60 million in annual sales from catering. Based on the amount of business already on the books, the company expects catering revenue to double in 2011.

Catering is nice because it's more predictable and easier to prepare for because events are booked in advance, said **Paul Dzubnar**, CEO of Green Mill, which operates 28 restaurants in the Upper Midwest. However, on the flip side, it's difficult to serve dozens or hundreds of people at the same time.

"You want to be able to turn out food that fits your brand," he said.

When entering a new business segment, it's important to recognize how it differs from your core business, Dzubnar said. For example, television or print ads might work well for restaurants, but they're not as effective for catering.

"The best way to market your catering is through word of mouth, and the best way to get good word-of-mouth advertising is to put out a quality product," he said. "The best caterers in town do a great job of putting out a good product and generating referrals."

Crave catering

Headquarters: Minneapolis

Business: New catering division for fast-growing restaurant chain Crave

Top catering executive: Daniele Mathey, director of operations

Menu: Many of the items offered at Crave's restaurants, including sandwiches, salads, entrees, pastas and sushi

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