

# Corporate bashes bolster caterers' bottom lines

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Bigger and more costly corporate events helped boost area caterers' sales by double digits last year, according to Boston Business Journal research.

The area's largest caterers, from **Rebecca's Cafe** in Burlington to Newton-based **Pushcarts Unlimited**, say they've seen an uptick in corporate events business. **Sebastians**, which is owned by Fidelity Investments, recorded a 62.5 percent increase in sales in 2005.

"We're seeing growth in terms of volume and number of clients and events," said Sebastians newly named president, **Emil Grosso**. "The budgets are much larger than they've been in the past."

Grosso said law firms, financial services companies and "even universities" are staging many more catered events. Fidelity's acquisition of event planning company **Best of Boston** last

November was also a factor in increasing sales for Sebastians, which caters high-profile events and meetings.

Increased marketing in **Au Bon Pain** cafes and its diversity of outlets — now in such places as hospitals and office buildings — helped push catering sales up 45.8 percent in 2005 over the previous year, according to **Randy Garden**, the company's vice president for development.

**Bakers' Best Catering**, which booked a 37 percent increase in sales, said that number might be on the high side because 2004 sales were understated. "For the past 23 years we've grown," said president and owner **Michael Baker**, noting that the company, which operates a retail cafe in Newton Highlands, has averaged 15 percent annual

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growth. "Our corporate catering is really the engine behind the growth."

**Capers Catering** in Stoneham reported 10.7 percent growth; general manager **Chuck Ray** pointed to a newly created division — Flip Flop's Clambakes and Barbeques — that's doubled in volume this year. That's on top of a 50 percent increase in company spending for events that's helped feed sales.

**Gourmet Caterers'** president **Robert Wiggins** credits his clients' success with his company's 11.8 percent increase in sales to \$9.5 million from \$8.5 million in 2004.

"When their business appears to be well, our business goes with that," he said.

"Our September is a 50 percent increase over last year," said Wiggins, whose Boston company has been the exclusive, resident caterer at the **John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum** in Dorchester for the past five years.

While seeing "record months" in sales, high-end caterer **The Catered Affair** in Hingham dropped its events business by 11 percent from 2004 to 2005 because it left its exclusive contract with the **Peabody Essex Museum** in Salem, where it ran a restaurant, cafe and did internal and external events.

"The revenue wasn't as profitable as we would have liked," said **Alex Marconi**, Catered Affair's vice president for operations. "So we made the very difficult decision to remove ourselves from that relationship."

Social caterers represent one of the fastest-growing segments in the restaurant and food service industry, according to the **National Restaurant Association**. National sales in 2006 are expected to reach \$5.7 billion, a 7.6 percent increase over 2005.

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