Cater+Event
by informa



Amber Kispert, Senior Content Producer, Cater+Event
November 5, 2026

35 Min Read

The Plate Has Changed:
How GLP-1 Medications Are Reshaping Event Menus



Mango Grilled Shrimp with Spicy Coconut Relish Eatertainment Events Catering

The half-eaten plates started piling up at corporate luncheons first. Then came the untouched desserts at galas. Caterers soon noticed a parallel pattern: guests bypassing bread baskets entirely while requesting double portions of grilled chicken. Something fundamental had changed, and it wasn't another trendy diet.

GLP-1 medications, originally developed for diabetes management but now used widely for weight loss, have moved from relative obscurity to mainstream adoption in under two years. The speed of that shift caught much of the hospitality industry off guard.

"GLP-1 medications are reshaping consumer food choices and what it means for the foodservice industry," said Rachel Royster, Director of Strategic Planning & Innovation at CSSI/Connections, during a session at the 2026 National Restaurant Show. "A year ago we didn't think it was going to be that big of a thing. A lot of people were unsure of where this was going and where the market was heading. We didn't know if it was going to have mainstream adoption, but now we do know that it is quite prolific and everywhere."

Nearly a quarter of U.S. households now include someone taking these medications. A recent Gallup survey found that 11% of American adults reported currently taking a GLP-1 medication in 2026, up from just 3% in 2024. Another 15% said they had tried one at some point. Roughly one in nine American adults is now using these medications for weight management, while nearly one in seven has tried them at least once. In fact, by 2030 some projections put GLP-1 users' share of national food and beverage spending above a third.

For event professionals, this isn't a single dietary preference to accommodate alongside gluten-free and vegetarian requests. It's a shift in how a meaningful share of every guest list now relates to food itself. That shift carries a financial edge planners cannot ignore. Catering operates on a fixed, per-person economic model, and uneaten food comes directly out of margins. As guests skip the high-margin categories that traditionally subsidize protein and labor costs — sides, desserts, alcohol, and shared appetizers — the math behind every banquet contract starts to shift. That pressure, explored in full later in this article, is reason enough for every caterer and planner to take this shift seriously now, not once menus have already been printed.

The science behind the shift

GLP-1 medications, including Ozempic, Wegovy, Mounjaro, and Zepbound, mimic a naturally occurring hormone that regulates blood sugar and appetite. Originally developed for diabetes management, they've become widely sought for weight loss because they transform how people experience hunger. The medications slow digestion and signal fullness sooner. They also quiet what users describe as "food noise," the constant mental chatter about cravings and what to eat next.

Reduced craving doesn't necessarily mean users are eating or drinking differently in terms of what they choose, only how much of it they take in. The real difference lies in volume rather than in any fundamental change to what people order. People on these medications still enjoy the same flavors and dishes, he explains, just in smaller quantities. "The big difference is volume," says David Stevens of Club Ichi and Olympian Meetings Not necessarily changing the way people are eating."

Protein and fiber-forward eating has become something of an industry talking point, yet Royster argues it isn't what's actually steering GLP-1 users' choices. "Protein and fiber maxxing are everywhere, but they aren't the top driver for this consumer set," she said. "Portion control is."

The shift isn't purely about quantity, however. Lizzy Freier, Senior Director of Menu Research and Insights at Technomic, has tracked a parallel change in what users crave and tolerate, not just how much they eat. Speaking during a session at the 2026 National Restaurant Show, she described a broader move toward whole foods and away from sugar and excess, alongside a faster sense of fullness. "They're craving different things than they previously craved," Freier said. "They're getting fuller faster."

A 2024 survey of GLP-1 users conducted by Eat Well Global supports that observation, finding fruit and vegetable intake up 62%, fiber intake up 40%, and a net preference for still water over soda and alcohol running 65% higher among users than before they started the medication.

Several voices in the industry describe a change in the emotional relationship users have with food itself, not merely a shift in nutrition data. For some users, the change runs deeper than portion size or ingredient choice. "The food-anxiety issues I've dealt with for most of my life just seemed to vanish within a few days," said Jason Diamon in a piece published by The Cut, New York magazine's digital platform.

Monique Rochard, Global Commercial Services and Operational Efficiency at Cordis, offers a similar account, informed by a dual vantage point few others in the industry share. "I can look at a beautiful plated meal and know immediately that I'm probably going to eat a third of it," she said in an article for Tradeshow Executive. Rochard has spent her career planning meetings and events, and she also takes a GLP-1 medication herself.



Sea Bass with Tomato & Sherry Wine Butter with Scallion. This dish features small portions, allowing GLP-1 users to enjoy an appropriately sized protein option. Photo courtesy Sharon DeFelices

These patterns shouldn't be read as a single prescription, however. "GLP-1 medications can help regulate appetite, and reduced appetite is one factor that may contribute to weight loss," says Chef LaLa, founder of Chef Nourish and a Le Cordon Bleu-trained chef and certified nutritionist. "But people use these medications for different reasons, including diabetes care and, for some medications, chronic weight management. We should not assume every guest is taking one to lose weight or wants the same menu."

Geoffrey Russo, Insights and Impact Director at Eat Well Global, sees the overlap between GLP-1 users and the broader health-conscious consumer as a defining feature of the current market. "The GLP-1 diet is not that different from a health-conscious diet, which is why we're seeing many products being catered to health-conscious consumers and GLP-1 users interchangeably," he says.



Colorful bites featuring crisp vegetables and light, protein-packed nibbles — a fresh, wholesome way to fuel the body with vitamins, fiber, and energy. Photo courtesy Joanna Salazar

Veteran planners have seen this kind of blending before, long before GLP-1 medications entered the conversation. Sharon DeFelices, with Blueprint for a Healthy Meeting, places it in that longer historical context: "The tenets of GLP-1-friendly menu planning are similar to things we've seen before, which were never identified on dietary surveys, like Keto, the South Beach Diet in phases one and two, and the Mayo Clinic Diet. Working with the culinarians to plan a balanced menu with smaller portions helps meet the needs."

Industry voices broadly agree this represents a lasting shift rather than a passing trend. "I see GLP-1s as part of a larger and lasting shift toward wellness," Chef LaLa explains. "The medications and patterns of use will continue to evolve, but the broader desire for food that supports wellness while still tasting wonderful is here to stay."

Reading the room and the plate

Unlike restaurants, which can adjust in real time when a guest orders less, catering operates on a fixed economic model: per-person pricing means uneaten food comes directly out of margins.

Rochard challenges a long-held industry assumption: "We have to get away from the idea that abundance automatically equals hospitality. For years in events, the fear has always been running out of food, so we over-order. Look at what was actually consumed at your last event, talk to your catering partners, track guarantees versus actual attendance and consumption, and adjust from there."

A 2026 U.S. Food Waste Pact study of six business events serving more than 20,000 meals found that attendees consumed just 58% of buffet food, with one plated dinner producing 1,440 entrées when only 1,061 were needed. Shifting appetite patterns, including those linked to GLP-1 use, may be one contributing factor behind that gap, though event food waste has long been driven by a range of causes. Industry-wide, surplus foodservice food was valued at $157 billion in 2024, or 14% of foodservice sales, according to ReFED..

Meanwhile, GLP-1 users haven't stopped dining out — 76% eat restaurant food at least weekly — but they're consistently leaving more behind. Restaurants have responded with smaller portions, and diners are choosing them. "We have seen a measurable increase in petite entrée selections over the past year," said Thomas Dritsas, Corporate Executive Chef of Truluck's. "I believe this is a long-term behavioral shift, not a short-term blip."

The signal from restaurants is already reaching the banquet hall. Francesca Malin, Event Director at 360 Live Media, replaced a traditional hot buffet at a Florida conference with an expanded sandwich-and-salad menu built around protein-focused choices: half a wrap or a protein-topped salad for lighter appetites, with the optional addition of chips or dessert for hungrier guests. The result offered more choice without more volume, and cost less than the buffet it replaced.

Similar inclusivity shows up in how planners talk about lighter menus generally. "Lighter portions are appreciated by many consumers, not only those taking a GLP-1 medication," says Russo, "and those who are on GLP-1 drugs don't necessarily want to be singled out with a different menu."

Breakfast remains the hardest meal to solve because there's a specific gap here: quality fiber options are rarely available alongside the protein sources most breakfast buffets already offer, with Danish, pastries, and bagels dominating the spread instead. A GLP-1-aware version of that same buffet might swap the towering Danish display for a tray of soft-boiled eggs and smoked salmon, Greek yogurt parfaits layered with berries and chia, and whole-grain mini muffins, with a protein-forward grab-and-go station tucked at the end of the line for anyone drifting in late. Malin herself has landed on a version of this hybrid: full hot buffets for about 60% of attendees, supplemented in the final 30 minutes with protein-forward grab-and-go options. "I am gravitating toward menus that are lighter, buildable, healthier, and protein-focused while still delivering a high-quality hospitality experience," she said.

Why waiting for requests doesn't work

Most event hosts aren't yet actively planning menus around GLP-1 use, but that's changing quickly, and corporate clients are leading the shift. With roughly one in eight American adults now using these medications, any gathering of 20 or more guests likely includes multiple users. Some planners have begun building GLP-1-friendly options into standard RFPs, treating the request with the same weight given to vegetarian or gluten-free accommodations.

Social clients, those planning weddings and milestone celebrations, lag behind this awareness unless personally familiar with the medications.

A dynamic unlike other dietary considerations emerges here. Food allergies require disclosure for safety; religious dietary needs are commonly and comfortably requested. GLP-1 use occupies a more private space: many users would rather navigate existing menu options quietly than identify themselves or explain a medication regimen.

"People are not necessarily chomping at the bit to share that they are taking GLP-1s, so we just need to be prepared to meet people where they are with regard to food and beverages," DeFelices confirms.

A preference for privacy shifts the burden: rather than waiting for a request many guests will never make, thoughtful hosts build guest-driven choice into the default offering. "We should be proactively considering this when planning menus," DeFelices adds, "even if it's just asking for smaller portions on the proteins and sauce on the side."

A quarter of plates left half-untouched reflects poorly on a menu regardless of the cause, and guests who feel unable to participate fully in a meal rarely leave an event thinking well of it.

How to start the conversation

Chef LaLa approaches this from the kitchen, building the menu language itself around adaptability rather than disclosure. "I would not start by asking individual guests whether they take GLP-1 medication," she says. "Instead, tell the client what the menu can offer: balanced, protein-centric plates; flexible portions; clear ingredient information; and, where practical, choices that work for different schedules and settings. Then ask about dietary needs and event goals through the usual confidential planning process. A broad question such as 'Would you like balanced options with protein, complex carbohydrates, healthy fats, and flexible portions?' can open the door without putting anyone on the spot."

Royster approaches the same idea from the data side, widening the frame beyond GLP-1 users specifically. "You don't always have to say you're creating something for this small consumer set; it is a larger population than that because a lot of the population is interested in protein, is interested in these macro nutrients even though they are not on a GLP-1," she noted.

A broader truth emerges from that wider lens, reflecting a shift already underway in how menus get designed in the first place, one less about naming a specific medication and more about rethinking old assumptions baked into event catering. Many event menus were designed in an era when bigger automatically meant better. Explicit requests for GLP-1-friendly menus remain rare, but the underlying preferences show up constantly in requests for lighter fare, smaller portions, and protein-focused options, even when clients never mention GLP-1s by name.

DeFelices expects this rarity in explicit requests to shift soon: "I have not seen this request and have not been including it as an option on the dietary survey... yet."

A different kind of accommodation

Gluten-free, vegan, Kosher, Halal, nut-free: these accommodations are standard practice, with established protocols governing ingredient sourcing, preparation, and service. GLP-1 accommodation works differently. Unlike allergies, which require strict ingredient avoidance, or religious restrictions, which can demand separate preparation, GLP-1 needs center on portion size, macronutrient balance, and preparation style, a simpler problem to solve than it first appears.

DeFelices takes this a step further, arguing that the distinction between GLP-1 accommodation and other dietary needs may be overstated: "I personally don't think there are significant differences. I strive to work with creative culinarians to create buffets and plates that check a lot of the boxes, which I think is far better than offering specialized plates for each attendee who indicates a restriction. I think it's getting much easier to find 'buy-in' from culinary teams on this approach."

Guests managing heart disease, diabetes, or post-surgical recovery often need similar accommodations but may hesitate to ask because their needs don't fit a standard dietary-restriction category, a pattern that extends well past GLP-1 users specifically. Building flexibility into the default menu lets everyone participate without disclosing anything.

"Allergies and certain dietary restrictions require careful ingredient control and clear communication because the consequences of an error can be serious," says Chef LaLa. "GLP-1 use is not itself a single food exclusion or a universal diet. Guests may have different health goals, appetites, tolerances, and preferences. The caterer's role is to provide appealing choices and practical flexibility without asking guests to disclose medication use."

Protein becomes a central design consideration, not only for GLP-1 users but for anyone mindful of satiety and nutritional balance. "Many people pursuing weight loss are also mindful of getting enough protein to help preserve lean mass as they lose weight," Chef LaLa notes.

Protein-forward demand is no longer a niche consideration for caterers to weigh against other dietary requests. It has grown to a scale that outpaces most other dietary accommodations event planners are accustomed to managing, running well ahead of food allergies and gluten-free requests combined. That scale makes protein-forward design less of an add-on and more of a baseline expectation.

Scale alone does not settle how much a caterer should disclose about a menu's nutritional makeup, however. As GLP-1 use becomes more common among attendees, planners face a related but distinct question: whether greater transparency around ingredients and nutrition actually serves guests better, or simply invites scrutiny the event budget cannot absorb.

"Sharing the nutritional data at events can be a slippery slope," says DeFelices. "Event budgets rarely have room to spare, and giving attendees a 'peek behind the curtain' to the nutritional value of a breakfast or lunch menu invites feedback that could affect the budget. Keeping dietary needs front and center when planning should satisfy the attendee's concerns."

The evidence is clear and the scale is only growing. The remaining question for event professionals is not whether this shift is real, but what to actually put on the plate, and in the glass, to meet it.

The strategies you can implement tomorrow

Five changes deliver impact without new equipment, new vendors, or added cost:

- Offer half portions at the same per-person cost tier, rather than treating smaller servings as a discount item
- Add one protein-forward station or build-your-own component to each meal
- Introduce smaller cocktail pours (three to four ounces) alongside standard sizes at the bar
- Publish menus at least one week in advance with clear descriptions of preparation style and protein content
- Swap one heavy side or starch per course for an additional vegetable or protein option

When guests can review menus at least a week before the event, they can plan accordingly without needing to make special requests. Beyond communication, right-sizing portions across the board is the most immediate structural change: even modest reductions in starches and heavy sides can decrease waste while better matching actual consumption.

On protein portioning specifically, DeFelices recommends a concrete benchmark: "Three to four ounces of protein. Starting the meal by eating protein first is advised so that anyone on a GLP-1 is getting valuable macronutrients in each meal, rather than filling up on carbohydrates or fat."

Design service styles that let guests self-regulate without drawing attention: buffets with smaller plates, family-style with multiple serving utensils, or plated options with clear portion indicators.

Format matters less than flexibility, DeFelices notes: "Both plated and buffet formats work for GLP-1 users. Guests can eat what they want/like, and portions can be controlled."

Beyond simply including an option, Protein prominence matters in making it visible, accessible, and appealing at every meal and break, with plant-based choices alongside animal proteins and grab-and-go options for multi-day events.

"Poultry and fish are always popular options," DeFelices says. "These items lend themselves to smaller portions as well."



A mini Chocolate Raspberry Cheesecake bite. Photo courtesy Sharon DeFelices

Rebalance plates toward vegetables and plant-forward dishes without eliminating indulgent options, ensuring lighter choices get the same culinary attention as richer ones. Treat vegetables as center-of-plate items: charred broccolini with lemon and garlic, roasted cauliflower steaks with chimichurri, grilled asparagus with shaved parmesan.

Fewer dessert and snack options of higher quality often outperform abundant spreads that go largely untouched. Mini desserts, fruit-forward options, and dark chocolate bites satisfy the desire for something sweet without overwhelming guests who feel full quickly. "Those little mini-indulgences play a major role in this consumer set," Royster said.

Building menus that work

Caterers and planners have largely moved past debating whether to accommodate GLP-1 users; the real conversation now is how to do it thoughtfully, without separate menus or unwanted attention.

The inclusive approach

The goal is a single menu, built for universal appeal, where accommodation is invisible because it is the default rather than the exception, not a parallel diet menu carved out for a subset of guests.

Chef LaLa frames this as a misconception to dismantle. "The biggest misconception is that wellness food has to be bland, restrictive, or culturally narrow," she says. "It does not. Food should be nourishing and pleasurable, and it should reflect the people who are eating it. I am Latina and love Latin food; I also draw inspiration from Asian, Indian, and many other cuisines."

DeFelices deliberately favors the word "inclusive" over alternatives when talking to clients: "This term does not feel overwhelming in a conversation with clients." In practice, that means planning for the full range of guest preferences, cookies at the afternoon break alongside veggie chips and jerky, so no one feels judged or managed.

A practical caution against overcorrecting toward restriction reinforces her approach: "As a chef and nutritionist, my go-to has been healthier menu options, but always remembering that some people want potatoes, rolls, and desserts."

She extends the same philosophy to menu presentation: "Seamless integration is always best. Best to be inclusive in your approach to food and beverage without singling out anyone."

Elevating the small bite format

Canapés, hors d'oeuvres, and small bites have always been part of the catering toolkit; they are now positioned to move from supporting player to centerpiece. "With so many people on GLP-1s, appetites are smaller and menus should reflect and accommodate this," says Sebastien Centner, Founder and Creative Director for Eatertainment Events & Catering.

That shift in positioning changes how a small bite needs to feel on the plate. A passed hors d'oeuvre does not feel like a smaller portion; it feels intentional. The key is reimagining popular entrées in miniature rather than defaulting to cheese cubes and crudités: a beef tenderloin becomes a one-bite medallion on a crispy potato pavé with a micro-drop of aioli, a burger becomes a glazed meatball skewer with a tiny pickle and cheddar crisp and no bun, and a brie-and-chutney sandwich becomes a crostini with melted brie and tart fruit chutney.



Moroccan Grilled Tuna, Cucumber, Chermoula Aioli. Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering

Shrinking the portion doesn't mean shrinking the experience. Flavor has to concentrate rather than dilute when the plate gets smaller, a sauce becomes a micro-drop rather than a pool, a garnish becomes structural rather than decorative, so every element on a reduced-size dish still earns its place.

Sauces benefit from the same concentration, where DeFelices favors lighter bases over cream and butter without sacrificing richness. "Vegetable purees are a velvety addition to many sauces," she says, pointing to a technique that delivers body and flavor without the heaviness or volume of a traditional reduction.

Chef LaLa extends this thinking to how an entire event should be structured, arguing against a single prescribed approach to portions or timing. "There is no single portion size or service format that works for everyone," she says. "I would make flexible portions easy and offer satisfying, nutrient-rich options throughout the event rather than assuming guests want one prescribed schedule."

The art of mini indulgences

Mini indulgences, smaller premium versions of favorite treats, let GLP-1 users participate fully without discomfort: individual chocolate mousse in espresso cups, two-bite cheesecake squares, petite fruit tarts, dark chocolate truffles. Taster flights extend the same logic, with three small scoops of gelato instead of one large bowl, or a dessert board built from bite-sized portions.

"They're not traditionally health forward items, but they're very craveable, and they're very indulgent, they're just in a smaller portion size," Freier observed. Success here is measured not by plate size or abundance of options, but by how well the menu serves the full spectrum of guests.

Designing for nutrition and satisfaction

Every choice on a GLP-1-conscious menuultimatelyanswersthe same question: does this dish make a guest feel cared for, or does it make them feel managed? The caterers getting this right aren't counting calories or cutting ingredients. They're redesigning dishes from the ground up around nutrient density, layered flavor, and genuine culinary craft, so that eating less never feels like eating worse.

Prioritizing protein and satiety

Chef LaLa's approach starts with high-quality protein and fresh, minimally processed ingredients, then builds a balanced plate around them: herb-roasted chicken or turkey, simply prepared fish, customizable grain bowls, substantial salads with protein, or vegetable-forward entrées with sauce served separately.



Steak & Olive Oil Poached ‘Frite’, Chimichurri Aioli. Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering

Cost has to factor into any protein strategy, particularly as beef prices remain at record highs. "If you're serving steak, instead of an eight-ounce tenderloin, pair a four-ounce tenderloin with shrimp," said Neil Doherty, Head of Global Culinary and Strategy at Sysco, in an article for The New York Times. Lentils, eggs, and cottage cheese offer less expensive sources that boost protein content without straining budgets. Skewers and spoons have become the go-to vehicle for small-bite formats: a grilled shrimp on a tasting spoon, lemongrass chicken satay on miniature skewers, Mediterranean chicken souvlaki bites with a pipette of tzatziki.



Thai Lemongrass Chicken Satay. Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering

Elevating plant-forward options

Fresh, vegetable-forward foods that don't sit heavy are often what GLP-1 users crave, particularly those with acidic notes and high fiber content. A vegan ceviche with palm hearts, chayote, corn, cucumber, and pepper in mango vinaigrette served in a shot glass; ginger and garlic edamame spoons; crispy rice cakes topped with spicy seaweed salad and avocado all fit this profile.



Plant Based 'Tuna' on Lotus Crisp with spicy seaweed salad. Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering

Legumes, tofu, and tempeh offer a way to meet satiety goals without putting the full cost burden on animal protein, an important option with beef prices at record highs: a lentil and roasted vegetable fritter, a crispy tempeh skewer with peanut sauce, marinated tofu cubes on a cocktail pick. A practical concern gets addressed by these options too, since many attendees on GLP-1s need additional fiber to offset digestive side effects.

Rethinking "lighter" preparations

Maintaining flavor and satisfaction in lighter preparations, not managing portion size, is the real challenge. "Flavor does not have to come from heavy cream or butter," Chef LaLa explains. "Citrus, herbs, spices, aromatics, fresh salsas, vinaigrettes, and well-developed broths can bring a dish to life." Baking, steaming, and broiling showcase natural flavors without relying on heavy fats.

Vegetable crudités alongside traditional dip accompaniments, and Mediterranean spreads like hummus and tzatziki with crisp vegetables, create options without special requests while addressing nutritional needs. Letting guests choose their own level of richness is as simple as offering sauces and dressings on the side.

A final note on adaptability

Someone taking medication as part of diabetes care may need to consider carbohydrate intake and monitor blood glucose with their healthcare team; others have different priorities and tolerances. Empowerment through choice is the goal, built on how food is prepared, not on eliminating ingredients or techniques, and not simply on how much of it is served.

The sensory experience

Two often-overlooked dimensions shape the guest experience and matter more for GLP-1 users than traditional event planning typically acknowledges: the sensory qualities that make food engaging, and the strategic timing of when food is offered across the day rather than confined to three fixed meals.

The texture factor

Texture plays a bigger role in how GLP-1 users experience a meal than most menus account for. "Texture comes into play in ways that we wouldn't traditionally think of for foodservice," said Erin McGlothlin, Senior Innovation Manager for Mattson, in an article for Flavor & The Menu. Contrast and intensity, rather than sheer volume, tend to be prioritized by guests eating smaller amounts: a crisp element against something creamy, a chewy bite against something smooth.



Yuzu Scallop Salsa, Celery Cucumber Brunoise, Fennel Pollen. Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering

Eatertainment's Togarashi Wonton Crisps put that principle into practice: a light, crunchy wonton crisp topped with a dot of sesame lime mayo delivers crunch with a fraction of the weight. A seared scallop with crispy pancetta and silky cauliflower purée offers three distinct textures in a single bite, while a chilled gazpacho shooter topped with a warm, crispy crouton pairs temperature and texture in one presentation.

DeFelices builds on this idea with a longer list of ingredients she turns to for exactly this kind of contrast. "Texture is a fun element to play with and there are a lot of options," she says. "Topping a dish with roasted chickpeas or edamame adds more protein and fiber. Adding pepitas into a salad is a flavorful crunch with no risk of allergic reaction. Pan-toasting quinoa adds crunch and extra protein to any dish. My favorite crunchy vegetables include jicama, loaded with prebiotic fiber, and radish, which adds a nice peppery and crisp bite to a salad or sandwich."

Reimagining breaks and snacks

The full spectrum of guest needs is no longer served by traditional break tables laden with pastries and cookies. "I think that what we're definitely going to see is a movement away from ultra-processed foods," said DeFelices. "Maybe less packaged snacks at breaks. Functional foods and drinks are going to continue to have their time in the sun."

Instead of treating breaks as obligatory sugar-and-carb stations, reimagine them as smaller eating opportunities throughout the day that complement rather than compete with main meals, without dictating when or how much guests eat at each one.

Expanding "snack" beyond baked goods and chips opens the door to Greek yogurt parfaits with granola and berries, mini vegetable frittatas, smoked salmon on cucumber rounds with herbed cream cheese, white bean hummus with vegetable crudités, elevated cheese and charcuterie boards, and trail mix with roasted chickpeas, pumpkin seeds, dried cherries, and dark chocolate chips. Several smaller eating opportunities throughout the day let attendees find something that fits their appetite and schedule at multi-day events.

DeFelices practices this expanded snack philosophy directly, pointing to specific break options that balance protein, fiber, and craveability: "Nut butter energy bites are a great option, as well as a DIY trail mix with lots of nuts and dried fruit add-ins. Cheese and veggies make a great afternoon break option with hummus and whole grain crackers."

Serving styles that serve everyone

Traditional formats often work against smaller appetites: plated meals with fixed portions can look wasteful once half the plate consistently comes back untouched, buffets quietly pressure guests to over-take, and family-style service nudges everyone toward over-serving.



Fresh poke station – packed with lean protein, omega-3s, and nutrient-rich toppings for a light, energizing, and heart-healthy meal. Photo courtesy Joanna Salazar

Customization & control

Build-your-own and action stations let guests select appropriate portions discreetly. "To me, if you're doing wellness right when it comes to the menu, you're empowering people," says Stevens. "Put the sauces on the side, deconstruct the salad. When you break the menu down a little, it provides more agency for the people who are participating."

Small formats and flexible pricing

Passed hors d'oeuvres work for this crowd for a simple reason: small, individual portions let guests sample widely without committing to a full plate, and the social rhythm of a cocktail reception means eating less doesn't stand out. At seated dinners, breaking a meal into courses rather than one oversized plate gives guests room to participate at every stage without pressure to finish each one. Grazing tables extend the same logic, with varied, return-as-you-like options. Clear menu language, well-briefed service staff, and appropriately scaled serviceware help guests navigate these formats with confidence.



Petaluma Chicken with Sonoma Chardonnay, and Napa Grapes. This dish offers small portions, allowing GLP-1 users to enjoy an appropriately sized protein option. Photo courtesy Sharon DeFelices

Reimagining portions

The "micro-main" is a more fundamental rethinking of event dining than simply shrinking an existing dish: entrées designed specifically for smaller appetites while preserving visual impact and flavor complexity. A three-ounce portion plated thoughtfully on right-sized dishware looks intentional; that same portion on a standard dinner plate looks like a shortage. Presentation, in other words, does the work that used to be done by volume alone.

Beverage considerations

Reduced alcohol tolerance and decreased interest in high-calorie drinks are commonly reported by GLP-1 users. Treated with the same care as a full-sized cocktail — proper glassware, a proportionate garnish — mini drinks read as intentional rather than stingy. A model events could adapt directly is already used by some upscale restaurants, which now offer every cocktail on the menu in both full and mini formats, stocking three-to-four-ounce pours alongside traditional six-to-eight-ounce ones.

"I would not assume that every person taking a GLP-1 avoids alcohol; individuals differ, and guests should make their own choices," says Chef LaLa. "Still, a festive non-alcoholic drink gives people an inviting way to join the social ritual without feeling like the odd person out carrying a plain bottle of water."

Every bit as celebratory as a cocktail, low-sugar spritzers and mocktails built on sparkling water, berries, citrus, or herbs can feel. "The beverage program is where you can really show creativity and inclusivity," notes Chef LaLa. "When non-alcoholic options are just as thoughtfully crafted and beautifully presented as cocktails, everyone feels included in the celebration."

Awareness without alarmism

Educating clients and internal teams alike calls for balance: awareness without alarmism, so everyone feels included without being singled out.

Training internal teams

Staff training should focus on general patterns, smaller portions, protein preference, reduced alcohol tolerance, without asking staff to identify which guests might be on these medications. Chef LaLa frames the goal as training teams to be "observant and responsive rather than prescriptive."

Educating clients

Client education lands better when framed around broader wellness trends than GLP-1s specifically. Sharing consumption data, successful menu examples, and tastings that show smaller portions can still feel celebratory reinforces the case. Framing menu evolution in business terms, reduced waste and improved satisfaction, tends to win enthusiastic buy-in rather than reluctant compliance.

Professional culinary education & collaboration

Chef LaLa argues nutrition education belongs in culinary training "because chefs shape how food is experienced." That collaboration has a clear boundary: caterers build flexible, wellness-oriented menus, but prescribing medical nutrition therapy is the registered dietitian's role. For events serving populations with specific health considerations, diabetes conferences, cardiac rehabilitation programs, weight management groups, partnering with nutrition professionals ensures the menu serves attendees while elevating the caterer's standing as part of a wellness-focused team.

The cost-benefit equation

Beef prices remain at record highs, and Darren Tristano, Chief Executive of Foodservice Results, offers the clearest numbers on what that means for pricing: "If you're serving half the portions, you're likely going to charge 75% of the price of the full portion," he said in The New York Times. That math forces caterers to decide whether clients will accept a $5 to $7 increase for additional protein.

Cost pressure cuts in an unexpected direction. In restaurants, GLP-1 households often spend more overall despite eating less; they're 13% more likely to pay a premium for right-sized portions, according to Royster. At events, where hosts pay a flat per-person rate regardless of consumption, that willingness to pay never reaches the caterer. The pressure intensifies because guests are skipping the categories that traditionally subsidize protein and labor costs. "These are your high margin items," Freier noted. "This is going to have a huge impact and be a huge challenge for your bottom lines."

Treating portion flexibility as standard practice turns this challenge into an opportunity. Three financial benefits make the case: reduced waste, with many chefs reporting cuts of 20 to 30% after implementing right-sized portions; stronger client satisfaction and repeat business; and positioning as an early adopter of wellness-focused dining as the trend scales.

The broader wellness context

GLP-1 use is one piece of a much larger wellness movement, and event professionals who treat it that way will be better positioned for what comes next. "I expect GLP-1s to remain part of a wider wellness conversation, and event catering can respond by making balanced food, flexible portions, clear information, and appealing non-alcoholic drinks part of good hospitality," says Chef LaLa. "People are much more in tune with their wellness and have been conscientiously choosing foods that support better health," DeFelices adds. "Information is everywhere and being consumed at a rate that we've never seen before. Guests are expecting to be cared for in a way similar to how they care for themselves at home."

What this means for events

The shift in appetite and eating habits hasn't translated into guests pulling back from events altogether. "Americans still want to eat, they still want those experiences," said Graham Humphreys, CEO at The Culinary Edge, during a session at the 2026 National Restaurant Show. "They just want to eat differently." Attendees on GLP-1s aren't skipping events or opting out of social dining; they're looking for ways to participate fully while honoring a changed relationship with food.

Morning Consult's June 2026 Category Advantage analysis, How GLP-1 Reshapes Users' Relationship to Casual Dining, found that GLP-1 users, despite eating differently, aren't retreating from social occasions; if anything, they're more likely to get together with coworkers and clients. The finding matters because Freeman research found 51% of attendees say strong networking alone is enough reason to come back to an event.

Food and beverage still set the scene; they're just increasingly scenery rather than the headline act. Dollars saved on excess food and beverage can be redirected toward lounges, matchmaking, hosted introductions, and other tools built to make connection easier. "More food doesn't necessarily mean a better attendee experience," Rochard said. "Sometimes better food, more choice, and less waste does."

The road ahead

The direction is clear. Caterers and planners who treat this shift as an invitation to innovate, rather than a constraint to tolerate, will lead the industry instead of chasing it.

With more affordable oral versions entering the market and potential insurance coverage expanding, GLP-1 adoption will likely keep climbing. Some analysts project up to 30 million Americans using these medications by 2030, representing up to 35% of U.S. food and beverage sales.

A familiar thread runs through all of this, the same one caterers have always had to manage, just with new variables. The financial stakes are real: high-margin categories are shrinking just as protein costs climb. The privacy stakes are real: guests will rarely ask directly, which means flexibility has to be built into the default menu rather than offered as a special request. And the sensory stakes are real: a three-ounce portion only reads as generous hospitality, rather than a shortage, when the plate, the pacing, and the presentation are designed around it.

"GLP-1s have permanently reshaped how consumers eat out: smaller portions, higher protein demand, less sugar and alcohol. These aren't fad behaviors, they're here to stay," Royster said. "The winning playbook is reformulation, not restriction, smaller sizes, shareable formats, and nutrient-dense upgrades to existing menus that beat starting from scratch. Craveability still drives the purchase, so lead innovation with premium ingredients, bold flavor, and indulgent textures, calibrated for consumers who eat less but expect more."

The half-eaten plates that started piling up at corporate luncheons were never really a problem to apologize for. They were an early signal. The caterers who have since learned to plate a three-ounce portion so it reads as intentional rather than sparse have already found the answer those plates were asking for all along: smaller can still mean generous, if the menu is designed that way from the start.