



Guys in ties at Allison Sarofim's Halloween party

What's Under That Napkin?

Have you noticed that the people passing the trays at parties lately are, well, very pretty? And all men? MEREDITH BRYAN takes a long toothpick and skewers the hot beef that is New York's cater-waiter industry

On Thursday, Oct. 25, Michael Ellison, a model and aspiring actor from Texas with spiky blond hair, settled down with an espresso at the 19th Street Le Pain Quotidien wearing a gray puffy jacket, jeans and two-tone Marc Jacobs wellies. The fresh-faced Mr. Ellison, 25, has starred on *Law & Order* and appeared Off Broadway, but he was here to discuss his side career.

"Four years ago, I was at a modeling agency," he said. "And the guys were talking about ways to make extra money, saying you could make \$18 an hour catering. Being from Texas, I was like, 'Heck yeah, sign me up!'"

Mr. Ellison went in for an interview at a company called T&L Events Inc. (no relation to Time-Life). "The staffing person had all his walls filled with models' comp cards," he remembered. "And I thought, 'This is weird, my agent has the same thing!' And it was all guys, no girls. And soon enough, the rate went up to \$25. And before you knew it I was being flown out to Ohio to do parties for Abercrombie & Fitch at the owner's house."

Nowadays, Mr. Ellison works mostly for private chefs and event planners staffing the city's most exclusive parties. He's one member of a genetically blessed army of (largely) male "cater-waiters" who provide scenery, branding and genial, attentive service to New York's social, fashion and finance elite during soirees in brownstones and downtown lofts. Friendly, efficient and just flirtatious enough, Mr. Ellison and his peers are a workforce whose attractiveness is unrivaled except in modeling itself, and so great is the demand for their symmetrical, youthful vigor that the best among them can pull in upward of \$100,000 a year—on top of what they might make acting or modeling.

It's money their employers say is well worth it. "In today's times, it"—meaning attractiveness—"carries huge importance," said Peter Callahan, whose high-profile eponymous company caters for luxury and private clients including Al Gore. "We hear all the time from people, 'I need really handsome staff.'" A lot of his staff are models, he said. "They're good guys; they're happy about life. They're not *cranky* cater-waiters."

"I remain cognizant of the fact that I'm in the fashion business," said Olivier Cheng, a caterer who has recently provided fetching fellows for elaborate bashes thrown by Ralph Lauren and Hermes, "I'm like a marketing agent for my client."

He added: "New York is a visually driven city."

'LIKE A BIG FRAT HOUSE'

During Fashion Week in September, the army was out in full force. There they were serving cocktails at Tom Ford's party for Marilyn Minter: hair

slicked into side parts, wearing tailored white mandarin coats with gold buttons; at Kate and Andy Spade's early-morning press breakfast, helpfully offering coffee and mimosas and charming miniature donuts. On Sept. 18, courtesy of Mr. Cheng, they were black-clad and clean-shaven at *GQ's* 50th Anniversary bash in Chelsea. At a *Lucky* magazine event on Oct. 25, young servers from Mr. Callahan's company in black dress shirts and slacks served mini-cheeseburgers and spring rolls while women attacked racks of shoes all around them.

Of course, it makes sense that handsome male cater-waiters would be staffing fashion and media events, since those are mostly organized by women and gay men. But Brett Stephan, 28, a former model and longtime cater-waiter who now staffs private parties for fashion elites and Sant Ambroeus restaurant, provided another rationale. "Ninety-five percent of the business is men, because you're dealing with heavy lifting," he said. "You have 50- or 60-pound tubs of ice and 40-pound racks of glasses. There's a lot of setup and breakdown."

Mr. Stephan said he's constantly prospecting for potential staffers. "I'll be at Marquis on a Wednesday night, and I'll meet a guy who just got into the city to do a little modeling. I'll give him my business card and tell him to give me a call if he wants to do some parties. I've gotten a couple good guys off Craigslist. And just through friends. The business that we're in is a very small niche business, and everybody pretty much knows each other. It's like a big frat house."

Indeed, the industry is still reverberating from a 1995 lawsuit brought by a female staffer against the high-profile Upper East Side caterer Glorious Food, charging that she was not given an equal chance to work the most lucrative parties. The case was settled for \$425,000, and Glorious Food agreed to stop accommodating clients' requests for men only. "We are an equal opportunity employer," said Stephan Baroni, Managing Director of Hudson Yards Catering. "Occasionally we have certain clients in the luxury market that do request certain looks or certain styles, and we try to accommodate some of them without breaking the law."

And for many clients of means, that certain look simply amounts to "hot beefcake."

"I've probably catered with every face that's been on the Abercrombie billboards," Mr. Ellison said. "You'll go to a party and see a guy and feel like you know him, but it's just that you've seen him in Dolce & Gabbana ads."

"It's kind of the rite of passage," said Jarred Sper, 30, a model and former cater-waiter from Michigan who started his own staffing firm, Choice Productions, with his roommate in 2004. ("People would come up to us and say, 'You know, we really like how you guys are doing the job, do you ever do work on your own?'"

"A lot of the guys who I came up with four or five

years ago, I see them on TV shows now and in movies," he continued. "We have a guy named Blake who does big campaigns for Dolce & Gabbana, and he's in all the Old Navy commercials now. I'll see him on TV, and then I'll go to work an hour later and see him at one of my parties."

"There's only a handful of guys in the city who make enough modeling that they don't have to cater," said Mr. Stephan, who still works as a stand-in for actors Chris Klein and Freddie Prinze Jr. when they're on set in New York.

Agents are not always supportive of male models moonlighting as caterers. "I don't think it's necessarily good exposure," Mr. Ellison said. "My roommate's a big model, and I know that he's actually not gotten jobs because casting people have seen him out at parties. They kind of look at you and think, 'If you're catering then you're not modeling, which means you must not be hot.'"

Mr. Stephan did not entirely agree. "I have one friend named Chris who never signed with an agency, but he's six feet tall and good-looking, and he's booked so much work just from working parties," he said. "He'll meet photographers who'll say, 'Hey, I want to shoot you for something,' and that becomes a \$10,000 campaign. It happens more often than you'd think."

SHIRTLESS IN MANHATTAN

As stylish New Yorkers have grown accustomed to a certain, er, visual standard for their parties, specialized staffing companies with names like Model Bartenders have proliferated, unabashedly advertising service with a side of toned pecs. Sometimes such companies employ chefs and producers and can stage an entire event; other times they provide staffers for large events put on by other caterers. Occasionally, said several event planners, staffing firms will agree to provide head shots for a client's approval. But mostly, companies' reputations precede them, and caterers and event planners have learned whose guys can both look good and get the job done.

"We tell them, get us hot guys," said one event planner, who asked not to be named. "And they do."

Some clients are also getting more specific about the exact meaning of hot. "What maybe has changed is the requests—an awareness of wanting certain looks," said Tom Palmer, director of events at Syndicate, a P.R. firm that works with clients like the concierge service Quintessentially and Ian Schrager's Gramercy Park Hotel. "We work with industries in a style-conscious world. They're wishing to communicate luxury, attraction, sexiness—I can't think of a single client I've worked with who's not been conscious of that."

"I could send you 10 guys who look like rockers," said Mr. Sper. "I could send you 10 that look like

surfers from California."

"Some people have asked me for bare-chested waiters, or they want only women and they have to be really hot," said Mr. Cheng. "If that's what a client wants, I'll source that from someone who specializes in that sort of thing. If they want hooters, we'll get them hooters. But my staff themselves—that's not what we do as a company."

Mr. Ellison admitted he has been on the other end of such requests. "I once got paid \$300 an hour to take my shirt off," at an event for a big name in the men's grooming world, he said. "If you hire a model, he's going to get \$500 to 600 an hour, so you might as well just pay me half of that, since I'm basically a model."

Mr. Ellison added that on that occasion, he fought for a premium rate, but most of the time the hourly rate for shirtless cater-waiters, a Hamptons mainstay that occasionally pops up in the city—as it did paired with ties and Charlie Chaplin hats the weekend of Oct. 27 at socialite and entertainer Allison Sarofim's lavish annual Halloween Party (staffed by Mr. Sper's Choice Productions)—is more like \$75.

It's no secret, say cater-waiters and their employers, that the guys are a hit at the parties. Exactly how much of a hit is anyone's guess. Of course, there are rumors. "Sometimes you get people who hire you who want something a little more than just being served food," said one cater-waiter who asked not to be named. "I've heard stories about a staffer, and I'm not going to say who, who kind of leases his boys out to individuals at the parties. You can call it 'gay for pay.' I don't think the guys [are gay], they just want money. If they can make \$1,000, they'll do it. Some guys are just hard up, I guess."

Many cater-waiters refer to more benign offenses. "You know the way straight men will stare down a woman on the street?" said Mr. Stephan. "The men at [these parties] will do the same thing. So when a girl says to me, 'You don't know what it's like to be a woman, and see what we go through with all you asshole guys,' I'm like 'Oh, but I do.' I've had a guy grab my ass at a party!" Mr. Stephan added that he never drinks on the job, and sends home any staffers who do.

'WE'RE NOT WHORES'

"It's horrible!" Mr. Ellison said of the occasional attempted party pickup. "I mean, I see women get cat-called when they walk down the street, and my heart breaks for them, because I know! I'm like, 'It happened to me for five hours last night! The thing is, we're not whores, but we're [sometimes asked to] take our shirt off, and lean like this, and we're going to spray you with all this grease. I mean, no! I can take so much, but then you start drawing a line.'"

Of course, staffers and caterers are quick to point out that looking good will only get you so far with

the richest, most exacting people in the world. "It's all about good service," said publicist Lizzie Grubman. "They have to be really personable, so it's more the whole package."

"We did a party recently where everything had to come in on barges to a private island near Branford," Mr. Callahan said. (That's in Connecticut, dope.) "You need the very best staff there is to do that. You can't be like, 'You can't work because you're not six feet tall with a 30-inch waist.'"

Mr. Sper of Choice Productions estimated that there is a cadre of about 150 experienced and attractive cater-waiters who are well known and coveted by the highest-end boutique staffing firms and private chefs in the city. The industry's rate of turnover makes these staffers—many of whom are on a first-name basis with the elite clients and guests they serve time and again in private, intimate settings—essential to bookers. "I call them the Usual Suspects," he said. "It's so competitive out there. When an event comes in, you want to reserve the best people before they get reserved for something

'I've had a guy grab my ass at a party!'

—Brett Stephan, former model and longtime cater-waiter

else." Mr. Sper regularly staffs parties for Serena Bass, Ann Dexter-Jones and Ms. Sarofim, whom he calls "the most generous people," and who know and like his staffers, occasionally even hand-picking them for various parties.

"I don't want robots," he said. "I want every person that's working with us to be a host at the party. We want to remember what [guests are] drinking, we want to remember what their favorite hors d'oeuvre is."

Mr. Sper estimated that 98 percent of his staff is not from New York, and he trains them to handle the occasional bout of culture shock. "You'll be at a party and suddenly Matt Dillon will be there, Yoko Ono will be there, people you've never dreamed you'd be in the room with," he said. "As much as all of us are from other places and aren't used to seeing celebrities, our guys have to just offer them a drink and be able to approach these people."

Despite being in the city for 5 years, he's still wowed by the entertaining customs of New York's wealthy. "I'm from the Midwest," he said. "I grew up in a very middle-class family; my dad worked two jobs for the past 25 years to support his family. And I've been a waiter at a \$750,000 bat mitzvah. ... It's still hard for me to accept that it's the way our society operates. But just because you don't agree with it doesn't mean it's not reality."



The choice staff of Choice Productions