

Is the power lunch dead? Or on a diet?

January 23, 2009 02:11 PM

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(Globe file photo/1980)

By Andrew Ryan, Globe Staff

News that [Locke-Ober had canceled lunch](#) circulated through Boston's business community like cigar smoke during the heyday of the venerable restaurant.

Has the staggering economy ended the days of those three-course power lunches, where business was done over steak tartare and wood-grilled Atlantic salmon? Even before the credit crunch, had those hour-plus-long meals already given way to the rushed world of take-out salads and desktop dining?

The recession has certainly slowed the lunch business, restaurateurs acknowledge. But they see Locke-Ober's troubles as more of a blip during the post-holiday doldrums, a season typically slow in the restaurant world.

"I'd be lying if I say I haven't seen any drop-off," said Niels Vuijsters, director of food and beverage at Cafe Fleuri at The Langham hotel in the Financial District. The number of diners is down roughly 10 percent, Vuijsters said, "but considering the climate, were still maintaining a good volume."

In fact, an offshoot of Cafe Fleuri opened two weeks ago in The Langham, a new 80-seat gourmet sandwich shop named Bond. The target audience is business people in search of a quick, upscale lunch -- hand-cut, crisp fried fingerling russet potato chips; dim sum; and Asian lobster rolls.

Other purveyors of fine noontime food have seen a drop-off in large group dining, the crowds of 12 to 14 that would reserve private dining rooms.

"But there's definitely still people here doing businesses," said Esti Parsons, co-owner of Radius, a four-star restaurant on High Street known for its \$19 burger with yellow Vermont cheddar, crispy onions, and horseradish sauce.

Where some restaurateurs see a temporary decline, however, some local power brokers see a wholesale change in the business environment.

"You would have to be over 65 and among the uber rich to have any type of business lunch in 2009," said Thomas O'Neill 3d, the former lieutenant governor and principal of O'Neill and Associates.

The economic crash has exacerbated a generational shift away from power lunches and those mythical three-martini chasers, O'Neill said. Real business is now done early, from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., over made-to-order omelets and mixed berry pancakes at upscale breakfast spots such as Meritage at the Boston Harbor Hotel.

"That's where you see things happening," O'Neill said. "Where business is being done."

Others say the power lunch is a casualty of a new order in the local business world in which real influence has moved out of Boston. Takeovers have gobbled up local banks, for example, putting chief executive officers in New York, North Carolina, and beyond.

"If somebody says they are going to a power lunch, they are kidding themselves," said John D. Spooner, a money manager and author. "I call it the former power crowd. Essentially there is no power lunch because there is no power."