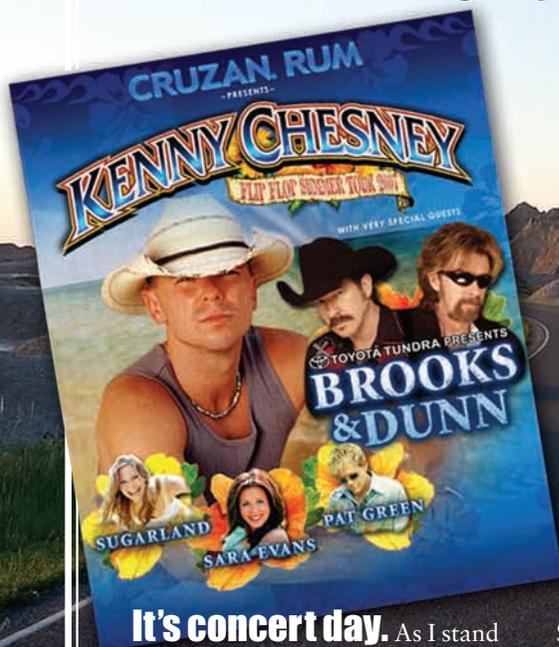


The Ultimate Road Trip

Traveling with America's hottest country music tour is the catering experience of a lifetime

by Nan Hildebrandt



It's concert day. As I stand outside the backstage entrance and watch buses, tour staff and limos come and go, I have to admit I feel a little bit like a teenager hoping for the slightest chance at scoring the elusive backstage pass. But today I'm not here to meet country music superstar Kenny Chesney, I'm here for a behind the scenes look at a unique type of catering operation and an interview with the man in charge. Finally, Bob Schneeberger of Hospitality Services Group emerges from backstage for our appointment. "Hi, let's go inside," he says, handing me a backstage pass ... SCORE!

Schneeberger's company is the traveling provider of catering services to Kenny Chesney's Flip Flop Summer Tour where his staff serves over 150 breakfasts, lunches and dinners almost four days a week. His mobile kitchen will see about 140 cities in five months as it travels from coast to coast with the tour.

VIP service

Schneeberger and HSG travel with a 53-foot kitchen trailer that houses a 250-gallon fresh-water tank, 80-gallon hot water tank, 350-gallon

wastewater tank, compressors for the 4x8 walk-in freezer and 8x10 cooler, and air conditioning. "When we were in Arizona, it was 118° outside and the kitchen was 65°," Schneeberger laughs, a pretty unheard of luxury when living the on-the-road lifestyle. Other features of the kitchen trailer include a double stack convection oven, deep fryer, 48-inch tilt skillet, 36-inch char grill, four burners, a 22-foot hood with fire suspension, a steamer, 5-gallon tilt kettle as well as two sinks.

The critical underside elements of the trailer are all heat-tape wrapped for winter and the generator switch *➤

powers everything down when they're not in use and auto starts again when needed. The kitchen was originally built for Bob's days on the WWE tour (World Wrestling Entertainment), but it suits this new application just fine. "The most important thing is that I can keep four days worth of food fresh" says Schneeberger.

As we entered the back stage dining room, I saw beautiful buffets set with dozens of meal selections ranging from salads and fresh fruit to tacos with rice and beans, salsas and a chef making fresh quesadillas tableside. The atmosphere is inviting and complete with colorful linens, water fountains, and two big plasma screen televisions broadcasting concert clips via Slingbox from Schneeberger's home in Chicago. There's also a special buffet set for Kenny Chesney himself. While the award-winning performer doesn't make many special requests, Schneeberger knows and accommodates the strict diet Kenny keeps in order to perform at a high level. "We try to put a little more

emphasis on health," he says. "We put juicers out there and protein powders. It's not something that's requested by the band, but it's been a big hit everywhere we've gone."

The catering crew uses a small prep area next to the dining room to keep it in service during meal time, typically starting set up around 4:30am so they're ready for breakfast at 7:30am. They then reset the room and the buffet for lunch around noon and again for dinner at 5pm. By 8pm, dinner is done and they're packed up and ready to move on by 10pm.

Schneeberger says one of the more trying aspects of traveling from city to city is buying food. "Even though I buy a lot of food, each purveyor is independent so they don't see the volume," he says. "We plan our menus a few weeks out, I call up vendors and see what's fresh and local, but sometimes it's a challenge to get something fresh. You know that first piece of fresh fish is going to the best restaurants,

then to the secondary restaurants, then to the grocery stores. I'll name-drop a little bit if I have to try and get the freshest stuff."

Behind the scenes

HSG has a crew of seven that travels with the tour and it hires two staff from the venue in each city, usually a dishwasher and a runner—the person who knows the area and can make a run to the grocery store or Target if needed. The crew travels on the tour bus, complete with televisions and DVD players, sleeping quarters and a



Custom built crates keep expensive equipment safe from damage on the road.



lounge. In most cases, the show runs Thursday through Sunday and they all head back to Nashville in between. "The catering crew [mostly from Chicago] generally stays on the bus. If they're close, they'll travel back through Chicago and take a couple days off," says Schneeberger, who flies in and out to the tour.

Schneeberger's team currently includes three chefs, one of whom has been with him since his internship at age 15. Coming up with great menu ideas to keep a superstar tour satisfied is a team effort. "I give my chefs a lot of freedom," he says. "If they see something in a restaurant or a magazine, I say 'let's do it!' I usually like to do something tableside at each meal: omelets, pasta stations, stir fry stations; when we get picky eaters, we can always do something to make them happy. I get a lot of ideas from magazines, but I'm not a recipe guy. Show me a picture and I'll recreate it;

it's a lot easier looking at pictures than reading a recipe as you're bouncing down the road."

Schneeberger stumbled upon this touring lifestyle as a somewhat natural progression of his successful catering career in Chicago. By age 20, he was the youngest manager with Marriot. He was getting pressure to take the next step within the company when he decided to go into catering with an old schoolmate doing delivery lunches. A 3,000-seat banquet hall hired them to do its catering. He and his partner were servicing the banquet hall during wedding and prom season as well as running three shifts in their delivery business. "That's what really catapulted us and showed us that we could do more," he says. They picked up more business with several exclusive concert venue contracts and some golf courses.

Schneeberger eventually moved from the kitchen into sales and a \$3.8 million business was built quickly—too quickly. "It was too big," he says. "At one point we had over 140 employees and I'd walk in and I didn't know anybody. It was kind of growing out of hand."

During this growth, the company catered several World Wrestling Entertainment shows at their venues. Schneeberger saw the potential of this kind of business; he proposed an arrangement to his partner, in which he would travel with and cater for WWE himself, renting all the necessary equipment from the company. Eventually he parted ways with his partner and went on tour with WWE exclusively.

He stayed with the WWE for five years, then wanted something

different. He began to work on tour with the country music group Rascal Flatts, and later learned that the Kenny Chesney tour was in need of a caterer. "We put together the proposal in one day and were off on the tour two weeks later," he says of the tour that started in April.

Love of the road

One of Schneeberger's favorite parts of being on tour is the camaraderie that he's developed with others. "This is definitely a 'go out and have a good time' tour," he says. "The crew is very proactive about including everyone, including the caterers. Plus, it gets to be like a big family—for better or worse." And what a big family it is: The traveling crew is close to 100 people, plus locals who come in at each city.

Even on his days off, he finds his thoughts going back to the tour, "There's a lot centered on the work," he says. "It's such a big rush and then you're beat and you need a couple days to unwind, but then you're looking for that rush again. It's like a drug. After doing an 18-hour show you say 'I'm never doing that again,' but when you're off for a few days you miss it; you wake up at 4 in the morning ready to go again."

He says it's not for everybody: "Definitely being single and young is a big advantage. And it's very physical a lot of walking, a lot of concrete, you know, it's a job. But I never complain about what I do. I get to travel, I get to see a lot of things people don't get to see, and I get to develop really, really great relationships." ❄️



High end plasma screens are an integral part of the buffet display and overall atmosphere.

"It's a lot easier looking at pictures than reading a recipe as you're bouncing down the road."

He uses care when it comes to hiring his staff. "I've had people I had to fire the first day because they were star-struck, they wanted the autograph, they were all about the show," he shakes his head, "I've been doing this for 17 years and I don't have one autograph. I've got the stories to tell."

The road ahead

Catering to the same client, three meals a day, five days a week, has special challenges. "I try to keep thinking outside the box, but the trouble is that we come in and start at this level [he indicates a level with his hand], and everyone loves it and now we have to think about that next level," says Schneeberger "What do we do next, what's the next big thing going to be? I don't know yet—we'll come up with something!"

"Sometimes I miss the old days," he says, "so I keep one client that was always real good to me and I do a phenomenal

"What's the next big thing going to be? I don't know yet—we'll come up with something!"

Christmas party every year for him. Each time he says this was the best party he's ever seen—and then I have to top that. More pressure just ends up being more fun. I've been real fortunate."

While he has no plans to retire any time soon, Schneeberger does have his eye on the horizon. He says when he's done touring he might "go into companies and do a little bit of consulting, help them set up a kitchen, do some marketing, helping others. I like that aspect of it."

Schneeberger invites me to come back for dinner in a couple hours. Back to the dining room around 5pm, the atmosphere is



dramatically different: The overhead lights are off and strands of small white bulbs illuminate the buffet table. The water fountains change colors as they softly bubble in the background. An all-new dinner menu is set out for band members and crew to enjoy before the show. I try to curb my excitement as, 5 feet from me, Kenny Chesney himself browses the tables.

After dinner, I walked out of the dark loading dock into the hot sun. I joined my friends for a little pre-concert tailgating where we took in a few of Kenny Chesney's own cocktail concoction (recipe below). That night,



we experienced the concert with 20,000 other country music fans. As three bands put on an energetic performance, in the back of my mind I give credit to the caterers that feed them and make it all possible. **CS**



Cruzan Confusion

One part
Cruzan™ Coconut Rum

One part
Cruzan™ Mango Rum

Pineapple Juice

Mix, garnish and enjoy!

