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Hospitality industry fires up for auto show parties

By [Sherri Welch](#)

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Cobo Center and a number of off-site venues around town are preparing for a busier-than-usual party circuit and fundraiser lineup this week in tandem with the press and industry days of the Detroit auto show.



Hougard

"This is one of the biggest shows in North America at any convention center, and no question, the biggest that Cobo sees during the year," said Jason Hougard, general manager for **Centerplate**, the hospitality contractor at Cobo.

Local chefs from area country clubs and golf courses lend a hand to prepare for the onslaught of international press, automotive manufacturers, dealers, suppliers and 13,000-14,000 guests expected for private pre- and post-receptions hosted at Cobo by

organizations such as **Charter One/RBS Citizens**, the presenting sponsor for the 2013 **North America International Auto Show's** charity preview, and for the black-tie preview on Friday night.

Typically, Cobo's hospitality provider, Greenville, S.C.-based **Volume Services America**, which does business as Centerplate, brings in about 52 chefs and sous chefs, Hougard said. This year it hired 70.

Beginning last week, chefs began turning 4,000 pounds of flour shipped in for the week into croissants, breads and desserts.



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Also brought in to prepare for an expected 110,000 meals: 4,000 pounds of shrimp, 3,500 pounds of deli meat, 1,200 pounds of tenderloin, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, 3,500 bottles of sparkling wine from **L. Mawby Vineyards** in Michigan's Suttons Bay.

On average during the year, Centerplate has about 200 people on staff. But to handle hospitality this week for all of the private receptions at the conference center, press days, dealer/industry preview days and the charity preview, the company has ramped up to 750 kitchen, wait staff and other customer service staff, 75 more than last year. It's also brought in 30 out-of-town managers, up from 25 last year, Hougard said.

On Saturday, Centerplate began a 24-hour, rotating shift for its staff, bringing in the kitchen team 10 p.m.–4 a.m. and wait staff and other front-of-the-house staff for the balance of the day.

After the charity preview ends, staff from Cobo operator **SMG** and Centerplate will work until the show opens to the public at 10 a.m. the next day to convert the venue's ballroom back to a food court, Hougard said.

"That's just the food service side ... we also mirror those shifts with the construction ... and operational side," said Thom Connors, Cobo regional vice president for SMG and general manager for the center.

Following the charity preview, Centerplate's preparation begins all over again, Hougard said, this time to accommodate the crowds attending public days. Last year, that was about 770,000 people. Options include the food court inside the ballroom, the Michigan Hall eatery or beer garden or lobby eateries: Eatsville USA and Go Natural, a fresh-made and natural food concept Centerplate is launching at Cobo before expanding it to other convention centers around the country.

During press days, every available space at Cobo is reserved to showcase automakers and suppliers. Relocating the media center to Michigan Hall this year freed up some hospitality space to help replace any lost to construction, Connors said.

Off-site catering companies and venues are also busy and benefiting from private party business.

MGM Grand Detroit Casino-Hotel on Saturday hosted The Gallery, a \$500-per ticket event showcasing luxury cars, with a strolling dinner prepared by celebrity Chef Wolfgang Puck and a fashion event.

The **Sheraton Novi Detroit** was scheduled to host an event for about 100 people for the China Council for Promotion of International Trade, Automotive Industry Committee Sunday afternoon.

Three nonprofits also plan to host afterglows at local venues Friday: **The Children's Center** at Ford Field at \$325 per ticket, **Children's Hospital of Michigan Foundation** at MGM Grand for \$150 per ticket, and **Junior Achievement of Southeastern Michigan** and **Alkebu-lan Village** at the Detroit Club for \$155 per person.

GM's Corvette brand (and its caterer Troy-based **Forte Belanger**) was preparing for large events centered on the launch of the 2014 Corvette C7. Forte Belanger last week was preparing beverages for 500 employees for a private event Sunday at Russell Industrial Center in Detroit, said President and CEO John Forte. It was preparing food and drinks for another 1,200 people expected for the unveiling that night.

For the third year running, **Lear Corp.** plans to host a private event before and after the charity preview for employees, customers and business associates at the Virgil H. Carr Cultural Center.

Forte Belanger has seen a 25 percent jump in its auto show-related business, said Forte. Forte said his company was also catering the Lear party, an event for **Mercedes-Benz**, *Autoweek's* annual design forum event, and others. A lot of Detroit restaurants also pick up, particularly with charity preview events. The **Rattlesnake Club**, for instance, said it had several private events on tap.

The week leading up to the public days of the show "is kind of like Mardi Gras," said Rod Alberts, executive director of the NAIAS and the **Detroit Auto Dealers Association**.

"You don't ever know all the events taking place around this."

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