

DENISE PORTILLO, M.A.

Hospitality & Food Service Expert Witness | Litigation Consulting

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EXPERT PROFILE

Hospitality and food service professional with 26 years of hands-on experience owning, operating, and leading restaurants, cafés, corporate catering, high-volume event food service, federally contracted food service, and commercial kitchen operations. Background includes food safety and sanitation, kitchen workflow, employee training and supervision, off-premise catering, operational controls, health-department compliance, and hospitality workforce practices. Le Cordon Bleu trained with a Master of Arts and Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, bringing an additional behavioral and human-factors perspective to questions involving training, supervision, procedural compliance, and workplace performance. Available to consult with plaintiff and defense counsel on matters within the scope of her education, training, and professional experience.

AREAS OF EXPERTISE

Food Service Operations & Standard of Care

- Restaurant, café, catering, hotel food-and-beverage, and commercial food service operations
- Commercial kitchen organization, workflow, staffing, station design, equipment use, and supervision practices
- Food handling, storage, temperature control, sanitation, cross-contamination prevention, and allergen controls
- Operational practices relating to burns, lacerations, lifting injuries, spills, floor conditions, cleaning protocols, and incident response
- Health-department requirements, inspection readiness, recordkeeping, and operational compliance

Training, Supervision & Human Factors

- Employee onboarding, kitchen training, food safety instruction, and supervisory practices
- Whether operational training and procedures are reasonably designed, communicated, reinforced, and followed
- Human factors affecting procedural compliance, performance drift, communication, and decision-making under operational pressure
- Span of control, staffing, scheduling, management oversight, and workplace performance in food service environments

Labor & Employment Practices in Food Service

- Industry custom and practice concerning duties of chefs, kitchen managers, supervisors, and food service employees
- Operational practices involving scheduling, timekeeping, breaks, off-the-clock work, tip/service-charge systems, training, discipline, and termination
- Workplace practices and management responsibilities in professional culinary and hospitality environments

Scope: Opinions address hospitality industry operations and customary practices; legal conclusions regarding statutory compliance are reserved for the court.

Catering & Off-Premise Food Service

- Off-site food transport, cold chain, holding temperatures, temporary kitchen setup, power/water needs, permitting, staffing, and service
- Large-scale catered events, corporate and government service, film and television production catering, and temporary food-service environments
- Operational scope, service-delivery practices, staffing, supervision, and food safety for catered events

Business Interruption & Restaurant Operational Disputes

- Operational impact of property loss, vandalism, forced closure, health permits, licensing, inspections, and restoration requirements
- Reasonableness of restaurant closure and reopening timelines from an operational perspective
- Restaurant premises, tenant improvements, kitchen build-out, operational readiness, ownership/partnership practices, inventory, and financial controls

Scope: Lost-profit quantification and accounting opinions are outside the scope of this CV; operational opinions may address the reasonableness and practical impact of interruption or restoration.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Founder / Hospitality Consultant — Portillo Hospitality Advisory

August 2026 – Present | Nevada & California

- Provides independent hospitality and food service consulting for attorneys evaluating restaurant, catering, commercial kitchen, food safety, training, supervision, and operational-practice issues.
- Available for case review, analysis, written expert opinions, deposition, and trial testimony when retained and when the matter falls within the scope of expertise.

Founder & Chief Executive Officer — Summa Holdings Inc.

January 2024 – Present

- Leads a portfolio of hospitality, workforce, education, and technology ventures, including EduPlate Tech, Fork'd Up, Hospitality Human Works, and Athena Chef Apparel.
- Develops operational systems, workforce solutions, educational resources, and the Psychology of the Plate framework integrating behavioral science with food, hospitality, and workforce behavior.

Owner / Executive Chef — Bella Corporate Catering

2005 – 2020 | Los Angeles, California

- Owned and operated a corporate and event catering company serving businesses, government agencies, film and television productions, and diplomatic clients.
- Directed menu development, temporary kitchen operations, food transport and cold chain, permitting, purchasing, staffing, supervision, food costing, and regulatory compliance.
- Produced events ranging from routine corporate service to large-scale functions of approximately 1,000–5,000 guests, including events at the Rose Bowl and East LA Meets Napa.

Food Stylist — Independent

2004 – Present | National

- Food styling for national brands, advertising, film and television, editorial, and packaging; clients have included Nestlé, Facebook, Absolut Vodka, and Silk.

Owner / Executive Chef — Forkin' Good Café

2012 – 2018 | California

- Owned and operated a farm-to-table café and catering division; managed kitchen operations, hiring, training, scheduling, purchasing, food costing, inventory, production, and health-department compliance.
- Sourced produce through local farmers markets and maintained in-house production standards, including daily bread production.

Food Service Specialist — U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement — Government Contract

March 2011 – September 2014

- Delivered federally contracted food service for approximately 125–600 individuals daily under structured food safety, sanitation, documentation, inventory, security, and dietary requirements.
- Maintained temperature controls, audit trails, controlled inventory, and religious/dietary accommodations in a high-accountability environment.

Project Director — La Cocina de Gloria Molina, LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes

May 2018 – May 2019 | Los Angeles, California

- Helped develop a teaching kitchen from an empty space, including commercial kitchen planning, permitting, code compliance, contractor coordination, sponsorships, donated materials/services, and event programming.
- Supported the operational and educational infrastructure for culinary and community programming within the museum.

Founder — Athena Chef Apparel

2018 – 2022

- Founded a professional chef apparel company; managed design, sourcing, manufacturing, distribution, and brand operations. Products were carried by Sysco.

Owner — Bella Café

2008 – 2011 | Los Angeles, California

- Owned and operated a full-service café, including kitchen operations, staffing, purchasing, costing, inventory, customer service, and health-department compliance.

Additional Hospitality & Wellness Operations — Ancient Yoga Studio; Herbal Apothecary; Vegan Market & Delicatessen

2017 – 2019

- Owned and operated complementary wellness and food retail concepts involving staffing, scheduling, product sourcing, menu development, food safety, regulatory compliance, and customer education.

SELECTED HOSPITALITY EXPERIENCE

- Health-and-wellness guest chef, Villa del Palmar Resorts, Los Cabos — multi-season residency
- Corporate, government, diplomatic, entertainment-production, and large-scale event food service
- Career Technical Education culinary instruction and curriculum development

- Commercial kitchen planning, permitting, build-out, operational readiness, and program launch

EDUCATION

- Master of Arts, Psychology — University of Arizona, 2023
- Bachelor of Arts, Psychology — University of Arizona, 2022
- Culinary Arts Diploma — Le Cordon Bleu, Pasadena, California, 2004

CERTIFICATIONS & CREDENTIALS

- Career Technical Education Teaching Credential — California Commission on Teacher Credentialing
- Certified ServSafe Instructor & Registered ServSafe Examination Proctor — National Restaurant Association
- ServSafe Food Protection Manager Certification — National Restaurant Association; ANSI-ANAB / Conference for Food Protection accredited
- Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) 40-Hour Training — Autism Partnership Foundation, 2025
- 300-Hour Yoga Teacher Training, Part 2 — Yoga Alliance curriculum, 2024
- CPR/AED Certified
- Reiki Practitioner

HONORS, MEDIA & INSTRUCTION

- Culinary Woman of the Year — National Latina Business Women's Association, 2014
- Media appearances include Food Network, CBS / The Talk, Bravo, KTLA, ABC7, and BESE
- How to Open and Operate a Business — six-part instructional course published on Udemy
- Author, Unbroken Roots (2023)

CASE ENGAGEMENT

Plaintiff and defense matters considered. Engagement begins with a conflict check and preliminary review to determine whether the issues fall within the scope of expertise. Current rate schedule and engagement terms are provided directly to retaining counsel upon request.