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<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/art-and-design/live-sushi-making-prawns-and-pav-powerhouse-museum-defends-christmas-party-20250224-p5leqa.html>

In print as: 'Museum defends Christmas party after 'exceptional' year''

Live sushi making, prawns and pav: Powerhouse museum defends Christmas party



By [Linda Morris](#)

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The Powerhouse museum and its chief executive funded a lavish end-of-year celebration for staff and stakeholders, during which a chef performatively carved sashimi from a one-metre-long tuna.

Chief executive officer Lisa Havilah defended the live tuna performance as a “special gift” from her to staff and stakeholders to mark a historic year in which the museum’s Ultimo campus was shuttered ahead of a \$300 million renovation, and its new storage centre opened.

Canapes, sliders, cheeses and an “abundance of large-sized poached prawns, market-best oysters and whole yellowfin tuna sliced in situ”, were served at the December 4 function.



Performative carve-up of a whole yellowfin tuna at Powerhouse Museum’s Christmas celebration. *CREDIT: INSTAGRAM*

Most of the evening's \$30,000 cost inclusive of GST was paid out of the museum's "self-funded revenues".

"After a big year, where both partners and staff had achieved exceptional outcomes, I wanted to do something special and contributed \$5000 to cover the costs of the fish performance element of the event," Havilah confirmed.

Details of the celebration are contained in documents recently released to the *Herald* under freedom of information laws.

Some 207 staff and guests accepted invitations to the three-hour event, titled *Celebrate 2024*, in a building next door to the Ultimo museum, according to the documents.

The museum was charged \$28,985 inclusive of GST for a three-course grazing menu, including floral table pieces, ice, wait staff, table hire and event production. The museum was invoiced for 192 people. But Havilah estimates 400 people showed up, giving a cost of \$56 per head, plus GST.

The Christmas menu comprised bite-sized canapes of Shokupan sandwiches, crisped flathead, and beef sliders with bacon, zucchini and gruyere cheese, according to the documents.



The giant pavlova served at the museum's Christmas party. *CREDIT: INSTAGRAM*

As well as the array of quality seafood was a giant pavlova, dressed in peaches, raspberries and raspberry ripple chantilly cream. Some 30 bottles of sparkling wine and 100 bottles of Grifter Ale and soft drinks were also purchased for the event for an additional cost of \$1030, with the rest of the drinks provided from sponsors' stocks.

The event was the second of two end-of-year functions held that same week. The night before the staff party, the museum hosted 40 trustees, donors and other VIPs with catering, drinks and staff by caterer John Wilson, costing \$11,457.

The museum was also billed for event styling and equipment hire but declined to detail those additional costs until it consulted “third parties”.

Disclosure of the museum’s party comes amid heightened focus on government spending and ministers defending their use of taxpayer-funded vehicles.

NSW Treasury is currently considering the museum’s funding pitch for fit-out and programming expenses for the \$915 million headquarters being built on the Parramatta riverside. Conditional approval of its Ultimo redevelopment is imminent.

The NSW government’s hospitality policy states that any staff gifts should assist with the organisation’s goals, should not be used merely for social occasions, be reasonable for the circumstances and publicly defensible.

It gives the example of modest refreshments such as sandwiches during an all-day training session as being appropriate, but not a three-course meal.

It does not explicitly outline guidelines for parties beyond saying any staff expenditure on hospitality such as Christmas celebrations should not personally benefit friends or family.

Department of Creative Industries and Tourism said the Powerhouse is governed by its own codes of conduct and gifts and benefits policy to which the museum insists it is compliant.

The gift of the live sashimi performance was the first of its kind the CEO had provided staff and stakeholders.

“This was done after a significant year where staff and stakeholders collaborated to achieve significant outcomes,” the museum said.

“This epic undertaking included; the entire Powerhouse Collection was decanted, and staff had worked on the temporary closure of Powerhouse Ultimo and the opening of Powerhouse Castle Hill. This was a unique moment in the institution’s history.”

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The invitation for “Christmas drinks” was circulated via an all-staff email. Caterer John Wilson, the museum’s part-time hospitality contractor until 2023 and a one-time restaurant co-owner at Carriageworks, invoiced his costs for the “staff and partners” event on November 23.

A week after the party, on December 12, Havilah confirmed to the museum’s finance department she would contribute to the sushi bill. The exact cost was redacted and has not been disclosed. The bill was paid by personal bank transfer on February 6.

Havilah’s predecessor, Dolla Merrillees, resigned in 2018 after it was revealed that the museum’s fundraising ball cost taxpayers more than \$200,000 but raised just \$70,000.

A spokesperson for Arts Minister John Graham declined to comment on the museum’s spending, but confirmed he had attended the VIP and donor event, accompanied by two staff.