



## Choosing your Caterer ... Considerations

II Gather, as a venue with an Open Vendor Policy creates a blank canvas to create something unique special for you and your guests. With open vendor policies, you can stick to your budget, save money and allocate funds for the things you want, allowing you with some wiggle room financially. There are some requirements, such as that the caterer has a license and insurance, but other than that the choice is up to you.

While it may seem a daunting task to choose a caterer, a little understanding, pre-planning and coordination with your venue will make your experience feel like an all-inclusive event, but even better!

Guests are attending your wedding to watch you marry the love of your life, but that doesn't mean they're not expecting a great meal, too. Gone are the days of standard wedding fare, with limited choices and bland offerings. But with so many creative caterers out there, how do you know who is best suited for your big day?

### Tips for Hiring a Wedding Caterer

#### **Booking early is important ... but don't jump the gun!**

If your wedding venue doesn't have in-house caterers or a list of preferred vendors, start the search by narrowing down a list of caterers you absolutely love. Once you settle on a few options, strike while the iron is hot and set up appointments.

Don't begin talking to caterers until you have a good idea of how many people you'll be inviting to the wedding. The number of guests is a key determining factor in your overall catering budget, so any conversations without this information will be very hypothetical and very unhelpful.

#### **Consider the logistics.**

According to *Alexis Berry*, General Manager for **Tom Douglas Catering** in Seattle, choosing a caterer in tandem with your venue can be a total game-changer. "Typically, couples will choose a venue, and then try to accommodate catering within that space," she said. "Think about your vision, work backward, and consider logistics. Working on the venue and catering needs at the same time will help to eliminate compromises later on." Because the venue and the caterer are two main party components, choosing them at the same time and making sure each vendor communicates is crucial.

#### **Know what your priorities are.**

What's most important to you? It doesn't matter if it's having a gourmet experience or having as many friends in attendance as possible-you just need to know the answer. As any bride in the thick of wedding planning can attest, it's hard to have it all. Knowing where you're comfortable cutting back will make comparing catering services that much easier.

## Establish your budget.

As you're thinking through catering options, come up with a comfortable budget from the get-go. "It's really important to know what kind of food you want, and a rough idea of your budget," says *Shawn Niles* of **Fat Pastor Productions**. "For us, we work to craft a meal that is very specific to the wants and needs of our clients. We don't have cookie-cutter menus, because we want our service to match the people we are serving. Without an idea of budget, we don't know whether to craft a menu for sandwiches or lobster."

## Don't Try to Skimp on Service

We're talking menus here, so it seems obvious that the most important factor is the food, right? Wrong. "In this order, the three things that are really key in choosing a caterer are service, food, and presentation," says Gage. "If you don't have good service, the rest doesn't matter because that's what people will remember."

## Do Trust Your Gut

This will be a relationship. You will have numerous meetings and communication, so make sure that you feel "connected" with your caterer. Did they respond quickly to your initial inquiry? Did they provide you with information and answers to your questions? Do you feel a personal connection? Talk easily? Feel understood? Feel like you are a priority?

Aside from the food itself, your budget, the presentation, and the team's service, there's one factor that can go an even longer way: your gut. Choose a caterer you enjoy working with, one who understands your vision and concerns, and is generally personable. You're inviting this person to be part of your big day! Make sure they're worthy of the honor.

## Come to your appointments prepared.

Once you've figured out a budget and a few caterers you're interested in, set up appointments for interviews, and see if you can do sampling at the same time. "Going into the first meeting with a clear idea of your vision, whether it's laid back and fun or formal, definitely helps," says *Diana Ceballos* of **Rise & Shine Catering** in L.A. "Walk us through what you want so we can see what can be done to meet you there."

# Questions to Ask Your Wedding Caterer

To be sure you're heading into that first meeting prepared, we've rounded up a list of questions to consider as you're finding the best wedding caterer for you!

## Venue & Availability

- Do you have our wedding date available?
- Do you have any other obligations that day?
- How will your staff balance multiple events that day (or weekend)?
- Have you ever catered at our venue before?
- Can you accomplish our vision at our venue?
- What are your specific needs to be able to cater at our venue?
- How much space will you need at the venue?

- How much time will you need for set-up and clean-up at our venue?

## **Food & Drink**

- Do you have a static menu, or can you do a custom menu?
- What are your most popular dishes?
- Do you charge a bulk fee or cost per person?
- What is the difference between a plated meal, buffet, family-style, etc.?
- Can you make kid's meals?
- Can you provide vendor meals?
- Can you take care of various allergy/dietary requests?
- Will food be made on-site or brought in?
- When will you need final menu choices?
- When will you need a final headcount?
- Where do you source your food from?
- Can/how will you handle last-minute requests?
- What are the portion sizes?
- What do you do with leftovers?
- Do you make wedding cakes as well?
- If not, will you provide cake cutting services?
- Do you offer other desserts?
- Can you provide bartending services?
- If so, will we need to provide alcohol, or can you?
- Are any non-alcoholic beverages included in the food costs?

## **Logistics & Details**

- Do you have the proper catering license requirements, as well as liability insurance?
- How many weddings have you done in the past?
- Do you have photos of past events and references from past clients?
- Do you provide linens, table settings, and accessories?
- What colors and style options do you have for linens, table settings, and accessories?
- If you don't provide linens, table settings, etc., will you handle coordinating the rental?
- Will your staff handle setting place cards and menus, if desired?
- What is your typical server to guest ratio?
- Will your servers be bussing the tables?
- Will your servers be offering water refills?
- Will we need any special event permits? Will you obtain those?
- Will there be an onsite coordinator day-of? Can we meet them ahead of time?
- Can you provide a copy of your standard contract?
- What is the amount of the deposit due to hold our date, and when will the remainder be due?
- What is your cancellation policy?
- Do you offer a payment plan?

