

BEFORE OR AFTER AN EVENT

YOUR FOOD EVENT: CATER IT

By Chuck Harris *Chuck's Catering and Special Events*

Catering! How fun is it to go to catered events, especially the big ones? Let me just say it's just as much fun putting them on! While it's not all free cake and ice cream, it's a huge rush of satisfaction feeding 600-plus people hot, timely food in an elegant or themed setting.

I am Chuck Harris, most know me as Chef Chuck, I have been cooking for the last 17 years starting at David's Upstairs. Since then, catering has always found its way into my life, from Super Bowl parties in college to present day and full-time catering for a living. In between college and now, I managed the Holiday Inn and Suites- Beaumont Plaza for four years, doing more than 400 weddings and every major fundraiser dinner known to Beaumont. Then I worked at L'Auberge du Lac, where I was responsible for a 600-item a la carte buffet, a banquet for 1,600 in the ballroom and 200-person event on the lawn, all in the same night. And that was just another day at the casino. I also worked at The Beaumont Country Club and the MCM Elegante Hotel. So, I know a little bit about catering, and let's just say, "I've seen it all." I especially know how to accommodate the masses for weddings and other big events and hope I can help you determine how to pick your next caterer.

Realize not all caterers are created equal. Some carve ice sculptures; some are comfortable with big numbers; some don't like to make desserts; some do great appetizers but not entrees, etc. However, for the money, usually a caterer will do whatever you want. The key is to match your preferences and budget with a caterer's abilities and specialties. For example, not many caterers can carve ice, but all caterers know who does. If you want an ice sculpture, chances are every caterer you talk to is going to say "okay" to your desire for a 3-foot heart on your buffet table. BUT if your caterer doesn't do the sculpture, he'll outsource it, and that will cost more money than hiring a caterer who can do such projects himself. This same scenario would be true of special foods or desserts. Know what type of food and specialty services you want and use the caterer who

has experience in that food, or find out what food the caterer you want specializes in, and serve his/her specialty.

The key to planning an event is to think of everything, I mean everything, you hope to have and discuss it with the caterer. Your caterer is not just a cook but a logistical choreographer who needs to understand your entire vision for the event from seating or buffet timing to presentation or cake eating, fireworks to night caps, first dances to skits. Whatever your big event "events" are, you should share them and choreograph them with your caterer.

Another determining factor for catering is venue. Many locations have on-site caterers. This may limit your choices of bringing in an outside catering. If that's the case, questions about wait staff, linens, menus, etc. will be discussed differently. However, if your venue allows for an outside caterer, you'll need to ask your prospective caterers about such things like: Do you have a wait staff? How long have you worked together? What is their level of skill? Keep in mind that for plated dinners, the ideal number of wait staff to guests is one for every 10 to 20 at most, for buffets, it's one for every 30 to 50. Ask your caterer if he/she provide plates, linens, silverware, etc. and if can you see the items to be used for your event in advance? Ask if your caterer serves alcohol if you want it? For liability reasons, some caterers don't serve it. Does the caterer have a menu? Will he/she make items off the menu?

If you want a caterer to make items off of his/her menu, you may want a tasting prior to the event. That's reasonable, just schedule this tasting during lunch or dinner and be prepared to pay for it.

Also ask a prospective caterer about his or her availability and plan well in advance. Ninety-five percent of all catering is needed on Saturday. Better check dates first and make sure of availability.

Talk price with your caterer. Food and labor are the main two variables determining total cost of an event. A lot of people think finger foods are cheaper because they're small pieces. Well, finger foods require a lot of labor to make, so that's not always the economical option. If you want to cut costs, consider rice or pasta-based dishes. Buffets are more economical than seated service because they require less labor.

Once you've chosen a caterer, sign a contract and put down money to secure your event. Most caterers want anywhere from a fourth to a half of the total. All costs should be in writing weeks before your event so you should know the cost. The only reason the cost could change is if you have a lot more people show up than you indicated/expected.

Plan to meet one to three times prior to the event. Besides booking the event, get together and talk about the details and what can happen, just a few weeks out. At this meeting, ask the caterer to walk you through the event. Discuss when he/she is going to get there; what's set up going to look like; how much food per person, dishes, napkins, drinks, clean up, etc. Explain your event one last time, and ask if they have any advice to further make the event successful. You don't have 300 people come to your house every day, but caterers have plenty of experience and, oftentimes, have ideas for making things better.