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Catering to the couple

BY AUTUMN RHEA CARPENTER

While love is the main ingredient served on the menu at a wedding, food and drink play important roles in ensuring a memorable event. Couples should consider how food influences their relationship and the type of cuisine that they would like to define their special day. Take the time to hire a caterer who meets your budget requirements, understands your vision, and offers choices. Gone are the days of limited selection and standardized menus. Today's couples are restricted only by their own imaginations.

"A wedding is an anxious period in a couple's lives because it is an event that permanently bonds two families," said Casey Taylor, catering and culinary consultant at Pascal's Catering. "It is our responsibility to make the day as relaxing as possible, keeping the traffic flowing and ensuring an environment that facilitates the exchange of ideas between both families."

Important Interview Questions

Asking friends, colleagues, and family members for caterer referrals is a good place to begin the process. Couples should also inquire with their reception

site's manager whether the facility offers specific caterers. Creating a list of interview questions will streamline the process and help couples determine which caterer best fits their goals. By calling potential caterers and asking their availability and general price range, a

rough list can start to develop. Prior to meeting the caterer, the couple should envision how they see their reception unfolding. By having ideas in place, the couple will be able to answer the caterer's questions and feel confident in their responses.

Can you provide a portfolio that depicts past work and former client contact information?

Taylor explains that a portfolio can quickly answer many unanswered questions. "Always request to see photos from past events, so that you have a visual image that accompanies their descriptions," he said. "This helps the couple to see the venues where the caterer has worked, their level of creativity and experience, and the different types of projects they have completed."

Do you have prior experience at our reception site or somewhere similar?

Is your staff experienced at the type of serving that we require?

The portfolio should answer many of these questions, as pictures speak volumes. Ask whether the caterer is comfortable with your service preference, including buffet, family-style, plated, or serving stations. If you are unsure the definition of each style, ask the caterer to describe each.

Given the style, time, and date of our wedding, can you suggest some menu items?



"The time of day and month of your wedding will play an important role in determining the menu," said Taylor. "If an outdoor Austin wedding is planned

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for July, I would definitely not recommend 32-ounce Porterhouse steaks and twice baked potatoes. It is our job to match the food and drinks with the event to create a general ambiance. Obviously for a summer Texas wedding, we would want to serve light, refreshing items that keep the guests comfortable."

What services do you offer and how are your prices structured? Can you provide a standard contract? Are linens, serving dishes, utensils, chairs, and other necessary items included in the package? Should we get everything in writing?

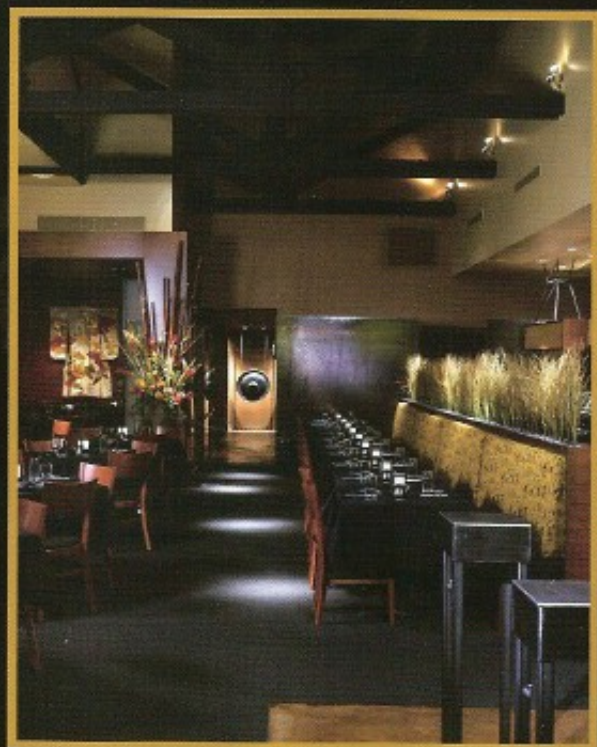
"It is paramount that we have strong communication from the beginning, in order to ensure that everyone under-

stands what is expected," said Leslie LaSorsa, The Catering Company's event coordinator and catering director. "We offer as much or as little service as is required," she said. "We can handle outdoor picnic affairs to plated, seated dinners. In order to avoid misunderstandings, I document each conversation and provide couples with the detailed logistics that would go into the event. I paint a picture so that we are all on the same page. Couples should request written documents from each vendor and should understand the fine print."

What service costs are included and what costs are additional? Are gratuities included? Is cake-cutting part of the package?

"At Pascal's Catering, we charge for food and beverages, rental supplies, service, and taxes," he said. "We never charge an automatic 17 percent gratuity, especially before we have even performed our job. We have functioned as caterers for 11 years and believe if we perform our job properly, we will be properly compensated. Couples should definitely ask for line item fees for each service, so sticker shock doesn't happen later."

Although many couples assign cake-cutting responsibilities to a willing friend, many caterers and event planners suggest hiring a professional. "I don't recommend asking a friend to perform this job, because it can be tedious and after the



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first few slices are cut, the fun wears off," said Michelle Hope Lawrence, wedding and event planner of Michelle Hope Weddings.

"Cake-cutting is part of our services," said Taylor. "We recently catered a wedding at the Wildflower Center where the

groom had a three dimensional University of Texas Bevo chocolate cake," he said. "Our professionals went in and cut the cake like a butcher. No one had to be concerned about our level of expertise and the cake was properly cut and enjoyed."

Cutting cakes is one of The Catering Company's complimentary services. "Cutting one of those multi-layered cakes is a class that people take at culinary school," said LaSorsa. "I recommend that a couple take advantage of every service their budget can afford. Cake cutting seems easy until the moment arrives."

Do you charge for beverage service?

If we want to provide our own wine, champagne, and liquor, do you charge a corkage fee? What are the licensing requirements?

Serving alcohol is serious business and requires a Texas Alcohol Beverage Commission (TABC) license. Although many venues allow guests to bring their own alcohol, a licensed bartender must serve it. Any catering company can provide the rules pertaining to the rules. Again, determining the caterer's fee structure will avoid miscommunication.

Does your company offer food tastings?

Some caterers will prepare private tastings while others offer samples at planned monthly events. Tasting the food is worth a thousand descriptions.

"Some caterers will prepare a tasting specifically for the couple with items on their personalized menu, whereas other caterers have a monthly tasting or tell clients to visit during a weekend where they are already planning to prepare items for a different wedding so that the couple can get an idea of food quality," said Christine Gerlach, event planner of Elite Weddings.

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What is your staff to guest ratio?

Are your staff members professionally trained?

Presentation is everything at a wedding and couples can be prepared by investigating the caterer's credentials. "It sounds basic, but find out the staff's experience level," said Taylor. "Will a bunch of high school students show up to serve the food and hang out with the band or will your guests be served by well-dressed professionals? Service is a key element is a catering company's reputation and should be researched."

Do you specialize in a specific cuisine?

Can you provide menu examples?

Gerlach explained that Austin is a Mecca for all kinds of food choices. "The sky is the limit for couples seeking caterers that serve different kinds of cuisines, including Asian, Italian, French, Kosher, Mediterranean, and Southwestern," she said. "Many of the coordinators in the area can help couples to locate a caterer who fits a couple's specific preferences."

Lawrence agreed. "Caterers in Austin are diverse," she said. "One caterer can be utilized for multiple events and change cuisine styles, theme, and food presentation for different events throughout the weekend or simply to provide a tray of food for an open house."

When should menu planning begin?

What issues should a couple consider during this process?

The menu should be finalized at least a month prior to the wedding, according to Lawrence. "This eliminates rush

charges and the caterer not being able to order specialty foods," she said. "One of the biggest learning curves for clients is that not everything makes for good banquet food. What works in small quantities may not be feasible for a group of 100 people. Also, the couple should ask the caterer their policy regarding menu changes."

Is packing a picnic basket standard procedure? How can this idea be personalized?

Packing food for the couple to enjoy after the reception is a good way to ensure that they are able to enjoy at least a sample of their hard work. "By the end of the wedding, the couple is usually

starving," said Taylor. "I have suggested, as one of their gifts, couples ask their friends to purchase a classic wicker picnic basket, complete with the plates, flatware, and necessary picnic items. It makes for a special present that can be used repeatedly. We can then pack the basket with food that is appropriate to save and place it in the limo for the couples to eat later."

Couple should ask many questions, collect referrals, and trust their instincts. Matching personalities, attitudes, and style is as important as culinary knowledge and experience. Consult with several caterers in order to make the best decision. ❦

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