

HOW TO CHOOSE THE *RIGHT* CATERER

Most people have never thought of entertaining on a grand scale, and the thought of providing food, alcohol, entertainment, etc. for a large number of people can be daunting for the uninitiated! When throwing a party, it should reflect your tastes, personality and sense of adventure, and selecting the appropriate caterer can make the entire process effortless. Tales of nightmarish events are plentiful, and you don't want yours to be remembered as one of them! But how do you decide which caterer is best for you?

RESEARCH!

When polled, event professionals agree: word of mouth is the best way in which to find your caterer of choice. When doing your initial fact-finding, ask friends or business associates whom they have used in the past. Large companies often have an in-house event planner who will be in the know. Ask your florist, DJ, or rental company for recommendations. Industry professionals tend to associate only with organizations who excel at what they do. Also, venues in your area are a great source of information. Call them and ask for their lists of approved caterers. When attending events, ask questions: Who is catering the event? How is the food? Are the service staff friendly and polite? Did you have to wait for service? Moreover, bend the ear of your hostess and inquire about the caterer's service during the planning process: Was the planning enjoyable? Was the consultant enthusiastic? Remember, the experience of a party is not simply how it appears at the actual event, the planning process should be enjoyable as well. Websites allow you to get a quick introduction and feel for the company, but be aware that the skills of the web-designer may actually enhance or mask the company's actual abilities. Finally, consistency is one of the cornerstones for your selection as it is your assurance that you will get the best service time after time!

The purpose of all this preliminary research is to narrow the field to those caterers you wish to interview for your event. Decide on a select few who seem to fit your needs. Asking for too many proposals creates an avalanche of unnecessary work for yourself!

CATERER STYLES

Understanding your caterer's area of specialty and his limits is paramount to ensuring a successful event. Caterer expertise can be divided into the following three categories:

Luncheon Caterer: Providing good, simple food, with a limited selection of cuisine.

Gourmet Caterer: Increased knowledge of food, more creative, able to provide cocktail, sit-down and buffet meals, somewhat limited in coordinating and providing related services such as consultations, rental equipment, wait-staff, etc.

Full service event caterer: Specialize in a vast array of foods and services, coordination, décor and can handle large number of patrons with ease.

By selecting the caterer in the right category for your event, you will ensure yourself a higher chance of success.

THE INITIAL CONTACT

Once you have decided upon the caterers you wish to interview, you should assemble some information: First, you should be able to communicate to your potential caterers your goals for the party. Are you celebrating a special occasion in a warm, intimate style? Do you want a funky, fun atmosphere? Are there important clients you would like to impress? Second, have some sort of a budget in mind before approaching your caterer. This is not easy to do, but developing a range is paramount. The cost of a reception varies wildly by caterer and type of event, but ultimately it is the size of the party, venue choice, type of food and service that will determine the price. Your catering consultant will discuss your budget with you and let you know if your expectations are realistic. A good caterer will make your money work for you. Third, be ready to answer some specific questions related to your proposed event. Your caterer will need some details so they can prepare an accurate proposal for you. Make sure that all potential caterers are given the same information so that you can compare equally. Questions they may ask you will include: What is the venue for your event? Is it an elegant black-tie affair or a fun filled birthday celebration? Is there equipment available for the caterer use at the venue (i.e. tables, chairs, kitchen amenities)? Will you require a tent? What kind of bar do you wish to have? Are there any guests with specific needs, allergies, or tastes? All these will affect your budget. Most caterers will (and should) provide you with a detailed proposal, which will outline the breakdown of services and clearly state all the costs. Be cautious of any caterer that asks to see another caterer's proposal or downgrades their competition. This indicates a company with very little confidence in their own abilities. Once you have the proposals, you can determine which organization has understood your ideas for your event. Remember that the initial proposal is simply a preliminary proposal, and may be altered in any way to suit your individual needs and budget.

YOUR CONSULTANT

Your entire experience should be a positive one, beginning with the first contact with your catering consultant. Are your ideas received with enthusiasm? Are they asking relevant questions? Do they provide alternative suggestions and ideas? Are they excited about your event? A lot of your time will be spent with your consultant, and you should feel at ease and most importantly, LISTENED TO for your ideas to be properly interpreted and to ensure a successful event. A consultant worth his or her salt will have a personal stake in the success of your event. You should have full confidence in their abilities.

THE INTERVIEW

At this stage of the game, you have probably gathered proposals from your chosen caterers. The next step is to meet with your consultant to get an up close and personal feel about their services. From the proposals, you will be better equipped to ask detailed questions. Don't be shy about asking for client references and request photos, if they have them. Always check with consumer advocacy groups such as the Better Business Bureau and Angie's List. Is your consultant confident, personable and enthusiastic about planning your party? Your meeting with them should be a positive one, if you leave feeling doubts or apprehension about the caterer, then keep looking.

THE TASTING

Caterers have mixed feelings about tastings. Some offer them, and some do not. A good caterer should offer a tasting free of charge. You should keep your decision-making team to a minimum. Make sure you receive the food items you want to have for your event so you can see the exact portion size and presentation you will be served. Some caterers will offer you "samplings" to try but very often will not be what is served at your event leading to disappointment.

Once you have met with the various caterers, you can make a confident decision about who will be best able to cater for you. Remember that catering is an art. Going to unknown venues, working in ill-equipped kitchens, being creative, dealing with weather conditions, etc., all of these factors requires good organization, skill and talent. Toss in time AND budget restraints... this will demand someone who has experience and knowledge, as well as a love of food and parties!

Once you have chosen your caterer, listen to their ideas. They have done this before and can offer beneficial advice on creating a successful party. They are professionals who take the "Art of Partying" seriously. Finally, execution of a catered event does not rest solely upon the quality of the food served. It is the successful fusion of planning, service and food.