

Questions to Ask When Hiring Your Caterer



Besides your location, the food and drink for your wedding bash will probably consume the largest portion of your wedding budget. Catering costs are usually presented as “per-person” charges, sometimes abbreviated in wedding brochures as “pp” after the amount. But be aware—the per-person charge often doesn’t include everything: Tax and gratuities (sometimes called “service charge”) might be extra, and there may also be separate per-person charges for the meal, drinks, hors d’oeuvres, and even setup. So your actual per-person charge might end up being considerably more than you expect. Bring your calculator along when meeting with potential caterers to help you arrive at the real bottom line.

There’s more to consider. Nowadays, many caterers offer a range of services in addition to catering. Some are actual “event producers,” providing props, special effects, décor—in other words, complete event design. They might also be able to assist in finding a location, coordinating your affair, or lining up vendors. One thing a caterer can’t do, however, is cook up a 5-course Beef Wellington dinner for \$20 per person. When planning your menu, be realistic about what you can serve given your budget and the size of your guest list.

A lot of factors come into play when selecting a caterer, so don’t be afraid to ask as many questions as you need to. You can refer to the following list, whether your potential caterer works at your event facility or you’re hiring them independently.

The Basics

1. Do you have my date open?
2. How many weddings do you do per year, and how long have you been in business?
3. Have you done events at my location? *TIP: If you haven’t chosen your location yet, ask the caterer if they can help you select one.*
4. Are you licensed by the state of California? Are you licensed to serve alcohol?
5. Will I need any permits for my event? If so, will you handle obtaining them?
6. Will you provide a banquet manager to coordinate the meal service or an on-site coordinator who will run the entire event?
7. Can you assist with other aspects of the wedding like selecting other vendors, event design (e.g. specialty lighting, elaborate décor, theme events, etc.)?
8. Do we have to work off a preset menu or can you create a custom menu for our event? If I have a special dish I’d like served, would you accommodate that?
9. Do you offer event packages or is everything à la carte? What exactly do your packages include?
10. Do you use all fresh produce, meat, fish, etc.? Can you source organic or sustainably farmed ingredients?
11. Can you accommodate dietary restrictions, such as kosher, vegan, etc.?
12. What décor do you provide for appetizer stations or buffet tables?
13. Do you offer package upgrades such as chocolate fountains, ice sculptures, cappuccino machines or specialty displays?
14. Can you do theme menus (e.g. barbecue, luau, etc.)? Would you also provide the décor?
15. What is the price difference between a buffet and a sit-down meal? *NOTE: Don’t automatically assume that a buffet is going to be the less expensive option. Ask your caterer which type of service is more affordable for you, given the menu you’re planning.*

Food & Presentation

8. Given my budget, guest count and event style, what food choices would you recommend? Do you specialize in certain cuisines?

17. How much do you charge for children's meals?
18. How much do you charge for vendor meals?
19. Do you do wedding cakes? If so, is this included in the per-person meal price or is it extra?
20. Can you show me photos of cakes you've done in the past?
21. If I decide not to serve cake, can you provide a dessert display instead?
22. If we use an outside cake designer, do you charge a cake-cutting fee?
23. Do you do food tastings and is there an extra charge for this?
24. Do you handle rental equipment such as tables, chairs, etc.?
25. What types of linens, glassware, plates and flatware do you provide? *NOTE: Some low-budget caterers have basic packages that use disposable dinnerware instead of the real thing, so make sure you know exactly what you'll be getting.*
26. Can you provide presentation upgrades such as chair covers, lounge furniture, Chiavari chairs, etc.? What would be the additional fees?
27. What is your policy on cleanup? *TIP: Be very clear about what "cleanup" means and who's responsible for handling it—and be sure to get it in writing. We've heard many tales about caterers that left dirty dishes, trash and uneaten food behind. In most cases, when you rent a location it will be YOUR responsibility to leave the place in acceptable condition. You want to spend your wedding night with your honey, not picking up empty bottles from the lawn!*
28. If there is leftover food from my event, can we have it wrapped up for guests to take home or have it delivered to a local shelter?
33. How do you charge for alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages? Per consumption or per person? Which is more cost-effective?
34. Is the champagne toast after the ceremony included in your meal packages or is it extra?
35. Will your staff serve the wine with dinner?
36. How long will alcohol be served?
37. Is coffee and tea service included with the per-person meal charge? What brands of each do you offer and do they include decaf and herbal tea options?

Business Matters

38. What is the ratio of servers to guests?
39. How will the servers be dressed?
40. How is your pricing broken down (food, bar, cake-cutting, tax, gratuity)? *NOTE: Usually tax and a service charge are tacked on to your final cost. The service charge, which can range 18-23%, is used to tip the staff. And in many states, the service charge itself is taxable.*
41. How much time do you require for setting up and breaking down my event, and are there extra fees for this?
42. If my event runs longer than contracted, what are your overtime fees?
43. What is the last date by which I can give you a final guaranteed guest count?
44. What is your payment policy? Do you accept credit cards?
45. How much of a deposit is required to hold my date? When is the final payment due?
46. Are there any fees that won't be included in the proposal that we should be aware of?
47. Once we book with you, how quickly can we expect a contract? And if we make changes to menu choices or other items, will you update us with a revised estimate and contract?
48. What is your refund or cancellation policy?
49. Can you provide a list of recent references?

Drink

29. Do you provide alcoholic beverages and bartenders? Can you accommodate specialty cocktails?
30. What brands of alcohol will be served?
31. Can we provide the alcohol and you provide the bar labor?
32. Do you charge a corkage fee if we provide our own wine or champagne?