

## Choosing an Off-Premise Caterer

*(Article for Premier Bride Magazine, Winter Issue, 2007 by Rebecca N. Watts, Small Potatoes Catering)*

**Congratulations on your engagement!** You're entering a whirlwind of activities, decision making, and organization for the big event. Your wedding will be a reflection of your personal preferences as you choose the wedding dress, the florals, photography, and venue.

Perhaps you're considering a wedding and reception at a venue other than a hotel or country club. You may have a home wedding in mind, or a garden wedding overlooking a reflecting pool, a wedding ceremony in a quaint historical chapel, or in a privately owned reception facility.

If you decide to choose a wedding and reception along these lines, **now is the time to consider booking a caterer who specializes in off-premise catering.**

**Where do you begin? How do you find a caterer offering this service?**

Many brides will go directly to the computer to begin their search. Narrow the field by entering the locality of your chosen site and the type of catering. Would you enjoy a casual atmosphere with fun food such as BBQ or Mexican? Or maybe you prefer elegant Hors D'oeuvres, a beautiful buffet, or a formal dinner with tuxedo dressed waiters serving your guests. Find the catering websites that interest you. Many caterers will have contact forms for you to enter your information and submit. A good caterer will follow up with you promptly!

Other areas to explore are magazines and special wedding publications such as *Premier Bride*. Some caterers will be present at Bridal Shows with samples and photos. Make a reservation and attend a special wedding and event shows like *Reel Wedding Review*. But perhaps the best and easiest route is to get recommendations from friends, family, and other wedding professionals. Their personal experience can be an invaluable resource for you. Not only have they met the caterer personally, they will have first hand knowledge of the set up, the presentation and quality of the food, and the professionalism of the wait staff.

**What else is important when choosing your caterer?** A professional caterer will provide credentials. The catering kitchen should be registered with the Health Department and have an Inspection Form posted publicly to insure safe food preparation, handling, and serving. The caterer should have a Retail Food License and be trained in Food Management. Certification and training with the Texas Alcohol and Beverage Commission is essential if alcoholic beverages will be served. Ask to see proof of Liability Insurance. Ask about professional training and experience in food service, length of time in the business, and most importantly, professional and client references.

*Professional references* will include wedding and event coordinators and venue managers. Some venues will have a Preferred Caterer list. These are caterers who have proved themselves responsible and professional in working with the event venue. Questions to ask: Did the caterer arrive in a timely manner? Was the food delivered and handled in professional food safe containers with regulated heating or cooling units for holding? Did the wait staff and food prep helpers act in a courteous responsible manner? Was the number of wait staff servers sufficient for the number of guests to be served in a timely manner? Did the caterers leave the kitchen and dining area clean?

Continued to page 2

A good caterer will be happy to provide *client references*. Ask for several recent clients, particularly clients who have hired the caterer for a wedding reception or other wedding related events such as showers, wedding brunches, or rehearsal dinners. Questions to ask: Did the caterer arrive early enough to set up properly, or did they arrive at the last minute and create a less than perfect presentation? Did they deliver the *quality that was promised*? Was the wait staff courteous and professional? Did the caterer leave the kitchen and dining area clean? *And, of course, ask about the food! Was it attractively presented and delicious? Were "hot foods" served hot, and "cold foods" served cold? Were trays and chafer pans replenished with food items as needed to keep hungry guests happy?*

**Caterers are often asked about "tastings"**. Some companies will offer a tasting at no charge. Others will offer tastings for a fee that can be credited back to you if you book with that company. *Many caterers will provide references from satisfied clients instead of providing a tasting.* Why? Tastings can be expensive. Most caterers are preparing custom menus with freshly prepared food for your event and do not keep prepared food in quantities such as a restaurant kitchen is able to provide. Normally, a full day's labor is required to shop, prep, and prepare for a tasting. Ask what the policy is for the company you are considering.

Choosing the caterer for your special day doesn't have to be difficult. Follow the guidelines above. Meet with the caterer personally. You will be offered a menu to make your selections and pricing and payment options will be discussed. *It is most helpful to the caterer if you discuss your catering budget allowance early in the conversation.* You will be given a contract. Please read it carefully before signing and ask questions about any concerns. Note the cancellation policy in case of an unforeseen circumstance.

*You can do this!* You're on the way to creating the wedding of your dreams. Enjoy the process! Let a professional off-premise caterer help make your special day a joyful, stress free occasion.

***Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be...***

***Robert Browning***