

Event catering A to Z



Planning an event?

Catering an event can be daunting.

After all, people really care about food.

Organising a conference can mean taking responsibility for two or three meals a day for hundreds of attendees – who'll be quick to let you know if it isn't up to scratch. Even if you're planning a smaller, one-off event, the expectations are high.

And it's not just the food. It won't matter how delicious your canapés are if you haven't booked anyone to clear up the rubbish at the end. Practical details like choosing an appropriate space, or meeting deadlines for final numbers need as much care and attention as menu selection.

Feel confident about your event catering with this handy guide. It takes you through every aspect of event catering from A to Z, so you'll never forget the finer details that can make all the difference.

A

Alcohol

If you're serving alcohol at your event, it's helpful to have a clear idea of the maximum number of glasses per person you plan to provide. As a rule, a standard 75cl bottle of wine will yield five glasses. Sparkling wine and Champagne will yield seven glasses per bottle.

For most party-style events, it's typical to provide three glasses of wine per guest. For an all-day event or a wedding, it can be more realistic to plan for one glass per guest per hour during service.

Soft drinks and water are essentials, even if you're planning a boozy evening. Be aware that as the planner, you're responsible for your guests' behaviour, including any damage they cause – so liaise with staff beforehand to make sure they'll let you know if anyone's enjoying themselves a little too much.

B

Buffets

A buffet-style lunch is ideal for workplace events and conferences. It allows an easy flow of conversation, and attendees can enjoy a wide variety of foods. It also makes your life easier, as with a few thoughtful decisions, you can make a good meal available to everyone without having to demand their menu choices in advance. Just make sure all food is clearly labelled with ingredients and allergens.

There are a few key points to bear in mind when you serve a buffet. Finger foods are ideal; crudités like carrot sticks and cherry tomatoes are easy to eat, with no chasing salad leaves with your fork. That doesn't limit you to heavy pastry and traditional sandwiches, either; tortilla wraps, Indian snacks like pakoras and samosas, falafels and hummus or Greek-style vine leaves are all great alternatives.

C

Canapés

A drinks reception can really be lifted by well-chosen canapés. All you need to do is order the right ones, in the right quantities.

Good canapes do not make a mess, and can be eaten in one bite. Avoid ‘surprises’ like savoury bites disguised as sweets, or bonbons with an ice-cream centre; your guest wants something tasty, not a shock. If you choose to serve spoons or other plated items, be sure staff are available to collect them afterwards; a reception filled with guests clutching empty canapé spoons quickly feels awkward.

For a one-hour event, order four to six canapés per person; four should do nicely if the reception is directly before a three-course meal. For longer events, use the same rule of thumb for the first hour, and a further two to four pieces for each additional hour. If you’re serving both sweet and savoury, you’ll want a ratio of around 4:1 savoury to sweet.

D

Dietary requirements

Every caterer’s worst nightmare is getting this wrong. Don’t view the range of special diets you should prepare for as a problem: it’s an opportunity to be really creative with your menu choices.

Remember, vegan food is also Halal, and will often be gluten free too, as well as keeping your vegetarians happy. A buffet that centres on these foods makes no one feel like an afterthought. If you’re creating a banqueting menu, save yourself from ordering multiple alternative one-off dishes by making one Halal and free from dairy, egg, nuts and gluten-containing ingredients.

Some allergens are less well-known than others. Mustard, celery, sesame, soybeans and many more are also on the list of named allergens. Not all dietary needs come with a neat label, so if you’re asking guests for details, be sure to keep the response field open for them to reply fully.

E

Ethical catering

It might not be your #1 concern, but choosing an environmentally-friendly caterer with a sustainability policy is good business. Guests increasingly care about the origin of their food.

If you're running a conference, you may have an overall sustainability policy in place. Food is typically a major contributor to the waste footprint of a conference. Counter that by choosing caterers that use local suppliers, cutting down your food miles and supporting local producers. Ask for evidence: Fair Trade status for coffee, the Good Egg award and Red Tractor-certified meat are all big positives. When it comes to service, reusable crockery and cutlery is always preferable to single-use.

F

Fine dining

For some events, only a grand gathering over an impressive three-course meal will do. Whether it's a special occasion or a gala dinner to close a conference, nothing brings a sense of drama quite like delicious food served to you in style.

For a traditional feel, a simple elegant menu, white linens and unobtrusive but attentive staff will be all you need. But don't feel constrained by convention.

G

Guest numbers

Pinning down the numbers early in the process is an essential. For some events, your venue choice will be completely dictated by your head count; it's no use holding a banquet for 400 in a room with capacity for half that – and the opposite is also far from ideal.

If it's a ticketed event or a conference, set a realistically ambitious target and pursue it, with early bird discounts and other low-impact incentives. If you have a long lead time and budget allows, you can always scale up. For smaller and one-off by-invitation events, set a cap. Remember your caterers need time to order in fresh produce and special ingredients; they'll also need to book the right level of staffing. And you need to know what your per-head budget looks like.

In short: pin the numbers down as early as you can.

H

Healthy choices

Eating healthily isn't the province of fussy diners and yoga bunnies. Most adults are aware of the kinds of food they should eat more of, and will choose something tasty and nutritious over a stodgy treat whenever possible.

This is especially the case when you work away from home, and are reliant on hotel breakfasts, restaurant food, take-aways and pre-packed sandwiches for a lot of your meals. A residential conference should feel much more like eating at home than life on the road. A full English might be a treat once in a while, but make sure breakfast includes fresh fruit and cereals, especially if the event carries over several days. Include plenty of freshly-cooked vegetables in your menus, without rich sauces and butters. While fine dining comes with an expectation of rich, high-fat foods, a good menu includes a variety of calorie count as well as taste. Fish, rice noodles, pulses and grains can provide great nutritious lighter options that will particularly please millennials.

Intimate dining

Table for two? Intimate dining isn't only for couples; a dinner can have an intimate feel with eight or twelve around the table, with the right ambiance.

With a smaller group, you have the opportunity to really personalise the catering. Choose sharing dishes for the centre of the table; it feels more relaxed than having food served to you. Add atmosphere with candles and silverware.

J

Just for fun

Catered events don't have to be serious. Why not turn a grand dinner into a live spectacle, and make the cooking part of the drama? Carving stations at the table, or crêpes Suzette flamed live in front of your guests always make an impact.

In the last five years, wedding catering has often been accompanied by whimsical extra touches: an old-fashioned sweet stall, or an ice-cream kiosk. These quirky extra touches work just as well at other events, especially if tied in with decorative theming. Why not have a popcorn stand at a movie-themed event, or candyfloss for a circus or fairground feel?

K

Kids

Conference organisers don't generally need to worry about younger attendees, but for many other events they can add a challenge.

Your caterer will be able to advise on the best option for children, whether that's a smaller portion or a special children's menu. You should negotiate a lower price too, of course.

L

Look and feel

Staging matters. From dramatic table decorations, flowers and centrepieces to creative lighting and sound effects, a big event can wow your guests before they've eaten a bite.

It's important to match your catering to the look and feel you're working hard to create. An elegant historic building will feel at odds with a low-key menu of sliders and chips. A relaxed summery garden party doesn't suit steak followed by sticky toffee pudding with custard.

When you meet with your caterer, pick out three words that sum up your event's look and feel: stylish, formal, hi-tech; high-end, dramatic, elegant; fresh, bright, simple. It will help them to produce a menu that matches up.

M

Mingling

At conferences and work events, food is an opportunity to meet and talk.

Help your attendees by making the catering support comfortable chat and ease of movement. Buffet tables should have plenty of space and variety, to avoid everyone clumping around one small area. It's a challenge to hold a plate, fork and cup or glass at the same time: consider finger foods, and buffet plates with a handy 'nook' to rest your wine glass. Although you want flow, some people will prefer to sit down to eat, so make sure you've provided tables and chairs too.

N

Night

Evening events have a few special considerations to bear in mind.

What's your finish time? Give guests a clear time for 'carriages' and, if appropriate, order some taxis to help move lingerers on. It's a good idea to close the bar at least 30 minutes before this time, so brief staff, and ensure any bottles left on tables for guests to share are removed by this time.

Be sure to discuss your finish time with your caterers, servers and bar staff; these may be provided by the venue or by your caterer. Make sure you know what the extra costs will be for staff overtime; if it's not within your budget, be strict!

O

Outdoor events

Al fresco catering can be a real treat, especially in summer.

It can also be a challenge for caterers, who need to find a suitable place to set up close to power sources, water and a kitchen (or a private area big enough to bring their own equipment). If the cooking can take place inside, think carefully about the distance between the food prep and food service areas; however much you might dream of a meal under the stars on a beach, it'll be a let-down if the food's stone cold and the staff exhausted after dragging it for a mile.

Your caterer will know all this; just make sure there's close communication between them and the venue.

P

Plant-based

One of the buzzwords of this year, 'plant-based' foods are more commonly called vegan. Vegan food is often described as what it's not: no eggs, no dairy, no animal products. Plant-based puts the positives back on the map, by focusing on freshly-prepared foods without processing, bleaching or adding sugars as well as avoiding animal products. These are nutritious, healthy options with varied ingredients.

The rise of plant-based diets has brought a host of new flavours to the catering spotlight. Jackfruit, which has a similar texture to pulled pork, is a great alternative to meaty burgers and tacos. Kimchi, a Korean fermented vegetable dish, packs a real flavour punch.

Q

Questions

The only daft question is the one you didn't ask.

Your catering team are the experts, and they'll be happy to share that expertise with you. If you're not sure you're ordering the right number of canapés, or whether to bother with three desserts, ask away.

R

Relaxed catering

In recent years, there's been a strong shift away from formal dining to more relaxed eating experiences.

Whether it's the opening meal for a conference or a workplace celebration, a casual approach puts guests at ease, lowers stresses about dress codes, and includes everyone. Relaxed catering includes barbecues – ideal for summer events – and, increasingly, street food of the kind you'll see at urban festivals. International flavours, variety and plant-based foods are the big hitters. Many catering suppliers are adding these options to their service. If not, ask your venue or look for local options; they're often small independent traders who'll be keen to give you a good deal.

S

Seating plans

If your event is formal, you'll need a seating plan. It can be daunting to arrange hundreds of guests, but there are easy, well-integrated apps designed exactly for this task.

Social Tables offers drag and drop visual planning, and data-based seating so you're giving priority to your VIPs automatically. It also offers a cloud-based chart, meaning guests can view on their phones where they'll be sitting. For a free basic alternative, Clickschool's Seat Plan Generator will work directly with your Excel spreadsheet.

If you're looking for an impressive printed seating chart to display and don't have a design team to back you up, try Canva. Their ready-made templates look professional, and are easily customised.

T

Timetable

Every event planner needs one of these.

View it as a calendar of deadlines: the key dates by which essential decisions must be in place. Your caterer will have lead time requirements for produce, staff and guest numbers; ones that can't be changed. Give yourself five extra working days on top of their deadlines, to give you space to chase up late details. Your caterer will appreciate it.

U

Unique people

Every guest is different. Some of your attendees will have additional requirements that impact on your catering decisions – and you should always make the effort to be as inclusive as possible, not just when you know you need to.

For people who can't stand for long periods, use walking aids or wheelchairs, or have issues with grip, lining up at the buffet table can mean misery. They're also a challenge for those with sight problems. Make sure staff are briefed to respond with a polite offer of help, or an explanation of what's on offer. Provide a few ready-plated lunches. Always provide seating at a table for some attendees, even when serving a buffet.

V

Venue choice

This is absolutely crucial to catering success.

Whether you're planning a barbecue or a banquet, your caterers need to have the right equipment and setting to create high-quality food. Even if your venue has a preferred or in-house catering supplier, it's still essential to check that they can deliver what you're hoping for in the space you've chosen. Many caterers are able to provide piping hot food from portable kitchens – but if they need to reach upper floors, confirm that lifts are big enough to manage the equipment involved.

W

Wastage

Every catered event will experience some food wastage. Try to minimise it, by taking advice from your caterer. If you can, use a catering team who have a sustainability policy which includes recycling food waste, or taking it to a local shelter. You can work with your venue, too, to make sure everything's disposed of appropriately.

Single-use plastics also contribute to your event footprint. Ask your caterer to supply a water cooler or jugs with glasses, instead of relying on bottles. Ask for reusable platters and plates too.

X

eXtras

When it comes to making your guests feel special, sometimes the small things make a big difference.

A keepsake at the end of the meal, like a mini box of chocolates or a slice of cake, ensures everyone leaves feeling upbeat. Extras at breakfast and coffee breaks can add a lot to the experience, too. Warm fresh pastries, or a plate of biscuits fresh from the oven, are a lot more appealing than something wrapped in plastic with a 3-month shelf life.

However, don't be tempted to blow the budget or cut corners elsewhere on these kinds of extras. A fantastic main meal matters much more.

Y

You

It's important to keep your personal tastes in check when you're planning catering for an event. Let's say your caterer offers a liquorice ice-cream parfait for dessert, and you love liquorice. Is this a party just for you? Great, go for it. If you're pleasing an audience of 500, or even 10, be cautious.

Listen to your caterer's experience about what makes a crowd pleaser.

Z

Zero stress

Large or small, event planning is stressful. Hiring a caterer means making a lot of decisions – but all with support, from people who do this every day.

If you have the option, choose a venue with catering services in-house. It'll save you a huge amount of time liaising between the two. You'll be using a team that's familiar with the setting, and already know what works well in that space. It also keeps your budgeting simple, by combining everything under one invoice.

Organising an event?

Good news: all the expertise you've read about here can be yours, when you book with University of Birmingham | Conferences & events.

Every venue uses in-house catering, so you never need to waste time searching for the right caterer. Share your event vision with the experienced chefs here; they'll help you find the perfect menu from our range, or come up with something bespoke just for you. Then relax and enjoy the event with your guests.

Curious? Get in touch today.

conferencesandevents@contacts.bham.ac.uk

conferences.bham.ac.uk

+44 (0)121 415 8400