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**Presents**

**ADVICE FROM AN AWARD WINNING WEDDING CATERER**

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Your wedding caterer will do far more than just prepare your wedding menu. Not only to help coordinate the wedding reception timeline and the flow of the dinner but, in many cases, supply the tableware rentals, stock the bar and bake the wedding cake (no pressure!). So how do you narrow down your list of caterers and once you do, what questions should you ask your wedding caterer?

**Does the caterer have a license?**

Why you want to know: This means the caterer has met local health department standards (always good!) and carries liability insurance. Make sure the caterer also has a liquor license if you're going to be serving alcohol.

**Does the caterer have liquor liability insurance** (if they're providing alcohol)?

Why you want to know: Anyone serving alcohol needs to have this type of insurance, including a wedding caterer. If your wedding guests leave your party after taking advantage of the open bar and injure themselves, a third party or damage property, you could be held responsible. Liquor liability insurance will minimize how much you'll have to pay if something goes wrong.

**Can the caterer provide references from previous clients?**

Why you want to know: References can tell you what you may not find out just by talking to the caterer, including what it's like to work with this company or individual. Get at least two references who had a similar number of wedding guests and reception menu style.

**Is the caterer working any other weddings or events on the same weekend or same day?**

Why you want to know: Sometimes, caterers will stack two or more events onto the same day or weekend. This doesn't have to be a deal breaker by any means, but you want to be sure that if the caterer does have other events, your wedding will get the staff and attention it deserves.

**Does the caterer specialize in certain types of food, such as organic, locally sourced, ethnic or gluten-free? Does the caterer work with fresh, not frozen, food?**

Why you want to know: If you have a particular type of cuisine in mind, use a caterer who specializes in it. Not only will they have all the right resources but the caterer will also know how to properly prepare the food, meaning better and tastier results. Let's face it, asking a sushi chef to create country-French cooking probably isn't going to end well.

**Does the catered meal come full service?**

Why you want to know: This just means that the caterer, in addition to food preparation, will handle everything from the table settings to bar service and cleanup. What's included depends on the catering company and the packages they offer. If it isn't full service, you'll have to find (and pay) additional staff.

**What's the average price range and does the caterer offer packages?**

Why you want to know: A good chunk of your budget will go to catering, so take some time to carefully weigh your options when choosing a caterer. How many appetizer and entrée choices come with the package? Are costs itemized depending on the foods you choose or does the caterer offer an all-inclusive rate? Packages can save you some serious money, especially if you plan on having a lengthy guest list. Most catering packages include appetizers, salad, entrée and dessert (or cake), plus coffee service and, in some cases, wine. If your caterer does offer multiple packages, ask for sample menus to determine which one works best for you.

**When does the caterer need finalized choices?**

Why you want to know: Your caterer needs to know your menu choices by a certain date so they'll have all the ingredients ready to go for the day of your wedding. Decide on your RSVP date based on when your caterer needs a final head count.

**Is the caterer able to prepare vegetarian, gluten-free, kosher or halal meals for a few guests, and is there an additional fee?**

Why you want to know: A caterer may be willing to work with special dietary restrictions, but it could mean additional costs. If offering a special meal to certain family and friends is important to you, but the caterer's fees are hefty, you might have to find room from elsewhere in your budget or look for another caterer.

Will the caterer make special meals for children and other wedding pros, and what does the caterer charge for each?

Why you want to know: You will need to feed some of your wedding pros who'll be there at your reception, like your photographer, wedding planner and your DJ (as well as their assistants). If you're hosting a child-friendly reception, plan for those too. Depending on the caterer, some could charge you half of the normal guest meal cost while others could have you paying full price.

When will the tasting take place? Does the caterer offer tastings before being hired?

Why you want to know: Reading reviews of a wedding caterer is one thing, but you'll need to taste the food yourself to be sure. Definitely opt to do it beforehand if possible—it will allow you to make an informed decision and prevent you from getting locked in with a second-rate caterer.

Does the caterer provide wedding cakes as well and, if so, is it included?

Why you want to know: Some wedding caterers can produce a fabulous confection, but other caterers don't specialize in wedding cake baking. Ask to see past examples of the caterer's work to get an idea of their cake-baking skills. If you're less than impressed, you might want to hire a separate wedding cake baker.

**Will the caterer provide tables, chairs, plates, napkins, silverware, and salt and pepper shakers? Are they extra?**

Why you want to know: If a caterer doesn't outfit their events with these necessary items and your wedding venue doesn't have them on hand either, you'll have to rent them yourself—which can quickly add up. Even if a caterer does have them, ask to see them to make sure they're up to par.

**Will the caterer provide a waitstaff? How many are included in the package and what's the fee for additional waiters?**

Why you want to know: Top caterers say they always use their own serving personnel, even if the wedding venue's staff is available. They know the ins and outs of how the company operates, so they're better able to provide seamless service. You'll want about three waiters for every six tables for a sit-down meal.

**What will the caterer and their staff wear?**

Why you want to know: You want to make sure the catering staff dresses appropriately for the tone and style of your wedding. If you're planning a formal black-tie wedding, you might not want waiters in polo shirts.

**Does the caterer provide a bar, and what sorts of packages do they offer? How do you charge (by consumption or per person)?**

Why you want to know: The bar can be a big cost so give it some extra attention. There are usually two ways caterers (or wedding venues) charge for bars: either by set fee per person or by the amount of alcohol consumed. If they go with the latter method, at the end of the party, your bartender will count all the used and partially used bottles of wine and beer (and sometimes by the glass for mixed drinks) and ring up your bill.

Will the caterer provide alcohol or do you need to handle the bar separately? Can you provide your own alcohol and does the caterer charge a fee for that?

Why you want to know: Most catering companies provide the bar and alcohol, but supplying it yourself can save you money. If you want to take the latter route, check with the caterer or wedding venue first—they might charge a corkage fee for every bottle opened, which could slash any savings.

**How many bartenders are included in the caterer's package? What's the caterer's fee to hire extra?**

Why you want to know: Ideally, you should have four cocktail waiters for every 100 wedding guests and one bartender for every 50 wedding guests to make sure your guests aren't hanging around with empty glasses. Additional staff will cost extra so factor in that cost.

**How do delivery, setup and breakdown work and is there an additional fee? How much time will the caterer need to set up? When will the caterer need access to the wedding site?**

Why you want to know: You need these details in order to coordinate with your wedding venue and determine a time when your caterer can start setting up. You also need to know how much time the caterer needs for cleanup, because some venues may have a restriction on how late staff can stay. Not all companies will include setup and breakdown in their pricing, meaning you'll have to pay the wedding venue or caterer extra or hire outside help to do it for you.

**Where will the caterer prepare the food? Are there on-site facilities or will the caterer need to make additional arrangements with the wedding venue?**

Why you want to know: If the caterer has to bring in equipment, there may be an additional fee. So before you decide on a company, make sure you know what type of facilities your wedding venue has and the potential obstacles this could pose for the type of caterer.

**Will the caterer set out the wedding place cards and menus we created?**

Why you want to know: If the caterer says "no way," you'll need to enlist the help of your wedding planner or day-of coordinator, a family member or friend to deal with these wedding details. No matter who is putting them out, give them instructions (and a photo) of how you want them displayed at the wedding reception.

**Who will oversee the event on the wedding day? Will the same caterer you worked with when planning also oversee meal service on the day? What will happen if he's sick or otherwise unable to be there?**

Why you want to know: Ideally, the person you worked with from the catering company throughout the planning process (and who best understands your needs) will be your wedding day contact. If this person isn't available, they should have a suitable replacement in mind from the company (ask to meet with this person too).

**Does the caterer have extra charges, such as a security deposit, sales tax or service fees? What, if any, are the expected gratuities?**

Why you want to know: Any extra charges from the caterer are going to affect your bottom line, so it's best to know ahead of time to plan for it.

**How does the caterer arrange the food on the buffet or plate? Can you see photos of previous presentations from the caterer?**

Why you want to know: Presentation is everything, and even the most delectable dish can seem unappetizing if poorly presented by the caterer. You've put a lot of time and effort into all of your other wedding details. This should reflect in the food as well.

**About the Author:**

**ELISABETTA CIARDULLO** is the founder of Think Italian! Events  – an event planning company in Los Angeles. [www.ThinkItalianEvents.com](http://www.ThinkItalianEvents.com)

As a Personal Chef she also is an ambassador of the Italian cuisine and culture, bringing it into the private homes of Americans.   She was recently selected for the Expertise Award 2016 as one of the 17 best Personal Chefs in LA.

Passionate about Italian style and culinary traditions, she has realized her dream of transforming her hobby into a full time job. With a Degree in Law from the University of Rome and a background as interpreter, translator and teacher of the Italian language, she has found her ideal city in Los Angeles, after having resided several years in Rome, Milan, Tel Aviv, and Washington DC.   With her husband Geert they have two beautifully multicultural daughters.

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