

EXCLUSIVE: Summer events without the burnout (p. 50)

# Special Events™

SUMMER 2025

## STAYING TRENDY

THE RISE OF MULTI-DAY  
WEDDINGS

P. 10

STRIKING SUMMER FOOD &  
BEVERAGE PAIRINGS

P. 32



# SUMMER 2025 THIS ISSUE



VOLUME 43  
NO. 2

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The do's and don'ts of  
trend incorporation



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Elaborate after parties are quite popular among multi-day wedding celebrations, like this one featuring a Cyr wheel performer. Turn to [page 10](#) for more on this trend. Photo courtesy John & Joseph Photography

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EDITOR'S PAGE

## Establishing Boundaries

A recent [New York Times](#) article reported the tale of a couple of Chicago and Philadelphia newspapers that hired a freelancer to put together a Special Section: a recommended summer reading list. The freelancer used generative AI to compile the list, he turned it in, and voila! Published.

The problem was... many of those books did not exist, though they were attributed to recognizable, best-selling authors. Noted *The Times*, "While generative AI has improved, there is still no way to ensure the systems produce accurate information. AI chatbots cannot distinguish between what is true and what is false, and they often make things up. The chatbots can spit out information and expert names with an air of authority."

The reading list also included quotes from "unidentifiable experts." Yikes.

In Christie Osborne's latest column, she addresses the positive and negative aspects of Artificial Intelligence as used in the event industry. And don't get me wrong, there are a lot of positives to embracing this type of technology. However, we would all be wise to read her piece, beginning on [page 08](#), to grasp the clear boundaries that must be established before we dive in.

As we hit the fever-pitch of summer and early fall social gatherings, you may still be working with your clients to develop details that will make their events uniquely remarkable. Should your clients be pushing for the latest trend, while you struggle to maintain your professional composure, you will find Amanda Nicklaus' article [Staying Trendy](#) to be of great help. Incorporating the wise advice from noted industry vets Kristin Banta, Brian A M Green, Jaclyn Watson, and others, author Nicklaus' take on using trends organically will help you stay the course.

Finally, Kate Patay's suggestions for self-care during the busy season is spot on. Look for it starting on [page 50](#).

Have a terrific summer!

*Kathleen*

Kathleen Stoehr  
Director of Community & Content Strategy

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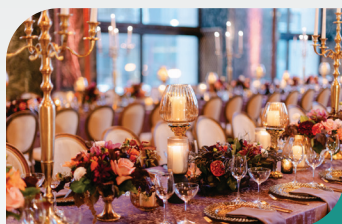
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*Photo courtesy Tim Tab Studios and Catering by Michaels*



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# How Tariffs are Impacting the Industry



It's not about squeezing clients—it's about staying sustainable and delivering the same quality experience without compromising your business.

By Meghan Ely

**If you've noticed prices creeping up on event essentials, you're not alone.**

A recent increase in [tariffs on imported goods](#) is starting to impact the wedding and events industry, from specialty items to everyday supplies.

For planners, designers, and vendors alike, these added costs are shifting how we budget, source, and plan. In this article, we'll break down how industry pros are adapting to stay ahead.

## Where tariffs are hitting hardest

Are you noticing that your go-to supplies and gear are suddenly more expensive or harder to source? Tariffs on imported goods are making a dent in the cost of doing business for many event pros, especially those who rely on international products.

"For us in photography and videography, it's been equipment and production gear that have seen the biggest impact," confirms Craig Peterman, Owner of Craig Peterman Photography & Videography. "Cameras, lenses, lighting gear, memory cards, all those little essentials have gotten more expensive. Even things like hard drives for storing client footage or batteries for our gear are costing more than they did just a year or two ago."

And it's not just gear. Those in product-based sectors like florals are feeling the squeeze just as quickly.

Joan Wyndrum, Co-Founder of BloomsByTheBox.com, shares, "As a provider of flowers directly from the wholesale/grower market to our [couples], the impacts on our business were immediate. Unlike other industries where there may be some inventory stateside that is delaying the impact to consumers, the floral industry's inventory rollover is very short."

From high-tech equipment to fresh blooms, these added fees are trickling down fast, forcing pros to get creative about managing costs.

## Adjusting pricing to keep up

Rising prices naturally raise a big question: how much of that increase do you absorb, and how much do you pass on to your clients? It's a tough balance.

"As our suppliers have done, we have priced to absorb some of the increase, but it's simply not feasible to sustain the full impact of the tariffs," notes Wyndrum. "The inescapable fact is that the effect of the tariffs across all industries will be felt by the end user—the consumer."

Some businesses have started making gradual price adjustments to account for new supplier costs, while others are introducing small service fees or revising package





options. It's not about squeezing clients—it's about staying sustainable and delivering the same quality experience without compromising your business.

## Staying profitable in a shifting market

When the landscape shifts, the most successful pros are the ones who stay nimble. Instead of relying on one supplier or sticking rigidly to past processes, many are turning to more resilient strategies.

Peterman says, "Build strong relationships with multiple suppliers so you're not stuck if one brand or shop gets hit harder by tariffs. Also, try to stay flexible; clients care about results, not what problems you are having behind the scenes. Focus on delivering incredible work and adapt behind the scenes as needed."

Other small business owners are taking a similar approach by staying alert and making mindful decisions.

"For now, as a small business, I'm personally just trying to stay

mindful, keeping an eye on costs, planning ahead for gear upgrades, and being thoughtful about how this might be affecting both my business and my couples," explains Pamela Tatz, Owner & Lead Photographer of Pamela Tatz Photography. "We're all navigating this in real time, and I think that staying adaptable is key."

It's also about mindset. Rather than panicking, vendors should focus on being resourceful and continuing to provide standout service.

## What (and how) to share with clients

Most clients don't want to know about tariffs or production delays. Instead, they want a seamless celebration. That's why many vendors are handling behind-the-scenes hurdles quietly, keeping the client experience front and center.

Peterman confesses, "Honestly, we don't bring up tariffs at all. Clients come to us for a stress-free experience, and they don't want to hear about supply chain problems. Instead, we frame

everything around quality: that we're committed to using the best tools and tech available, and that's why they're getting top-tier photos and films. We manage rising costs quietly on our side."

Tariffs are just one more curveball in an industry that's always evolving. While we can't control rising costs, we can control how we respond—by staying adaptable, transparent, and focused on delivering great work.

The more we support each other and keep the client experience at the top of our lists, the better equipped we'll all be to weather these shifts together! [SE](#)

*Editor's note: For this article, Ely referred to [The Comprehensive Guide to Tariffs for Wedding Pros](#) by industry consultant Think Splendid® and recommends other event pros read it as well.*

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**Meghan Ely** is the owner of wedding PR and wedding marketing firm [OFD Consulting](#). Ely is a sought-after speaker and a self-professed royal wedding enthusiast.



# Do You Know Who's Using AI Behind Your Back?



By Christie Osborne

**A**rtificial Intelligence (AI) isn't coming for the event industry. It's already here—in proposals, timelines, nurture emails, and social media captions.

It's baked into tools your team already uses: Canva's Magic Write, Grammarly, and even email apps. Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT and Claude are increasingly used across teams—from marketing to administrative.

While that might feel like a productivity win, few rewards exist without some risk.

When someone uses AI in your business without your knowledge, you might be exposed to that risk: of brand erosion, IP leaks, and low-level inconsistencies you can't easily trace.

Managing that risk depends on transparency, boundaries, and control—the same principles you apply elsewhere in your business.

## Brand drift: losing control of what makes you unique

Say a team member uses AI to write your newsletter. The copy is clean. The grammar? Flawless.

But it doesn't sound like you.

The cadence is off. Your empathy, wit, or edge? Gone. Nobody flagged it, and it goes out anyway—flat, forgettable, and off-brand.

Brand erosion rarely starts with a rebrand. It starts with small, unnoticeable misfires.

*Why this matters:* Out-of-the box AI tools default to generic. Without brand voice training, they flatten what makes you stand out. Even one off-brand touchpoint can:

- Confuse your audience
- Cheapen your positioning
- Dull hard-earned trust

*What you can do:* Create a lightweight brand voice guide and make it required reading. Include:

- Sample copy in your voice
- Phrases you use or avoid
- Tone guidelines (e.g., no fluff, kind but sharp)
- Plain vs. technical language cues

Use these to “prime” AI tools, or instruct your team to. If you're using AI on behalf of your brand, it should sound like your brand.

## IP contamination: when “inspiration” becomes exposure

The marketing expert you hired is trying to scale with AI. To save time, they pull from your original work—those heartfelt captions, your welcome packet, or that custom strategy you paid thousands for.

They drop it into ChatGPT to “get a head start.”

Once content enters a public AI tool, you lose visibility into how it's stored, reviewed, or used.

*Why this matters:* Your originality is your brand. Feeding key content into a public tool is like handing your secret sauce to a third-party kitchen—with no way to see who's remixing it. At best, another vendor

When sensitive data—like financials, client names, or project history—is pasted into tools like ChatGPT, it's now in a system you can't audit, trace, or permanently remove.

ends up with content that sounds very similar to yours.

*What you can do:* Set a hard rule. Proprietary content and sensitive data do not go into public AI tools without your approval and consent. If you wouldn't post it on Reddit or drop it in a group chat with your competitors, it doesn't belong in a prompt box without your oversight and consent.

If someone needs inspiration from past work, train them to:

- Extract general themes
- Summarize frameworks
- Paraphrase, don't paste

AI is powerful, but when used without oversight or consent, it can quietly break parts of your business and brand.

## The efficiency trap: when speed undermines excellence

AI-generated content looks polished. But it can also strip away the personalization that modern clients expect.

Examples:

- A website uses vague copy with no real value proposition.
- A templated timeline causes confusion for a unique venue.
- A nurture email seems cold and transactional.

These moments don't always set off alarms. But over time, they make your work feel more generic—and slowly chip away at the care, creativity, and quality that used to set you apart.

*Why this matters:* Clients aren't just hiring you to deliver. They want to feel like their event matters, and when your messaging and communication style starts to sound like it was lifted from a template, it signals that maybe the experience will be, too.

*What you can do:* Draw a line between what's efficient and what must remain human-led. Define:

- What must be written or reviewed by a human (e.g., nurture sequences, proposals, custom menus)
- When AI is allowed for drafting only—not for final voice
- How to document or disclose AI use with vendors or clients

Examples:

- "Our design decks are 100% human-generated."
- "We use AI for outlines only—never for finished copy without full edits."
- "No AI-generated emails to vendors or clients—ever."

This isn't about rejecting AI. It's about fostering trust in your brand.

## The policy gap: what you don't know can hurt you

AI use doesn't always look risky; it looks like initiative.

An assistant pastes sensitive client data into ChatGPT to "analyze trends." A freelancer reuses your content as a prompt for another client. A contractor builds an AI agent to auto-respond to reviews—without your input or approval.

These aren't malicious moves, but they set precedents you never signed off on.

*Why it matters:* Without clear policies, you can't track or manage how AI is being used in your business.

Even if nothing explodes, inconsistency compounds. Before long, your voice, your client experience, and your service standards start to feel disconnected.

When sensitive data—like financials, client names, or project history—is pasted into tools like ChatGPT, it's now in a system you can't audit, trace, or permanently remove.

That matters; not just ethically, but legally:

- In the U.S., consumer data privacy laws (like California's CCPA) require careful handling of client information.
- In the EU, under GDPR, even uploading personal data to a platform without appropriate safeguards could constitute a breach.

*What you can do:* A one-page internal AI policy document is sufficient to get you going. It should define:

- What tools are allowed (public vs. enterprise)
- What data is off-limits (client info, financials, strategy docs)
- What must be reviewed by a human
- What AI use must be disclosed

Build it into:

- Employee onboarding
- Vendor contracts
- SOPs and project workflows
- Quarterly team check-ins

You don't need to be an AI expert to lead; you just need some structure, transparency, and clear boundaries.

Creating an AI policy keeps you in control of your brand voice, your client experience, and the standards that set your business apart. It's not about fear or avoidance. It's about ensuring your tools, team, and tech align with your values. [SE](#)

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**Christie Osborne** is the owner of [Mountainside Media](#), a company that helps event industry professionals and brands develop scalable marketing strategies that bring in more inquiries and leads. Christie is a national educator with recent speaking engagements at NACE Experience, WIPA, ABC Conference, and [Catersource + The Special Event](#). Christie regularly shares industry insight in her [Special Events](#) column, as well as on [Wed Altered](#), [Rising Tide Society](#), [WeddingIQ](#), and NACE's industry blog.





ON TREND

# Celebrate





# for Days

Inside the rising trend  
of multi-day weddings

By Amanda Nicklaus



This Hindu-Sikh weekend wedding combined several traditions for festive celebrations. Event by Nilyum Wedding & Event Design. Photos courtesy Can Kinalikaya- CK Photography





## ON TREND

**T**he past couple of years have seen significant changes in weddings. Some couples are moving toward increasingly smaller weddings, stripping away everything but the basics. Other couples are leaning all the way in, pulling out all the stops for their big day—or their big weekend. Multi-day weddings are having a moment, and whether you've planned hundreds of them by now or are just considering taking on something large-scale, there's a lot to keep in mind to create the best experience for everyone.

### Spreading the love

Multi-day weddings take place over the course of a weekend or longer, sandwiching the wedding ceremony in between numerous activities and mini events. These extended celebrations are popular among destination weddings, where guests travel long distances, making the most of everyone's time and the local scene.

"These destinations are special to the couple, and it is natural that they want to show them off to their friends and family," says Kevin Heslin (Kevin Heslin Photography). "Maybe it's a place where they spent summers as kids, like Nantucket, or maybe it's a more remote destination they traveled to after college, like Asia or Central America. It's hard to show off these places in just one day."

Heslin notes that Costa Rica has been a popular destination. According to the *LA Times*, so is Croatia, the Italian region of Puglia, St. Lucia, Montenegro, Mexico, Las Vegas, and Puerto Rico.

Multi-day weddings are popular for local ceremonies too, offering a chance for everyone to come and go as they please. Regardless of where they happen, weekend-long weddings are here for a while.

### An old tradition

Multi-day weddings might be new for certain demographics, but for some cultures, drawn out celebrations have been around for a long time.

"The multi-day celebration is a concept rooted in tradition, elevated by luxury, and personalized for today's contemporary couple," says Zhaun Frias (Zhaun Frias Photography). "Some cultures, like those from South Asia, have long had multi-day weddings as the norm—think week-long Indian traditional weddings or Chinese Tea Ceremony.



An Indian wedding held in Cancun made for a vibrant multi-day wedding. Photos courtesy Bambino International



A seven-day-long private estate wedding by Jessie Khaira featured several traditional





This [destination wedding](#) at the Coachella grounds packed in a lot of activity over the weekend, including a carnival after party. Photos courtesy John & Joseph Photography



Sikh celebratory events. Photos courtesy Blush Wedding Photography

"The trend has also grown in Western cultures because, in a digital age, where instant gratification is all-consuming, couples are craving more meaningful, long-standing, and immersive experiences with loved ones. Moments are not simply for social media, but for organic and purposeful connection. Post-pandemic, people are valuing time together more than ever, so why limit one of the biggest moments of one's life to a six-hour event?"

## The good and the bad

It's not just the amount of time spent together that draws couples to weekend weddings; it's the quality of time, too.

"Traditional wedding days constantly felt like 'the fastest day' of the couple's lives, where it was packed with necessary obligations, yet not enough time to breathe and celebrate with their loved ones," says Frias.





## ON TREND



# Wedding Weekend Ideas

### Day 1

The weekend should start with guests arriving at their leisure, with just enough planned that they can mingle without stress.

\*Think icebreakers and first impressions, such as a welcome event centered around food (e.g., barbecue, taco night, a bonfire with s'mores, or wine and cheese).

### Day 2

The theme of the second day should coalesce around bonding, exploring, and/or honoring the local or the couple's culture.

\*Think welcome brunch for those who hadn't arrived the day prior, a cooking class or wine tasting, and a spa morning.

### The Wedding Day

All the normal wedding day activities take place, but with the rise in popularity of after parties, this day can end with a bang.

### Day 4

The day after the ceremony usually focuses on saying goodbyes and offering one last memory maker.

\*Try a brunch buffet or picnic, maybe a coffee cart or fresh juice bar, and a Polaroid display from the weekend. For guests that want to stick around the day after the ceremony, consider participating in a local tour, offering one last chance for people to see what they may have missed.

"With a multi-day wedding, there is time to breathe, and the space to genuinely connect. As an example, the couple could have a welcome dinner on day one, a wine tasting with all their college friends on day two, and a brunch with the in-laws on day four. Each group gets its own 'moment' with the couple."

This kind of pacing can reduce pressure and stress for the couple, improving the experience of their special event and giving them the time to truly connect with their guests instead of rushing around cramming in photos with everyone.

The kind of activities and memories that can be built into a multi-day wedding also makes it stand out from the standard; and in today's personalized event climate, that holds a lot of weight for many couples.

There are a few downsides, however—the biggest one being cost.

Frias notes, "There is more lodging, food, coordination, and events to cover. Even simple things multiply: a second dress, more rentals or decor, more photos or video coverage."

It's not just the cost for the couple that needs to be considered, though. Jamie Chang (Mango Muse Events) cautions, "Not every guest has the time or money to travel and/or spend multiple days at events, so having a multi-day wedding can end up excluding some people." Extra costs can often lead couples to invite a smaller pool of guests, focusing the budget on those who are closest to the couple and most willing to commit.

The amount of planning you and your team and partners will have to do also significantly increases with longer events. "Think of it as planning three or four coordinated events, each with its own guest list nuances, vendor setup, transportation needs, and ambiance," explains Frias. "This requires more vendor coordination, more detailed timelines and schedules, and more complex guest communication, as not every event will be catered to every guest."

While multi-day weddings can increase the budget and the amount of work for you and your team, many people feel it's worth it.

"The payoff completely outweighs the downsides," says Frias. "It's a story that everyone involved will tell for their whole lives."

## Creating an itinerary

When it comes to planning the weekend, it can be helpful to have a focus for each day.

According to Chang, "Most multi-day weddings are



A three-day wedding in Saratoga delighted guests with creative food stations and plenty of entertainment. Photos courtesy John & Joseph Photography

about four days, and that is a good amount of time. It's essentially a long weekend where you have enough time to have three to four planned events outside of the wedding. There is usually a welcome event of some sort, whether that's drinks or dinner. The following day can have a casual daytime activity like hiking or beach time, followed by a casual evening event. The next day would be the wedding, which sometimes will have a morning activity included as well. And the last day will end with a breakfast, brunch or lunch and send off."

When putting together the itinerary, make sure you don't pack the schedule too full. "The most important rule of thumb is pacing," warns Frias. "Pacing is everything, as the best multi-day weddings feel like a wonderful dance between structure and freedom. To do this, anchor each day with one main event, but leave flexibility before and after. Secondly, providing a physical and digital itinerary is ideal so guests are always connected. A nice touch is sending out a mass text each morning with a recap of the itinerary."

## Other logistics

Every wedding needs tight logistics and communication, but multi-day weddings require extra attention to these aspects.

### **Lodging & transportation**

If the couple is having a destination or staycation wedding, it's common to rent accommodations for guests to stay together, whether in the form of a hotel, villa, resort, or massive rental properties like those available on WedBNB—which often hold space for lodging, activities, and the ceremony.

"Ideally, all guests and the couple would be staying at the same location. This makes it easy for group transportation, carpooling, impromptu get-togethers, and events on-site," says Chang. "But that isn't always an option, depending on the location. If not, then typically the couple and wedding party and close friends or family would stay together at the main venue/gathering





## ON TREND



spot, and all the other guests would be at a nearby hotel."

"We suggest room blocks at no more than two hotels if there is transportation provided," advises Alex Bovee (Vision in White Events). "That way, buses have fewer locations to try and coordinate proper timing for."

Regardless of whether everyone is staying in one place or not, transportation is an important part of a multi-day wedding. When guests have been drinking or exploring an unfamiliar area, locking in reliable, scheduled transportation is key.

### ***Guest inclusion***

Couples often debate whether children should be invited to weddings that take place over the course of an evening, but what about for events that last multiple days?

"It's totally understandable that some families will not have the option to leave their kids with someone else for a few days," says Heslin. "Most of these events and excursions are kid-friendly. Kids love beach days and catamaran tours, and resorts make a big deal about being kid-safe."

Whatever the couple decides, it's important for them to consider

that it might be difficult for some guests to leave kids at home for a few days, and if kids are welcome, activities will need to be either kid-friendly or offered alongside kid-friendly options.

Couples will also need to consider if they want every guest to attend every activity, or if they want to divide their attention among guests.

"We usually say the inner circle and family only attend the rehearsal dinner, and then out-of-town guests attend the welcome party. A lot of couples are inviting all guests, local or not, to the welcome party," says Bovee.





(From left to right) A multi-day wedding in Nantucket brings coastal flair. Photos courtesy Rebecca Love Photography; a small Colorado town sets the tone for this weekend mountain wedding. Photos courtesy Diana Coulter Photography; this multi-day wedding gathered loved ones close with beautiful beachy vibes. Photos courtesy Melani Lust Photography

"Generally, every major event or activity would include all guests. However, having a few small group activities, whether that's with just parents or immediate family or best friends, is nice as well, so that you can have quieter, more intimate moments," says Chang. "But either way, perhaps the most important piece is to include some quiet/restful time...away from everyone. Couples need some time to relax as well (especially introverts) to get recharged for the group events."

### **Budget**

Make sure to get clear about the wedding budget right away. Be explicit when talking about the

ceremony budget versus the overall wedding event budget.

"While creating and keeping track of an overall budget is important, it's crucial to think of each event (including the wedding) as its own budget," says Chang. "It makes it easier to break it down and make sure you're allocating your funds (and your time) to the right places. And this way, events don't end up bleeding into each other and taking from each other, even if you may have some crossover expenses (like transportation, rentals, or decor)."

### **On-site communication**

When it comes to an event with so many elements, excellent

communication among your team, [vendors](#), and guests is imperative.

"There are a lot of paid services, but I find a group chat on WhatsApp to be the best option, says Heslin.

"This way, the wedding couple doesn't need to answer every question. If someone wants to be reminded of the dinner start time, other people in the group can answer and also give suggestions."

Frias adds, "Using a welcome bag is a great touchpoint to ensure that everyone is informed of the chosen communication channel. A QR code or little infographic can be inserted in the welcome bag informing everyone of the resources they have access to, and to remind everyone to join the chosen communication channel.

"Pro tip: Set a moderator for the chosen communication channel so the couple isn't bombarded with messages, but rather a second party who is intimately connected with the plans and vision of the festivities and can communicate in the couple's place. A best practice is for the moderator to send a welcome message every morning outlining the anchor event of the day, as well as the itinerary and options available to the guests."





## ON TREND

Creating clear resources and expectations for everyone involved prevents the couple and yourself from having to field every question that arises, while keeping team members and guests in the loop and able to focus on what matters.

### Spreading the love

Wherever your couple decides to wed, multi-day weddings offer a chance to appreciate a location while building meaningful memories for more than the typical whirlwind afternoon.

"Multi-day weddings are here to stay, but in ever-evolving forms," says Frias. "Not every couple will have the ability to go full destination-weekend wedding, but bringing that feeling to a local wedding makes the wedding experience feel everlasting for the couple and their guests."

While logistics play a hefty role in these types of weddings, there is also much more room for creativity. "The logistics matter, but so does the vibe," says Pamela Tatz (Pamela Tatz Photography).

Prioritize the wellbeing of yourself and your team to provide the best experience. "You and your team will essentially be 'on call' for the entire four-plus days as events will be setting up, starting, ending, and breaking down constantly," reminds Chang. "Having a good team to support each other and allow for breaks is important because it is tiring and having time to rest and reset is key."

It's a big commitment, but planning a multi-day wedding can be incredibly rewarding for everyone involved. Don't be intimidated by this more-is-more style of event. After all, with great risk comes great reward! **SE**

*"With a multi-day wedding, there is time to breathe, and the space to genuinely connect."* —Zhaun Frias



Multi-day weddings help the couple slow down and make more memories. Photos courtesy Leah Black Photography

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## TECH TALK

# Beyond the Pretty: How to Optimize Your Website & Portfolio to Win More Clients



You don't need to rebuild your site from scratch to impress. Sometimes, small but strategic updates can have a massive impact on how potential clients see you.

By Katie Mast

**Y**our website is your digital handshake. For wedding and event professionals, it often makes the first impression long before you ever receive an inquiry. In fact, users form opinions about your website and online presence in general in less than seven seconds. That's less time than it takes couples to say, "I do."

And while beautiful imagery is still essential, clients today aren't just looking for a vibe. They're looking for connection, clarity, and confidence that you're the right fit for their vision. The good news? You don't need to rebuild your site from scratch to impress. Sometimes, small but strategic updates can have a massive impact on how potential clients see you. Let's break it down.

### Your portfolio isn't just pretty—it's persuasive

In 2025, your portfolio should be more than just a curated collection of your best work. It's a storytelling tool, and it's the most powerful way to communicate the value of our services.

Clients aren't just evaluating how something *looked*; they want to understand how it felt, what it meant, and how it all came together. Your portfolio should invite prospective clients into the whole story.

Here are a few examples:

- Instead of showcasing 20 random images from a wedding, build a

mini-case study via your blog or add this verbiage to their gallery: "We worked with Ava and Leo, a long-distance couple planning from Chicago, to bring their dream Charleston celebration to life. With a six-month timeline and three different family traditions to honor, we created a weekend itinerary that blended Southern hospitality, Persian rituals, and modern design touches." Be sure to show the key moments: the best event snapshots, the mood board, and the happy couple.

- Although tempting, don't highlight only your favorite portraits. Instead, organize galleries by story type: downtown elopements, luxury estate weddings, rainy day magic, etc. Adding commentary like, "This moody Brooklyn wedding took place during a surprise downpour, and we turned it into magic" helps the client put themselves in their shoes.
- Showcase a *range* of what is possible. Instead of one gallery of past weddings, offer segmented views: indoor ceremonies, garden receptions, winter weddings, etc. Include different lighting scenarios, indoor and outdoor scenery, and color vs minimal to illustrate your flexibility.

Bottom line: A portfolio that includes storytelling, captions, and context doesn't just *show* that you're talented and experienced; it proves you understand how to deliver results, and in today's market, that's what will book business.

## Small website tweaks, big conversion wins

If you've been putting off website updates because you think it's going to be a massive project, this part is for you. The truth is, you don't need a total rebrand to make your site more effective. Small, strategic tweaks can significantly improve your user experience and help turn window-shoppers into paying clients.

**Start with your site speed:** Nearly half of all users expect your site to load in under two seconds. If it's slow, they're gone. Period. Use a tool like [Google PageSpeed](#) (it's free!) to test your site and identify slow-loading images or plugins.

**Note:** For galleries, be especially mindful of large images on your site. Compress images before uploading and avoid slideshows that autoplay with high-res files.

**Audit your "above the fold" space:** This is what users see the moment your homepage loads, before they scroll down to see more. Ask yourself: does this information clearly tell someone who I am, what I do, and how to take the next step?

Here are some vendor examples:

- "Modern floral design for bold couples who love color and aren't afraid to break tradition. Serving Portland, Seattle, and beyond. Let's create something wild together." [Button: "Check Availability"]
- "Planning luxury events with heart. We serve modern romantics and creative couples in the Southeast who want their wedding to feel intentional, joyful, and beautifully executed." [Button: "Let's Connect"]

**Your navigation needs to be intuitive:** The "Contact," "Services," and "Portfolio" links should always be visible and accessible, and ideally

in the header menu. Don't make people hunt for your inquiry form, and don't bury your contact link at the bottom of a long page.

**SEO is still your best friend:** If your homepage title just says "Home," you're missing an opportunity. Use descriptive, localized language like "Vermont Wedding Photographer | Elegant Documentary Style." And don't forget to rename your image files; "boho-barn-wedding-wisconsin.jpeg" goes a lot further than "IMG\_1123.jpg."

## Why user experience is the secret ingredient

Let's be real—it's 2025, and clients are savvy. They order groceries on apps, book vacations online, and use AI assistants. They expect a seamless digital experience, and your website is definitely part of that equation.

If your site is confusing, clunky, or outdated, it's not just a design problem; it's a trust problem. A modern, clean layout with intuitive navigation signals that you are a professional who's on top of things.

User experience also impacts how your site *feels*. Are you giving people the answers they need? Are you reducing friction? Are you making them feel understood? Let's make sure you have what you need with these simple checkpoints:

- Consider adding a "How to Book with Us" page with steps clearly outlined. Many clients just don't understand how to move forward with pros—spell it out and make it easy!
- A robust FAQ page can reduce inquiry ghosting by managing expectations upfront. Include common questions like "What's your working timeline?" or "Do you work with out-of-town clients?"

- Add visual icons for dietary needs. If you offer vegan, gluten-free, or allergen-friendly options, make them visible and easy to understand that you offer them in the first place.

Today's clients are already overwhelmed, so the easier you make it to get answers and take action, the more likely they are to trust you and book. The goal isn't to give them more, it's to give them just what they need, right when they need it.

## Clients don't need more, they just need clarity and ease

Your website doesn't need to be fancy or high-tech to be effective; it just needs to be intentional.

When you treat your website and portfolio as tools, not just digital brochures, you'll start to see them work harder for your business, and clients enjoy the process of getting to know you and booking you better and faster. Through thoughtful storytelling, easy navigation, strategic updates, and a strong user experience, you'll position yourself as the kind of professional people are excited to work with. [SE](#)

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**Katie Mast** is the Director of Community at Rock Paper Coin and a highly respected leader in the wedding, event, and creative industries. She has worked with renowned brands such as HoneyBook, The Rising Tide Society, Aisle Planner, and Dreamworks Animation. Having spent almost a decade as a business owner of a destination wedding and event planning company, Katie now dedicates her time working with companies to help them grow and develop their genuine communities, promote ongoing education and diversity, and build strong and healthy brand partnerships.





(This page) Floral arches in various sizes and styles are a significant trend. Jaclyn Watson customizes each one to suit the story of the couple. Photo courtesy Rodeo & Co. Photography; (Opposite page) Draping florals over the head table is trendy, but Jaclyn Watson personalized the trend by placing the florals on surfboards—a key motif in the couple's love story. Photo courtesy Rodeo & Co. Photography





## The Do's and Don'ts of Infusing the Latest Trends into Your Events

By Amanda Nicklaus



# How to remain authentic when doing what everyone else is doing

**It's happened to us all: a client shows you something they want for their event, something that you've seen 20 million times, something you're less than thrilled about including and even less thrilled to argue with them about.**

On the flip side, everyone has felt that spark at the first inklings of a trend, when it feels new and exciting and your brain is running a mile a minute figuring out how you can best try it out.

Love them or hate them, trends are the driving force of events, and in a world that passes along the latest and greatest faster than most of us can comprehend, it can be tough to keep up with what's in or out.

Don't fret! With the right approach, you can discern which trends are meant for you and how to organically work them into your events.

## Impact that matters

Infusing your events with the latest trends can be beneficial for various reasons.

"For businesses, staying on top of trends is key to survival. According to a study by McKinsey, companies that effectively use market trends are two-and-half times more likely to outperform their peers in growth and financial success," says an article from [Evolved Office](#).

Staying on top of trends makes you better able to anticipate client needs and requests, gives you better competitive edge, provides a veritable gold mine of content, shows that you're adaptable and in-touch, builds your credibility as a thought leader, and keeps you in tune with where the industry is headed.

That doesn't mean copy-and-pasting your social media feed into your events. Many event pros resist trends because they don't resonate, and for good reason—in an event climate that is increasingly personalized, authenticity matters.

## Take it or leave it

Social media creates a *lot* of [expectations around trends](#), and it is without a doubt one of the top places where trends are made and spread like wildfire.

In her session *Future of Weddings: Decoding the Trends and Planning Ahead* at Catersource + The Special Event 2024, Adrienne Harris (Blessed Events) put it best: "Everything is on demand." Clients want everything bigger, better, and faster, with little understanding of how far a budget will (or won't) get them.

You and your team can't do everything, so it's important to take time to discern which trends you take on and which you leave behind.

Jaclyn Watson (Jaclyn Watson Events) starts by asking herself some questions. "When looking at trends, I always ask: Does this enhance the guest experience? And: will it still feel beautiful and relevant in a few years when they look back? If the answer is 'yes,' then it's something worth exploring.

"I'm also careful to choose trends that complement my clients' personal styles, not just what's popular in the moment. Trends should feel like a natural extension of the story we're telling—not something we're forcing into the day just because it's 'in.'"

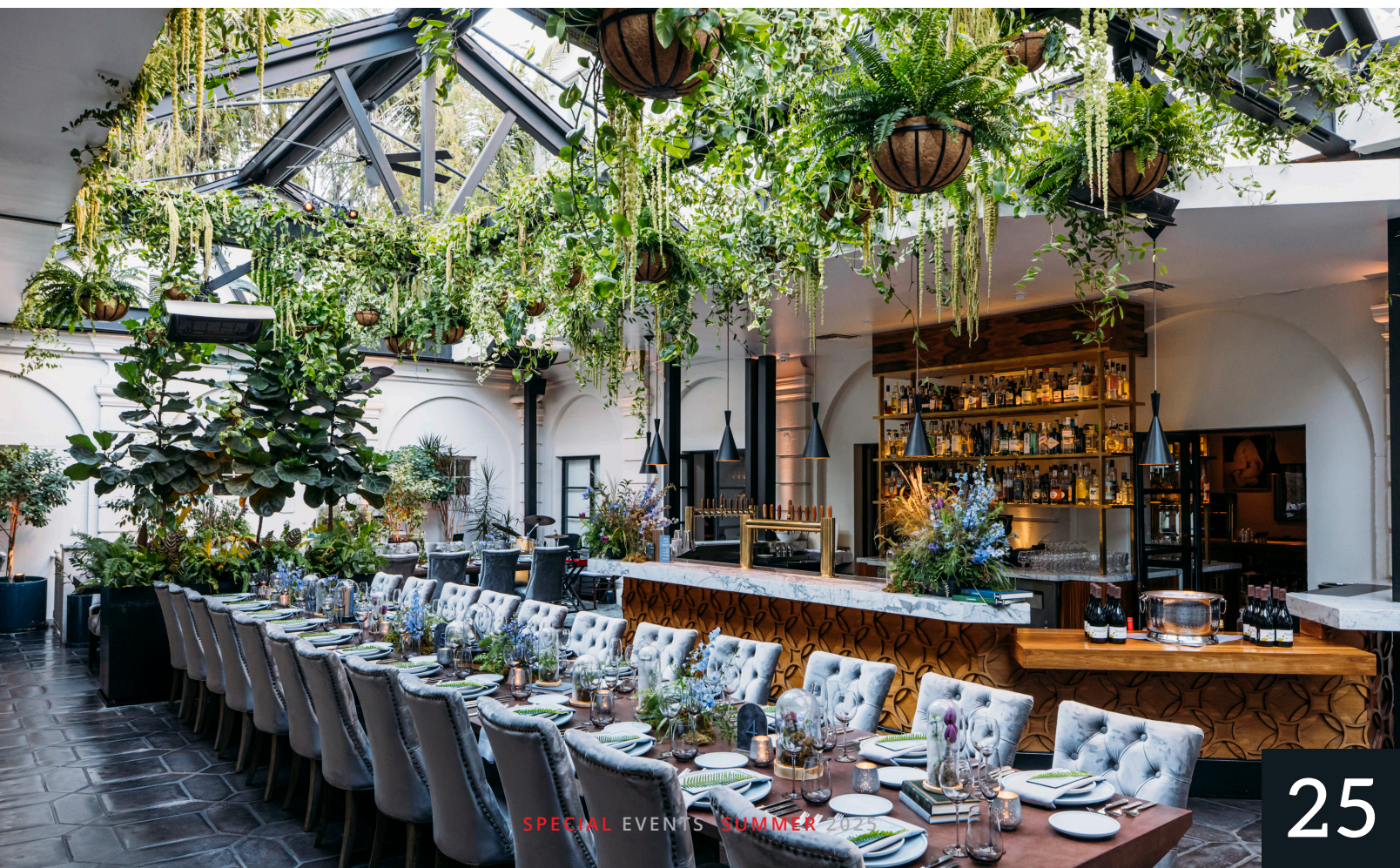
## It's equally important to know what doesn't work.

"Trends that feel forced or that distract from the overall vision make no sense to add at all," says Brian Green (By BrianGreen). "An example is the Color of the Year—there's no reason to incorporate it into your design to say it's a trendy thing to do.

"I also want to be very transparent: trends that feel fleeting are not something I want to use. No one wants to look back at images of a previous event years later and see a trend that was around for a brief moment in time—think like the blue ruffle shirts of the '70s. Bad idea then...bad idea now!"

(Opposite page, top) Mocha Mousse inspired these rich brown wedding party dresses. Photo courtesy Pamela Tatz Photography; (Bottom) A greenhouse-inspired wedding by Kristin Banta Events Inc. incorporated the biophilic trend in a sophisticated style. Photo courtesy Scott Clark Photo







“When you focus on how people feel at the event, not just what they see, that’s when magic happens.” —Jaclyn Watson

### **Staying true to your brand**

There are inevitably times when a client wants to try a trend that you’re less than enthusiastic about. When this happens, a conversation can help shed light on their desires as well as possible solutions.

“If a client wishes to incorporate a trend that we believe will negatively impact the event, we share our concerns honestly and offer alternative ideas that achieve the same goals differently,” says Green. “Our job is always to bring the client’s vision to life, whether the event is social or corporate.

“We do not impose our brand on their choices unless the element they want to include is illegal, immoral, or would clearly lead to poor design or guest experience. At the end of the day, we’re there to support the client’s success and ensure the event is its best.”

Getting clear on their intentions, your capabilities, and the purpose of the event will help you navigate through any disagreements on which trendy elements stay or go.

### **Staying in the loop**

As mentioned, social media is a major place where trends are shared and perpetuated, but there are plenty of other places to look for [inspiration and trendspotting](#).

“I stay inspired by a mix of places,” shares Watson. She looks toward editorial shoots and magazines, both wedding and fashion; luxury hospitality trends (“[Hotels](#) are incredible at setting the tone for experience-based design”); [industry conferences](#) and retreats; and travel and nature. “Honestly, some of the best design ideas come from being out in the world and seeing new textures, colors, and styles firsthand.”

It’s important to look to all ends of the trends funnel. Social media gives you an idea of what trends are at their peak and what your clients will be expecting, while magazines, travel, and conferences like Catersource + The Special Event give glimpses into what your peers have been playing with and what is about to catch on, giving you a bit of a competitive edge.

In her session *Kristin Banta’s Design to Impact in 2024* at Catersource + The Special Event 2024, Kristin Banta (Kristin Banta Events, Inc.) discussed the importance of staying in touch with trends, even those from oversaturated sources. “We can’t be in the business of regurgitating trends...instead, we have to be in the business of reinvention. So, just like we need to understand the audience we’re designing for, we have to know the trends first. We have to know what pop culture is exposed to, and then we can reimagine it.”



## BRIAN GREEN'S Trendspotting Guide

“To stay in touch with trends, we prefer to lean into trends that make sense, blended with timeless influences, rather than focus on hyper-trendy concepts. We find inspiration in sources that offer lasting relevance, such as:

### **1. Fashion, Architecture, Music, &**

**Nature:** These are rich, enduring influences that provide endless creativity and allow us to design experiences that feel fresh but incredible.

### **2. Industry Publications & Events:**

While we avoid jumping on fleeting trends, we stay connected to industry publications like this one [*Special Events*] to understand the landscape and where broader cultural movements are heading.

**3. Our Own Experiences:** Rather than looking at other event designs, we prefer to look inward and rely on our own creativity. We focus on creating unique concepts that feel true to us and our clients.

**4. Listening to Our Clients:** The best trends often come from paying attention to what people genuinely love and need. We stay attuned to our clients’ desires and how guests respond to different elements, ensuring that what we create feels authentic and unique.”





COJ Events seamlessly incorporates the Mocha Mousse Color of the Year with subtle shades of brown in a tablescape. Photo courtesy Matthew David Studio

## Infusing the latest & greatest into your events

Once you know which trends you want to try, it's important to move forward mindfully.

The first step is to see what will align with your client's goals and the purpose of the event. "Before adding any trend, make sure it supports the client's objectives and enhances the overall guest experience," says Green. "If it feels out of place or forced, it will not resonate."

While it might be tempting to throw in every trendy element you've seen recently, everywhere you can fit it, it's best to use a light touch. "A trend does not have to overwhelm the entire event to make an impact. Often, a few well-placed trendy details can create a fresh, memorable feel without overwhelming the experience," says Green.

Watson agrees: "Think accent pieces, not center stage." For example, instead of using the Color of the Year as a major theme, try sprinkling it throughout the event in subtle ways, like in nametags, party favors, or small floral pieces.

Unless you want your event to be rooted in an exact moment of time, it can be helpful to blend trends with timeless elements, notes Green. "Pairing trends with classic, proven elements keeps the event feeling sophisticated and ensures it will still look and feel great when people look back on it over the years."

Watson recommends focusing on quality, too, so that even trendy, novel elements feel elevated and well-thought out. She also encourages staying flexible to wherever creativity flows. "Sometimes a trend can spark a more personal, original idea that's even better."





(Top) Taking hold of the farm-to-table trend, Dish Food & Events created a Farmer's Market Party Favor Station, where guests could fill totes with heirloom tomatoes, fruits, beets, and other produce, as well as small bouquets of flowers, to take home. Photo courtesy Twah Dougherty (Above) This wedding tablescapes by Jaclyn Watson Events paired trendy wicker chargers with stacked rock formations, something the bride loved that added a personal touch. Photo courtesy Kate Seymour Photography

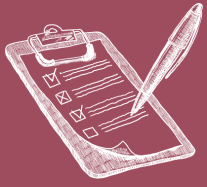
In her session, Banta offered some unique ways to play with trends, like turning an element into an art installation, supersizing it, or reconfiguring it into a different color, pattern, or shape, giving the trend a new life. She also recommended considering all mediums, incorporating popular elements in ways beyond what's obvious.

Another thing Banta embraces: humor. "It's never bad to allow people the chance to laugh." Sometimes, being cheeky in how you use items and details refreshes a trend in a surprising way that gives guests something to talk about.

If all else fails, and your client is insistent and passionate about a trend, Banta suggests leaning in and embracing it fully.

"If they want color drenching—my example—make it the whole thing.





## KRISTIN BANTA'S Trend-Setting Questions

In her session *Kristin Banta's Design to Impact in 2024* at Catersource + The Special Event 2024, Kristin Banta (Kristin Banta Events, Inc.) shared a list of questions she asks clients when incorporating trendy elements into her events:

- **What do they want to take away?**
- **How do they want guests to feel?**
- **Who is the event targeting?**
- **What is the goal/purpose of the event?**
- **What does the client/brand stand for or represent?**
- **Does the client/brand support a cause?**
- **Is there a motto that summarizes the client/brand or event?**

Gaining insight into these questions will help you seamlessly weave trends into your events.

Take the guest on a journey of color drenching. Take them from room to room with completely saturated colors. Do that trend and do it up....

"If your client wants Peach Fuzz (the 2024 Pantone Color of the Year), go ahead and do it. Give them all the peaches in the world... If your client is into bows, make them walk through a gigantic bow. Put bows on their wrist from the moment they walk in and make it a thing."

At the end of the day, you're the artist, and it's up to you to take what your client wants and deliver it well. "It's the old saying," said Banta, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

### ***Staying true to you—and your clients***

As you weave new trends into your events, it can be tough to strike a balance between what everyone seems to want and what is authentic to you and your client. If you're struggling to remain original, it's important to avoid replicating

trends exactly as you've seen them before, instead tailor them to the client. "Does it make sense for *their* story and style?" Watson asks.

It's also helpful to remember that while clients can get carried away with the trends they see online (or from the events they attend themselves), they are capable of understanding the reasons for incorporating a trend or skipping it. In her session, Harris recommended sitting down with your clients and educating them on what the top current trends require behind the scenes.

You can also just ask a client why they want to use a certain trend. Discussing their draw to the trend can give you insight on what aspects are appealing to them and what they are trying to achieve with it.

Once they know the reasons behind your decisions and preferences, and vice versa, it can be easier to work together to find a path forward that is both popular and personal.



Branded ice is big right now, like this ice cube stamped with a couple's initials for a signature cocktail. Event by TGIS Catering. Photo courtesy Chard Photo





LED curtains have been trending the past few years. Pictured here: an attendee at Catersource + The Special Event's Opening Night Party 2025 enters the celebration in vogue. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc./SpotMyPhotos



Projection mapping creates an aquastructure look at a movie premiere by Kristin Banta Events, Inc. Photo courtesy Kristin Banta Events, Inc.

## Bringing it all together

Trends can be a pain if you approach them in a restrictive manner, but they can also be a great tool for inspiring creativity.

"At the end of the day, our clients are going to be influenced by trends, but we're doing a disservice to them if we're being puppeteered by it," said Banta. "So, if we want to excite audiences by being one step ahead of them and what they're seeing on Pinterest, then we have to dive deeper, and we have to be willing to take risks."

Even if a risk doesn't play out as you want it to, keep in mind: it's not the trend that your guests will remember so much as the emotions it evokes.

"We all know that trends come and go, but what truly matters is how we make our clients and their guests feel," says Green.

"Make sure your events tell a story, whether it's a corporate gathering or a social celebration. It's not just about what's 'on trend,' but how well we understand our clients and their goals, and how we can bring their vision to life in an unforgettable way."

If you see something take hold of your peers, but doesn't speak to you, that's okay too.

"Identify what works for *you*, even if everyone else is doing it," Harris encouraged. It's a delicate dance, but sometimes you stand out for what trends you don't partake in as much as for those you do.

"Trends are exciting because they push creativity forward. But at the end of the day, it's not about doing what's trendy—it's about telling a story that feels personal, thoughtful, and true," says Watson. "When you focus on how people feel at the event, not just what they see, that's when magic happens." **SE**





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FOOD FOR FÊTES

# A MATCH MADE IN Heaven



Regional warm climate pairings are excellent in summer, like these Ahi Tuna Tacos & Mini Patron Margaritas by TGIS Catering. Photo courtesy Chard Photo





# Summer food & beverage pairings to wow your next event

By Amanda Nicklaus

**T**here are many reasons to love summer, and one of those is the abundance of seasonal foods. Summer menus are rich in fresh produce and bright flavors, inherently celebratory and vibrant, perfect for outdoor events.

In an [article](#) for the 2024 Fall Issue of *Special Events*, Robin Selden (Marcia Selden Catering & Events and Naked Fig Catering) and Sarah Kuhlberg (then of Colette's Catering & Events, Orange County, CA) described the key features of summer fare.

"For summer, I feel like it goes without saying... anything grilled," said Selden. "Peaches, heirloom tomatoes, fresh corn, and watermelon in salads or straight up as dessert all remind me of a great summer meal."

Beverages are light and refreshing, said Kuhlberg. "Summertime refreshments like tropical iced teas and lemonades and fruity margaritas are total winners. You can also bring in the summer vibes with classic mojitos and sangrias."

With food and beverage pairing, the guidelines and rules can seem confusing or overwhelming. While it may seem tempting to ignore pairing do's and don'ts—especially when working with fussy clients—a well-curated food and beverage menu can go a long way in cultivating an experience (and your brand).

Here are some summer food and beverage pairings that will guarantee satisfaction.

## Component combos

Interaction between the components of various food and drink (more on that on [page 05](#) in *Catersource* in the adjoining issue) can be either pleasant or unenjoyable. While the degree of intensity can vary from person to person, there are a few combinations that produce tried-and-true results.





## FOOD FOR FÊTES

For starters, sweet and umami foods can increase bitterness and acidity in beverages while decreasing sweetness and fruitiness. This means sweet or fruity foods should be paired with even sweeter or fruitier beverages. [A Forbes article](#) recommends pairing sweet with sweet: “Dry wines turn tart and mouth-puckering when paired with food that harbors even a hint of sweetness. Sweet foods are best with wines of comparable sweetness, whether it be a honey-baked ham with sweet-potato mash or nine-layer chocolate cake.” They recommend serving Honey-Drizzled Grilled Peaches and Ricotta with Moscato d’Asti for a rich summer treat.

It’s easier to start with food and choose an accompanying beverage, but if you have a sweet drink on the menu, the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET) recommends pairing it with salty or spicy foods to create balance. “A Peach Bellini with prosciutto-wrapped melon or a classic Piña Colada with spicy grilled prawns” is one suggestion in their [Food and Cocktail Pairing: The Summer BBQ Edition blog](#).

Since salty and acidic foods make beverages taste less bitter and acidic, as well as fruitier, there are plenty of fun pairing options. In fact, acidic foods and beverages are great paired together. Forbes notes that “sour, tart flavors in food can dull lower-acid wines. Beyond vinaigrettes, be mindful of other acidic ingredients like citrus, apples, and tomatoes.” They recommend pairing salty oysters dressed in mignonette with Muscadet, a highly acidic French white wine.

For oily or fatty foods, acidic beverages cut through the richness of these foods—like how oil and vinegar work together in a salad dressing. Think of Sauvignon Blanc with salmon or a Moscow Mule with sliders.

Finally, foods that contain high levels of capsaicin ([click here to learn more about heat-forward cocktails](#)), the chemical in chili peppers that produce heat, are best paired with low-proof beverages or mocktails. Alcohol can increase the effect of the chili heat, and in return the chili heat can increase the flavor of alcohol. Simple herbal or fruity flavors can balance heat—there’s a reason margaritas pair well with jalapeño-topped tacos!

### The Three Cs

An easy rule of thumb for pairing is known as the Three Cs: contrast, complement, and cut. An article from [Bar Louie](#) breaks down these three simple guidelines:

- **Contrast:** Pair drinks and foods with opposing flavors for a balanced and stimulating combination. Their

example? “A bitter IPA can cut through the richness of a creamy pasta dish, providing a refreshing contrast.”

- **Complement:** Similar flavors in both the beverage and the food will harmonize together. “Pair citrusy cocktails with tangy dishes or match herbal drinks with herbed dishes. A Basil Smash pairs wonderfully with an herb-roasted chicken,” suggests WSET.
- **Cut:** According to Bar Louie, crisp, acidic flavors will “cleanse the palate and reduce the intensity of certain flavors.” For instance, Prosecco cuts well through a rich, creamy brie.

Sticking with these three go-to’s can help simplify the pairing process and make it easier to curate menus with your client and caterer.

### Temperature & texture

Summer is all about cool, refreshing drinks that help beat the heat. WSET identifies three categories of chilled summer beverages: cooler, [frozen](#), and creamy. “The cooling effect of a cold Gin and Tonic makes it perfect for spicy dishes like grilled prawns or peppery rocket salad.” Frozen cocktails, on the other hand, go hand-in-hand with higher heat levels in food. “Try pairing Frozen Margaritas with spicy lamb kebabs or peri-peri chicken.”

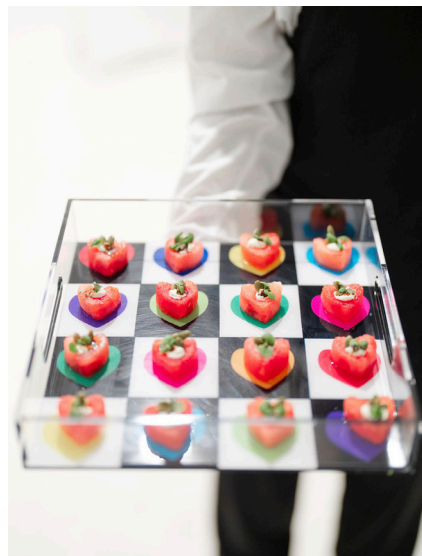
Dessert cocktails and smoothie-like beverages are another great summer drink that pair excellently with light summer food. “Creamy drinks can balance the

Opposite page, top row from left: Caviar can be enjoyed any time of year, of course, but with so much to celebrate in summertime, a chilled glass of [Champagne](#) goes nicely with [caviar](#)! Shown here: Roaming Caviar Station by Marcia Selden Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Jeffrey Selden; Nothing says summer like watermelon. Shown here: Watermelon Hearts by Marcia Selden Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Jeffrey Selden; Fresh seafood is a perfect summer treat and pairs well with a variety of beverages. Shown here: a seafood ice bar by Mazzone Hospitality. Photo courtesy John & Jacob Photography

Middle row: Summer menus are rich with produce, like acidic, herbal Heirloom Tomato & Fennel Plated Salad by TGIS Catering. Photo courtesy Carly Otness; Mini Lamb & Beef Slider (Savory Ground Lamb & Beef Patty, Tzatziki, Shredded Iceberg, Brioche Bun) from 24 Carrots Catering & Events during a Greek island-themed event. Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon; Summer is the time for fresh produce! Catering by and photo courtesy Dish Food & Events

Bottom row: Live grilling over an open-air, wood-fired pit is a great way to create an experience for an al fresco dinner. Photo courtesy Mazzone Hospitality; Strawberries atop pavlova (D’Amico Hospitality) is a light, summery dessert. Photo courtesy Marit Williams; 24 Carrots Catering & Events offered a Drink or Swim Limoncello Spritz at a Santorini-inspired event. This summery drink (Limoncello, Lillet, Soda Water, Sparkling Wine, Kumquat, Mint) paired well with the Mediterranean food menu. Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon









### Spotlight Flavors

Not every flavor should be accessible all year! Summer menus have certain featured flavors due to the ingredients and season and the ability to cook and dine outside. The main players:

- Berries galore
- [Grilled delights](#)
- Fresh salads
- Cool and creamy treats
- Fresh herbs and citrus
- Refreshing beverages

Information above courtesy [GoodSource Solutions](#)



### Playing with Palate

Food and beverage pairings hone in on certain elements and match them to harmonize together. Here are some common summer flavors and their effects:

- Citrus: Cuts through the richness of grilled meats  
*Example: Lemon, lime, and orange in cocktails (like Margaritas or Whiskey Sours)*
- Herbs: Enhances dishes with fresh herbs  
*Example: Mint, basil, or rosemary (like a Mojito or Basil Gimlet)*
- Spicy: Gives grilled seafood or tacos an extra kick  
*Example: Slightly spicy cocktails (like a Spicy Margarita)*



### Salad Selections

A [salad](#) is a blank canvas, best enjoyed with fresh, crisp greens and seasonal toppings. There are several ways to play with salad profiles and seasonal ingredients:

- Summer fruits: Berries, peaches, and citrus fruits  
*Recommended pairing: Peach Bellini + fresh fruit salad*
- Herbs: Mint, basil, and coriander  
*Recommended pairing: Mojito with fresh mint + herb-infused summer salad*
- Local produce: Use what's in season locally  
*Recommended pairing: Strawberry Daiquiri + strawberry and feta salad*

Information above courtesy [Wine & Spirit Education Trust](#)





Berries are abundant in summertime and fit perfectly in savory foods, sweet desserts, and refreshing cocktails. Shown here: Berry Tartlet by Chowgirls Catering. Photo courtesy Lucas Botz

*"A well-curated food and beverage menu can go a long way in cultivating an experience (and your brand)."*

textures of crunchy or crispy foods. A creamy Piña Colada pairs wonderfully with crispy fish and chips or tempura prawns," notes WSET. For clientele that are willing to play with the menu, temperature and texture are fun ways to match up food and beverages.

## Body & weight

Another easy way to pair food and beverage is to match body and weight. "Heavier summer favorites like baby back ribs and steaks on the grill call for a full-bodied wine, so reds are the usual choice," says the Forbes article, "but the key here is body, so a big white like an oaky, buttery California Chardonnay might be a better match with pork than a daintier red like Schiava." Full-bodied wines, hoppy beers, and stiffer cocktails need heavier foods to strike a balance.

For lighter foods like fish, go for light-bodied wines and beers, as well as low-proof or zero-proof cocktails. The article debunks the "white with fish, red with meat" rule by pointing out that a light-bodied red wine is a great pairing with fish. As long as the beverage's body and the food's weight line up, feel free to get creative!

## Regional pairings

Ingredients that grow in the same region and are used in the same cuisines certainly go together. "Think of how well a cold beer goes with bratwurst or how a crisp Picpoul de Pinet complements oysters," says the WSET article. It's why Ouzo works well with grilled lamb, or rum punch fits with jerk chicken.

## Playing matchmaker

Now that you know a few ways to pair ingredients, the sky is the limit! [Work with your caterer and clients](#) to lean into seasonal ingredients and pairings to create a menu that screams "summer" and gets guests excited about the elusiveness of seasonal flavors.

One thing to remember: Taste is subjective. At the end of the day, it's all about what your clients enjoy. If they want an untraditional pairing—maybe it's a combination of sentimental food and drink, or something they absolutely insist on having—that's okay. While guidelines are helpful for getting started and playing with creativity, some rules are meant to be broken. [SE](#)





CONFETTI

WILDES  
DREAM  
COME TRUE AT  
MOUNTAIN



Stilt walkers dressed as deer brought the forest scenery to life.

## Inside the Gala Award-receiving wedding that used theater trappings to create a grand scene

By Amanda Nicklaus

*All photos courtesy Brian Dennehy unless otherwise noted*

**E**very event has its challenges, and these challenges can make or break the success of the event. Sometimes, planners will do all they can to avoid challenges, but in this case, MC&A DMC embraced each difficulty that came their way.



Aerial view of the resort atop Grouse Mountain. Photo courtesy Nightlight



# CONFETTI



This corporate event took place in a ski resort atop Grouse Mountain, Vancouver, the first-ever event to take place in this treacherous remote setting. The team welcomed the challenges: access from only two 80-passenger gondolas and a steep, winding mountain backroad; the initial site visit taking place in a snowstorm; no pre-existing diagram of the venue; a trucker with a massive load of equipment refusing to continue up the narrow backroad; complex entertainment (including a celebrity headliner); coordinating green room needs and technical requirements with limited space and resources; and load-in scheduled around the public's access to the resort.



(This page, clockwise starting with left) Two 80-passenger gondolas transported guests up the mountain; A traditional Alpine welcome; Wildflowers were arranged across the resort to create a natural feel.





(Top) Aerial view of the after party. Photo courtesy Nightlight; (Above) The main plaza is transformed into a blossoming oasis with a stage.



# CONFETTI

Still, the team met every challenge head on, using the location's difficult features to shape the event into something special. Vibrant wildflower decor, atmosphere talent dressed as whimsical forest creatures, and a helium balloon aerialist all created a dreamy theme that encompassed guests and enchanted them in this unique location.



Guests took advantage of the ski lift-turned-photo op.



A helium balloon aerialist delighted the crowd, lifting into the air for a spectacular performance.



The balloon aerialist captivated the crowd!



Enchanting butterfly atmosphere talent brought the theme to life.





performance.



Tree fairy atmosphere talent guided guests along the mountain.



ought a touch of whimsy.

*"As long as you have a great team, the challenges of tricky venues, entertainment, and logistics can elevate an event when handled strategically and gracefully."*



# CONFETTI

The event received two *Special Events* Gala awards for Best Entertainment and Best Event Produced for a Corporation or Association. The team's Executive Producer of Creative Events, Holly Loulan, also received a Gala award for Designer of the Year. MC&A DMC demonstrated that as long as you have a great team, the challenges of tricky venues, entertainment, and logistics can elevate an event when handled strategically and gracefully. [SE](#)



Bavarian cuckoo clock costumed greeters hit the dance floor to hype up the crowd.



The stage was dressed in dripping greens and florals, threading the w



(Above and right) Atmosphere talent and guests alike have fun dancing at the after party.







woodland theme throughout the performance.



Intricate glowing lanterns light the way along the mountain.

## Gala Submissions Now Open

It's once again time to celebrate the best of the best! Submissions are now being accepted for the *Special Events* 2026 Gala Awards! We invite you to submit your best work from the past year. Join in the excitement and the spirit of our industry as we celebrate the hard work and exceptional accomplishments of our peers.

### Important Dates:

- September 1, 2024–September 15, 2025 | Eligibility Period for Entries
- Sunday, September 15, 2025 | Regular submission deadline | \$125 fee
- Tuesday, October 31, 2025 | Late Bird submission deadline | \$175 fee

To submit an entry to this year's Gala Awards, please visit our awards portal at <https://ace-gala.awardsplatform.com/>

The after party got guests on their feet as a DJ cranked out tunes.



# Eye-Catching Atmosphere Talent

**It's the greeters at the entrance of an event.** The guides directing traffic flow. The wanderers, wavers, statues, minglers, and champagne-skirted beauties. Creatively costumed atmosphere talent get attendees amped about a theme, and when woven properly into an event, these smiling performers can create excitement like no other while keeping everyone entertained. Whether you're working on a corporate mixer, an elegant gala, or a birthday bash, partnering with a talent company can elevate your event to the next level. [SE](#)  
—Amanda Nicklaus



"Fembot" roaming champagne skirted character for an Austin Powers themed event | Hello! Destination Management | Photo courtesy Hello! Destination Management



Stilt walkers in bright orange draw the eye of guests at an Open House | RumbleDrum | Photo courtesy Brittany Husong for RumbleDrum





(Left) Walking disco balls at a street party | MC&A DMC | Photo courtesy Tavits Photography



Rose-adorned strolling talent for the 150th Kentucky Derby | Artisan Oddities Entertainment | Photo courtesy Artisan Oddities Entertainment



Woodland fairy for mountaintop event (turn to [page 38](#) for more) | Cirque Berzerk | Photo courtesy Cirque Berzerk



Roaming LED robot entertainers interact with guests | Hello! Destination Management | Photo courtesy Cona Studios





## STEAL THIS



An entertainer painted blue at the Marcia Selden Catering & Events Love Party | Photo courtesy Michael Jurick



LED-lit cyclist at a street party | MC&A DMC | Photo courtesy Tavits Photography



Human arrows get ready to guide the way at the Grand Opening of the Fontainebleau Las Vegas | Colin Cowie | Photo courtesy Calen Rose





White Rabbit costumed greeter at an Alice in Wonderland themed event | Peace Arch Hospital Foundation | Photo courtesy Brian Dennehy Photography

(Two photos below, starting with top) Futuristic LED-lit roaming champagne skirted performers | Hello! Destination Management | Photo courtesy Cona Studios; A flapper and Charlie Chaplin costumed greeters at a decades themed event | Lenny Talarico Events & Cerbelli Creative | Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography



Union Jackie go-go dancer at an *Austin Powers* themed event | Hello! Destination Management | Photo courtesy Hello! Destination Management



Golden stilt walkers flank a photo op | Destination Concepts, Inc. | Photo courtesy Destination Concepts, Inc.





Ultimately, it comes down to this: if we want to champion wellness for our clients and their guests, we must walk our talk.

# Festive Affairs, Without the Burnout

By Kate Patay

**L**et's be real, summer event season can feel like a whirlwind. The energy is high, the calendars are full, and the pressure to deliver flawless, Insta-worthy experiences is very real. But behind every show-stopping soirée is a team of professionals running on caffeine, adrenaline, and—if we're being honest—not nearly enough sleep.

As event pros, we're wired to take care of everyone else. We anticipate needs, troubleshoot before problems arise, and go the extra mile to ensure every guest has an incredible experience. But in the middle of all that hustle, it's easy to forget one very important person: ourselves.

That's why it's time to shift the conversation. Yes, we want to create events that feel restorative and wellness-focused for attendees, but we also need to be asking: how are we taking care of ourselves in the process?

Because the truth is, when we're running on empty, it shows. Not just in how we feel, but in how we lead our teams, connect with our clients, and show up creatively. So, let's talk about how we can build in small but impactful self-care rituals for ourselves this season, while also setting the tone for the wellness-forward events today's guests are craving.

Start with the basics: hydration, rest, and healthy movement. I know it sounds obvious, but how many times have you gone through an entire site visit or install without drinking water or having a bite to eat? I found a water bottle I actually like carrying, and I keep snacks in all of my bags, jacket pockets, and emergency kits. If I've been at the laptop all day, I walk to see the sunset. These micro-moments matter, and they're surprisingly powerful.

I bring that same intention to my events. If you're feeling exhausted, chances are your guests are, too. Build in wellness-focused moments that offer a little reset. Maybe it's

a quiet nook with comfy seating and calm music where guests (and yes, even you) can take a breather.

One of my favorite gifts right now is the "event pro recovery kit." Think reusable moisturizing socks for load-in days, under-eye cooling gels, essential oil rollers, shower steamers, and travel-size pillow spray. Whether you put it together for your team, client, or yourself, it's a small gesture showing you value well-being.

On-site, don't be afraid to set boundaries. You don't have to be the last one to leave the afterparty every night. Delegate. Take shifts. Trust your team. Wellness isn't just bubble baths and matcha lattes—it's sustainable leadership.

Of course, we can also creatively infuse these self-care values into the guest experience. Set the tone with wellness-infused welcome gifts...maybe a sleep mask and aromatherapy blend instead of just a branded tchotchke that will be left in the hotel room. Offer movement-based activities like puppy yoga or dance zones for those who want to move but also give space and permission to rest. Design areas that soothe rather than stimulate with natural textures, soft lighting, and tech-free zones. These all can do wonders for the vibe and let people choose their journey.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: if we want to champion wellness for our clients and their guests, we must walk our talk. That means checking in with ourselves regularly, setting boundaries that protect our energy, and building in tiny moments of rest before, during, and after the event. Because when we show up as our healthiest, most grounded selves, we create better experiences; and isn't that what this industry is all about?

So, here's your summer self-care assignment: take the break, drink the water, stretch the stress out of your shoulders, and design your events with the same kind of care you deserve. You'll feel the difference—and so will everyone else. **SE**



SUMMER 2025

# Catersource™



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## CATERING'S *Unsung Heroes*

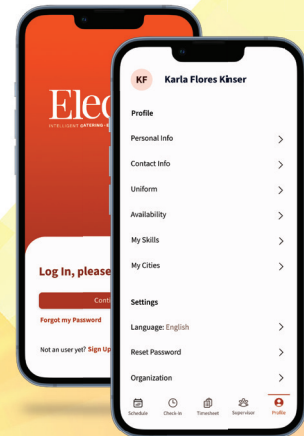
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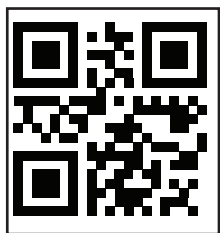
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At The Lake House on Canandaigua guests can enjoy fresh, locally sourced fare while sipping on a lake-side cocktail, offering the perfect spot to soak in the summer sun. Turn to [page 34](#) for our deep dive into hotel F&B. Photo courtesy The Lake House on Canandaigua

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# A badge of honor

**A** very long time ago (and I'm stressing a *very* long time ago), I was in a musical and a critic called me the "unsung hero" of the show. I was definitely not an "above the fold" lead, no publicity swirled around my appearance, but I had some significant stage time. Anyway, I saw that phrase and didn't know what it meant at the time—but for some reason, it stuck with me as a badge of honor.

As such, I love Amber Kispert's article, *Catering's Unsung Heroes*. We quote and elevate company principals, outgoing and enthusiastic marketers, and executive chefs often; but it's a rare day we focus on the "quiet" people of our industry, those who make an extreme impact on our events through their hard work and service. I'm so happy to shine that light on them in this issue. Turn to [page 16](#) to give it a read and then think about who you might bestow a badge of honor upon in your company.

Adding to the blend of this publication is the launch of *Sales Talk*—a "new" department that will be authored by the phenomenal Jennifer Perna of Fulton Market Consulting. She is taking over the slot held for many years by Meryl Snow, and I feel very fortunate to have her in our quarterly mix. You can find her starting on [page 30](#) where her nuts and bolts approach to successful selling hits a home run in her first inning here.

Finally, just a little housekeeping: I'm excited to announce that our very popular event, the Art of Catering Food, is finally separating itself from the Catersource conference and becoming the stand-alone event it once was, starting in 2026. Location TBD but we already have a number of very exciting locations in the running. However, if you need a little taste from Art of Catering Food 2025, turn to [page 09](#), where you will find Chef Jenny Bast's (Catering Creations) recipe for Lentil Carrot Harissa Hummus.

Have a great and profitable summer!

*Kathleen*

Kathleen Stoehr, Director of Community & Content Strategy

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## Foodservice Group

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# BRINGING *Flavor* INTO FOCUS

The key to flavorful dishes is creativity and approachability

Chef Elgin Woodman (Constellation Culinary Group) uses her nomadic lifestyle to inspire the menus that she creates for weddings and group events, taking diners on a culinary journey that showcases presentation, flavor, and culture. Photo courtesy Constellation Culinary Group



**C**aterers can no longer rely on their standard menus to make an impression. Today's guests aren't just eating; they're chasing experiences, and your menu needs to deliver a flavor story worth telling. Whether it's a spicy-sweet twist, a globally inspired fusion, or a daring ingredient that steals the show, flavor is the most powerful tool in the kitchen.

"Bold flavors are the ones that leave an impression; they linger on your palate and in your memory," says Chef Keith Sarasin (Aatma). "For me, it's not about heat or intensity alone, it's about depth. In catering, these flavors need to tell a story but still invite everyone to the table."

But how do you balance innovation with broad appeal?

"For us, bold doesn't mean overwhelming," says Bridget Bitza (Butler's Pantry), "it means thoughtful layering that enhances the dining experience."

## The bold and the beautiful

Today's clients are more adventurous than ever, seeking out global influences, unexpected combinations, and dishes that surprise and delight the palate.

"People are tired of the same old menus," says Sarasin. "They want something that feels personalized, rooted, and surprising; and bold flavors hit all of that."

The growing demand for [international and fusion cuisines](#), along with an emphasis on fresh and unexpected ingredients, has fueled the rise of bold flavors. Spices, [fermented ingredients](#), and umami-rich elements are no longer niche—they're expected. Whether it's the heat of gochujang, the tang



Nigerian sausage and chicken fried rice. Photo courtesy Constellation Culinary Group

of preserved lemon, or the deep savoriness of black garlic, diners are increasingly drawn to [flavors](#) that offer a memorable experience.

"We started incorporating more adventurous flavors into our menus because we wanted to push culinary boundaries and challenge ourselves—and our guests—with something new and exciting," says Chef Jonadel Tarrayo (Daniel et Daniel). "We love the idea of creating experiences that make people pause, savor, and truly enjoy something they may not have tried before."

A third of consumers are drawn to flavors that are new, unique, and different, and Gen Z values creativity one-and-a-half times more than baby boomers, opening the door for unexpected flavor juxtapositions and unique flavor combinations and fusions, according to research from Innova Market Insights.

"If done right, it sets you apart immediately," says Sarasin. "But fusion often leads to confusion; boldness for the sake of trendiness

burns out quick, but authentic boldness creates loyal fans."

## Flavor means more than just taste

When we talk about flavor, we're talking about much more than just taste (although that's an important component).

What we're actually talking about is the [sensory trifecta](#) of taste, aroma, and mouthfeel. These three factors combine to create the total experience of a dish.

When food enters your mouth, the sensations caused by that specific food register on your tongue, your nose, your palate, and even your teeth.

"It's the pungent smell of a fermented mango pickle, the brightness of freshly ground cumin, or the complexity of a masala that's been dry-roasted and hand-pounded," says Sarasin.





Oven Roasted Black Sea Bass from Chef Keyon Hammond (Get Plated) accompanied by a French-style cassoulet, a Pickled Fennel Citrus Salad, mussels, quinoa, heirloom tomatoes, grilled mushrooms, and haricot verts. Photo courtesy Ashleigh Bing Photo

For example, an unpleasant texture can make a dish go from delightful to disgusting. Grainy sauces, tough meat, and watery soups all can ruin the overall flavor of the dish.

Flavor is also influenced by contextual factors. For example, if you're having someone taste something in a stainless-steel test kitchen, their reaction can be completely different than if they're sitting at a table with colors, decorations, and sounds that tell them a story to accompany the new flavor.

"People tend to be far more experimental and open when the space they're in makes them feel positive or excited about the risk," says Samantha Stilwell (CultureDynamiq).

Plating and presentation can also have an impact on how guests experience flavor.

"We believe the visual appeal of a dish sets the stage for the flavor experience; bold flavors are best complemented by an intentional and visually striking presentation that

draws guests in and sparks curiosity," says Tarrayo. "The plate itself is the canvas, the food is the art, and this composition of all elements is the masterpiece. We like to create a sensory experience where the visual presentation excites the palate, setting the expectation for the bold flavors to come."

## It's all a matter of taste

When speaking specifically about taste, we all know the five tastes that help define flavor: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and umami. However, the spectrum of flavors goes well beyond just these. Think of things that are floral, earthy, spicy, or [smoky](#). Each flavor combines to achieve balance on our taste buds.

"The interplay of tastes creates a dynamic experience, making each bite more intriguing than the last," says Chef Cody Abrams (M Culinary Concepts). "These contrasts don't just highlight bold flavors—they make them unforgettable."

Bold flavors work best when they are well-balanced. Too much heat, acid, or spice can overwhelm guests. Consider combining tastes and flavors that enhance each other. Think of flavor combinations like a Tajin and pineapple glaze with seafood, chili-honey with creamy cheeses, black garlic and dark chocolate for an umami-rich dessert, and Yuzu and white miso for a punchy citrus contrast (turn to [page 32](#) in the adjoining *Special Events* for more on pairing summer flavors).

Once you understand taste, you can start pairing contrasting flavors (like sweet and salty or spicy and sour) for complexity or layering similar profiles for depth. Dishes should be carefully crafted to provide a symphony of flavors, taking the palate on an unforgettable ride.





"There's something incredibly rewarding about discovering and showcasing the tastes of our community," says Abrams, "creating dishes that tell a story through every bite."

## Flavor is not universal

As we noted above, there are a lot of different elements that influence flavor, but even beyond that, no two people will experience flavor the same.

For example, [culture](#) plays a significant role in shaping how people perceive and prefer flavors. The flavors that people grow up eating often become comfort foods and are deeply tied to memory and tradition.

"The beauty of food is that it tells a story, and cultural identity plays a huge role in shaping how those stories unfold," says Abrams.

"What's nostalgic for one guest may be unfamiliar to another," adds Bitza, "like rose water evoking childhood desserts for some but perfume for others."

Flavor also has an inherently temporal quality, which is to say that it is dynamic and changes over time. Think about foods that you may have hated as a child but over time grew to love and appreciate.

"Flavor is deeply personal—it's tied to memory, upbringing, and experience," says Abrams. "For some, boldness comes in the form of intense heat, while for others, it might be a deep umami richness. Our goal as chefs is to bridge those gaps—introducing new flavors

in ways that excite rather than intimidate."

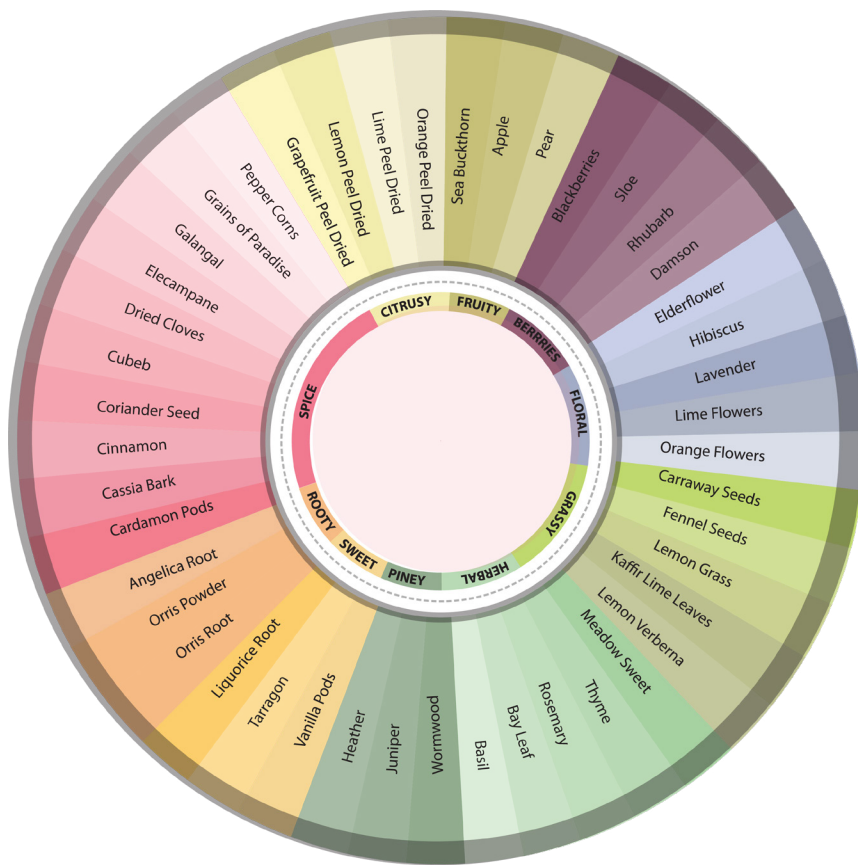
Every culture has its own foundation of flavors—some lean heavily on acidity, others on umami, heat, or sweetness. For example, [Indian cuisine](#) thrives on the balance of spicy, sweet, sour, and savory notes, while French cuisine focuses on richness and technique-driven depth. In Mexico, bold flavors often come from chiles, citrus, and smoke, while the bright, herbaceous notes of lemongrass and galangal immediately transport you to Southeast Asia. Understanding these classifications helps us layer flavors in ways that feel authentic and intentional.

"The moment you taste a dish, you can often tell its roots," says Abrams. "Every flavor profile carries a cultural fingerprint and understanding that allows us to use ingredients in a way that honors their origins while pushing creativity forward."

As cultures interact and globalize, flavor preferences continue to evolve. Fusion cuisines blend flavors from different countries, creating new taste experiences that transcend borders. However, despite globalization, traditional flavor profiles remain deeply connected to national identity, serving as a flavorful reminder of cultural heritage and history.

"R&D and a well stamped passport can prepare you for just about anything when embracing food from other cultures," says Chef Keyon Hammond (Get Plated).

Flavor perception is also highly individual. Scientists have discovered that each individual person has their own world of flavor thanks to the "flavor genome," or the genes that influence our perception and preference for different tastes. These genes code for taste receptors and trigger taste sensations. One of the most famous examples of this is cilantro.



A Flavor Wheel is an intuitive visual guide that maps out taste profiles, ingredient pairings, and seasonal combinations to help chefs craft perfectly balanced menus and elevate culinary creations to new heights of sophistication.



*“Flavor is deeply personal—it’s tied to memory, upbringing, and experience. For some, boldness comes in the form of intense heat, while for others, it might be a deep umami richness. Our goal as chefs is to bridge those gaps—introducing new flavors in ways that excite rather than intimidate.”* —Chef Cody Abrams

## recipe

### LENTIL CARROT HARISSA HUMMUS SERVED WITH PITA

*Recipe courtesy Chef Jenny Bast, Catering Creations*

*Photo courtesy Dana Gibbons Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc.*

*Yield: 1 quart*

#### *ingredients for harissa*

- 14 ea dried New Mexico or Guajillo chiles
- 18 oz (~6 ea) roasted red peppers (jarred is fine)
- 2 ea chipotles in adobo
- 4 T tomato paste
- 8 cloves garlic
- 2 tsp caraway seed, toasted and ground
- 4 tsp coriander, ground
- 4 tsp cumin, ground
- 3 tsp paprika, smoked (if you don’t have smoked paprika, add ½ tsp liquid smoke)
- ½ tsp cayenne pepper
- 1 T salt and pepper
- 8 T sugar
- 4 T lemon juice
- 4 T olive oil or canola oil

#### *method*

1. Remove stems and seeds from dried chiles. Place in pot and add water to cover. Boil until chiles are soft. Drain but save the liquid.
2. Combine all chiles with the remaining ingredients except the oil in a blender. \* Add in oil slowly while blending. Use some of the remaining chile liquid to create a smoother consistency. Taste and adjust accordingly. Portion in deli containers and freeze until needed. \*Note: You can use a food processor for this, but it’s not quite as smooth.



#### *ingredients for lentil carrot harissa hummus*

- 4 cups carrots, peeled and chopped into 2" pieces
  - 1 cup red lentils
  - ½ cup white beans
  - 1 cup oil
  - ½ cup harissa
  - ¼ cup honey
  - 1 T salt and pepper
- To garnish: crispy lentils, crispy chickpeas, cilantro, etc.

#### *method*

In a medium pot, boil carrots for 30-40 minutes until very soft. In another pot, cook lentils (overcooking is ideal since it leads to a smoother texture). Once the cooked carrots and lentils are cool, add to a blender or food processor with remaining ingredients. Blend until completely smooth, adding oil or water if necessary.





“Flavor association is deeply cultural and can also be deeply biological,” says Stilwell. “Two people can be brought up in the same family and culture and one will heap piles of cilantro onto their fish taco while the other will feel the urge to gag. Research shows us that this is due to a specific variant of a gene cluster that, when present, will create an aversion to the flavor of cilantro, and it’s not all that random.”

Flavors can also vary from dish to dish. Some ingredients, like spices or fermented products, can shift in intensity based on origin, seasonality, or aging. That’s why it’s important to taste constantly—before, during, and after preparation—to ensure balance. It’s about understanding how flavors interact and making subtle adjustments to maintain the intended experience every time.

## A build-your-own adventure

While bold flavors can be enticing, the key is to strike the right balance: bold enough to excite, yet approachable enough to please a crowd.

Incorporating complex flavors while keeping them approachable requires balance and familiarity. One way to achieve this is by introducing bold flavors gradually in palatable doses; mixing them with familiar ingredients that guests can relate to, so it feels more like comfort with an exciting twist rather than something completely new.

“As humans, we are predisposed to love a good journey,” says Stilwell. “We are all descendants of a species that was once fully nomadic, so

adventure runs through every part of us. So, give your guests an environment and story that makes them feel comfortable and safe to explore.”

For example, start with a familiar base, like a classic soup or roasted vegetable, and then layer in a new spice or fermented ingredient to gently ease people into something unfamiliar without overwhelming them.

“People know carrots, but they’ve never had them braised in jaggery and cardamom,” says Sarasin. “It’s about one foot in comfort and the other in curiosity.”

By keeping the foundation recognizable, guests feel comfortable trying something new.

“It’s a subtle push toward discovery—one bite at a time,” says Abrams. “It’s all about context—pairing the unexpected with the approachable. A unique spice blend in a classic dish or a familiar protein with an innovative sauce can be the gateway to expanding their palate. When they take that first bite and realize how incredible it tastes, that’s the moment we’ve won them over.”

Regardless of how balanced a dish is, there are still some people who are hesitant to venture into unfamiliar territory only because “certain flavors may just be polarizing for some guests,” says Hammond.

This is where customization and variety come into play. Instead of a flavorful entrée, add a bit of flavor to an appetizer or dessert. Or perhaps consider serving sauces on the side, so that guests can add what they are comfortable with.

“In catering we do have to be very careful of how we design our menus,” says Chef Elgin Woodman (Constellation Culinary Group). “We can be very fortunate to have a client that is adventurous, but we can’t



Sweet & Sour Beet Cornet. Photo courtesy Ashleigh Bing Photo





Spaghetti Squash with Curried Carrots and French Green Beans, Photo courtesy Butler's Pantry

## SOME LIKE IT

# Hot

From smoked chili rims to jalapeño syrups, heat-driven cocktails are everywhere right now, offering complexity, contrast, and a little bit of edge. This shift isn't about shock value—it's about creating layered, memorable flavor experiences that stand out.

Head over to [catersource.com](http://catersource.com) for an exclusive look at how to turn up the heat on your bar menu.

lose sight of the other 198 guests attending the event and that may be more conservative. The key is in variety and options and making sure that we have thought of everyone."

Never force bold flavors for the sake of being bold; instead, understand your audience and their comfort level.

"Everyone has their own preferences and even an easy introduction to a new flavor might not be for everyone," says Chef Jenny Bast (Catering Creations\*). "Blending a bit of the new with the old is how I overcome it."

For example, high-end galas, private chef experiences, and tech industry corporate events tend to have guests who are eager for something new and unexpected. On the other hand,

weddings, large-scale fundraisers, and traditional family gatherings often lean more toward crowd-pleasing classics.

Introducing bold flavors isn't just about taste either, it is also about storytelling. Clients and guests are more likely to be excited about a dish when they understand its inspiration and the thought behind it.

Bold flavors need bold storytelling.

"If you know where a flavor comes from, you're more open to tasting it," says Sarasin. "If I tell you this chutney recipe came from a region or household and was traditionally served with Idli during Pongal, it becomes more than just 'spicy green stuff'—curiosity kicks in."

It's important to start with curiosity. Explore new ingredients, experiment with different cultures, and don't be afraid to take risks. But most importantly, keep it intentional—bold for the sake of bold isn't enough. The key is knowing when to push and when to hold back. Introduce striking elements in a way that feels natural, layer flavors thoughtfully, and always taste, tweak, and refine. Daring doesn't have to mean overwhelming—it should mean unforgettable.

"Bold and unique flavors are all about matching the energy of the event," says Abrams. "Unlike a typical dining experience, catered events often have a vibrant, dynamic atmosphere—from bustling galas to high-energy fundraisers. Our goal is to create flavors that stand out and leave a lasting impression, even amidst the excitement. Every bite should deliver a memorable taste that complements the overall experience." **CS**

*\*Catering Creations is a proud member of the [Leading Caterers of America](#) (a consortium of the top catering and event planners throughout the United States and Canada).*





# A Showcase of Storytelling:

## The 2025 CATIE Award Finalists and Recipient for Best Catered Event

**E**ach year, the International Caterers Association honors excellence in the art of catering through the Catered Arts Through Innovative Excellence awards (CATIEs). These accolades recognize those who go beyond taste, transforming catering into immersive experiences. In the Best Catered Event category, this year's finalists proved that food can be a form of storytelling, celebration, and unforgettable connection. From oceanfront opulence to mountaintop magic and golden hour enchantment, each event delivered awe-inspiring design, culinary creativity, and flawless execution.

### Recipient: "Golden Hour Gathering" by D'Amico Hospitality

D'Amico Hospitality's "Golden Hour Gathering" wasn't just a catered

event—it was a sensory experience set against a breathtaking sunset backdrop. Designed to honor a long-time client's retirement and philanthropic legacy, this celebration was a masterclass in elegance, warmth, and hospitality.

Held at a stunning private estate, the event unfolded over several hours, with each element timed to align with the golden hues of sunset. Guests were welcomed with craft cocktails and passed hors d'oeuvres like Duck Confit Profiteroles and Smoked Trout Deviled Eggs, enjoyed amid glowing lanterns and string lights that enhanced the natural beauty of the setting.

Dinner was served al fresco under a canopy of trees, with courses like Wood-Grilled Lamb Chops and Corn & Chanterelle Risotto paired with regional wines. The pièce de résistance? A dessert bar inspired by the client's favorite childhood treats, elevated with a culinary twist—think

cherry pie with aged balsamic and dark chocolate s'mores made to order.

The event's timeline, menu, and ambiance were carefully orchestrated to reflect not only the literal golden hour, but also the guest of honor's luminous life. The result was an unforgettable send-off filled with gratitude, joy, and stunning flavor.

### Finalist: "Mountain Escape" by Catering by Design (Colorado)

Set amidst the awe-inspiring beauty of Jackson Hole, "Mountain Escape" was a wedding celebration that married rustic charm with refined cuisine. Catering by Design transformed a working horse ranch into a polished reception venue—barn doors opened to reveal elegant greenery installations, warm lighting, and upscale finishes.



(Above left) "Sea La Vie." Photo courtesy 24 Carrots Catering & Events; (Above right) "Mountain Escape." Photo courtesy Catering by Design





D'Amico Hospitality received the CATIE award for Best Catered Event for its "Golden Hour Gathering." Photo courtesy D'Amico Hospitality

“Whether bringing guests through golden hour memories, mountain ranch romance, or breezy seaside bliss, these caterers turned meals into moments.”

Guests were treated to a menu rooted in regional ingredients and elevated technique. Highlights included a Cacio e Pepe Pasta Wheel station, Green Chile Braised Short Ribs, Jalapeño Elk Sliders, and the show-stopping Braised Bison Braciolo. The couple's personal touches shone through, from the Penn State Creamery ice cream flown in from their alma mater to a custom-built espresso bar housed inside a vintage covered wagon—crafted especially at the father-of-the-groom's request.

This event's success was a testament to detailed planning and creative problem-solving. Despite the remote mountain location and cross-country coordination, Catering by Design ensured that every plate told a piece of the couple's story.

### Finalist: “Sea La Vie” by 24 Carrots Catering & Events

“Sea La Vie,” created by 24 Carrots Catering & Events, captured the essence of coastal luxury and artistic flair for a lavish birthday celebration by the sea. Inspired by the client's love for travel, cuisine, and the ocean, the event design combined Mediterranean influences with a boho-chic sensibility.


Guests were welcomed by an Aperol spritz wall and invited into a vibrant tented space adorned with dried palms, macramé details, and sunset-hued floral arrangements. A seafood-forward menu featured interactive elements like a ceviche station with house-pickled accompaniments, plus signature

small plates like lobster tortellini and saffron-poached shrimp.

What made “Sea La Vie” shine was the seamless blend of style and substance. From its curated playlists to its open-fire cooking demos and midnight paella, every detail was designed to delight the senses. The result? An event as memorable as a postcard from paradise.

### Where art meets appetite

The 2025 CATIE awards once again highlight the artistry, precision, and passion behind the world's best catered events. Whether bringing guests through golden hour memories, mountain ranch romance, or breezy seaside bliss, these caterers turned meals into moments. Their work reminds us all: the best events aren't just attended—they're felt.

Looking for more award-winning inspiration? Explore all the CATIE award finalists and recipients at <https://www.internationalcaterers.org>, and be the first to know when submissions open for the 2026 awards. Let your next event tell a story that lingers long after the last bite. 

**D'Amico Hospitality, Catering by Design, and 24 Carrots Catering & Events** are all proud members of the ICA. For more information on how to join the ICA and to be notified of future catering industry webinars, events, and education opportunities, visit [internationalcaterers.org](https://www.internationalcaterers.org).





By Carl Sacks



## Economic Impact of Elections Part 2 – Immigration and the U.S. Labor Market

*Editor's note: This is the second in a series of articles about the current U.S. political climate, and how it may impact the catering industry. See [part 1](#), which explores tariffs, [here](#).*

**T**he state of the labor market in the U.S. is broadly positive, though some areas remain problematic. As of the time of preparation of this article, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate remains only slightly above 4%, a level that many economists have traditionally considered to be full employment. This is down from a peak of over 14% in April 2020, during early COVID-19.

However, there is a case to be made that the current tight labor market benefits some categories of workers much more than others, primarily because of the impact of automation. For example, there are some mid-level creative and analytical white-collar jobs that are clearly at risk from AI replacement,

while many manual labor jobs are being done more frequently by machine. However, the catering industry is not likely to directly benefit from automation, since [robot servers and captains](#) are not on the horizon.

Immigration continues to be a bone of political contention. The big picture perspective is that the U.S. has always been a nation of immigrants. Recent arrivals have traditionally been fuel for economic growth, and discouraging immigrants feels self-defeating on several levels. Despite this, the post-election political climate seems to be focused on limiting additions to an already tight labor market.

This will impact caterers in several areas:

### Primary catering staff

Recent immigrants, documented or not, represent a pool of labor that caterers have frequently used for staffing both front and back of

house. This is more pronounced in some areas of the country than others; however, the caterers we have visited with purely native U.S. born staff are clearly in the minority. Regions of the country with large immigrant populations are the most likely to have those ethnicities represented in the local catering personnel pool.

While there are no reliable surveys on the number of undocumented staff working for U.S. caterers, it is certainly greater than zero. The percentage of undocumented workers in the hospitality industry is estimated to be in the 7% range, but our guess is that the undocumented percentage in catering is somewhat higher. This is in part because there are so many part-time jobs in catering that are in constant need of temporary staff.

The catering industry went through a labor shortage shock during COVID-19, from which it has mostly recovered. However, if there is a substantial ICE crackdown on immigrants, this could limit the





During a previous crackdown on undocumented labor in the early 2000s, several very large catering industry vendors were forced to cancel orders due to their own personnel shortages. This had a cascading effect on the caterers they work with, forcing some cancellations of events.”

growth of the catering industry for the immediate future. When we ask caterers which factors impact their ability to take on additional business, already most will say availability of staff. Limits on both legal and illegal immigration could exacerbate this problem.

## Vendor staff

Many catering industry vendors and suppliers also depend on immigrant labor. These include crucial primary vendors such as rental and tent companies, venues, and local food purveyors. Some event staffing agencies are also widely staffed with immigrants. The types of positions filled by these personnel include drivers, set up staff, cleaners, and food prep staff.

During a previous crackdown on undocumented labor in the early 2000s, several very large catering industry vendors were forced to cancel orders due to their own personnel shortages. This had a cascading effect on the caterers they work with, forcing some cancellations of events. Needless to say, this is an outcome that caterers wish to avoid.

## Grower/processor/ manufacturer staff

An additional degree of separation from caterers’ local vendors, but

perhaps just as crucial, are the immigrants who work in agriculture, meatpacking, and poultry processing. Many or most of these immigrants take jobs that most native-born Americans will not fill. There are several reasons for this: low pay, difficult working conditions, seasonality, and comparisons to what they might be expected to do in their home countries.

The National Agricultural Workers Survey conducted from 2019–2020 indicates that 70% of U.S. crop farmworkers are not native born. Of this group, it is estimated that about two-thirds are undocumented, and therefore subject to deportation. Widespread loss of this farmworker cohort could be catastrophic for the catering industry, due to the increased cost of domestic agriculture products, added to the presumptive [tariffs currently being levied](#) on other food imports.

According to the USDA, a similar ratio of workers in meat and poultry processing are undocumented—around 50%. While many farms are owned by individuals and families, meat and poultry processing plants are generally owned by large food conglomerates. Presumably these corporations would prefer to have a 100% documented labor force. The fact that they do not would seem to indicate that it is just not possible in the rural areas where most of these plants are located.

Basic economic theory states that a shortage of labor will tend to

drive up prices—as such mass deportations will likely add to inflation. The U.S.-born workforce is already close to fully employed, and immigrants are willing to take on lower status jobs that the native-born workforce is not. Additionally, the vast majority of undocumented workers are taxpayers, contributing to Social Security and Medicare even though they are unlikely to ever collect from these programs.

There is a case to be made that the U.S. borders need to be secured to diminish drug and human smuggling, and convicted criminals need to be deported to their countries of origin. However, it also needs to be recognized that widespread expulsions of immigrants will diminish the standard of living of the native born who remain in the country, primarily because of inflation. The catering industry will be among those most directly impacted if this happens. **CS**



**Carl Sacks** has spent more than 17 years as a consultant to the catering industry, starting at *Catersource*, and

currently as the managing member of Certified Catering Consultants. His list of clients includes many of the most prominent and successful caterers in the industry.





# The Unsung Heroes

These are the indispensable members of the catering Industry

By Amber Kispert



**B**ehind every event, there's an army of under-recognized team members working tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that every bite, sip, and detail of an event runs seamlessly. These unsung heroes may not always be in the spotlight, but without them, the magic of catering wouldn't be possible.

"Each role, no matter how small it seems, contributes to the overall customer experience," says Julie Baron (Proof of the Pudding). "These unsung heroes of hospitality are the heart and soul of every memorable event, often sacrificing their own family time and celebrations."

Let's take a moment to appreciate the vital contributions of these often-overlooked professionals. *Catersource* magazine asked caterers to share the team members who help make their businesses successful.

As the saying goes, "It takes a village." In catering, that village includes countless hands and hearts working in harmony to create memorable moments. So, let's shine a light on their invaluable contributions—they deserve it.



Toni (Antoinette) Cinque is an Event Captain at Blue Elephant Events and Catering. Photo courtesy Blue Elephant Events and Catering

## Toni (Antoinette) Cinque

### event captain at Blue Elephant Events and Catering

Toni (Antoinette) Cinque has been with Blue Elephant Events and Catering for over five years and her willingness to observe and report has been indispensable; she takes the initiative and becomes the eyes and ears of the entire event while keeping in constant contact with the owners and/or event captain.

She has perfected the art of being instantly invisible or appearing out of nowhere when a need arises.

"The front-of-house team members are the true unsung heroes for one reason: they are the eyes and ears of the entire production. They are the ones who assemble the front-of-house materials, they're the first in line for questions, compliments, and complaints (if any). They have a finger on the pulse of the mood of the crowd, and the ability to affect change on that mood in certain circumstances," says Reuben Bell (Blue Elephant Events and Catering). "These front-of-house team members are the backbone of every production because they have a handle on what the guests are doing and what is happening in the kitchen and keep the intersection of the two open for communication."

## Gladys Rios

### supervisor at Schaffer LA

Gladys Rios has been with Schaffer LA since its beginnings and has experience across a wide variety of roles. She has acted as a server, event captain, buffet designer, supervisor, and has been known to moonlight as a kitchen assistant. Basically, she has done it all.

"Her positive attitude and enthusiasm, dedication to the brand, and genuine values have been paramount to Schaffer," says Kathleen Schaffer. "Not only is she a wonderful person but is always reliable and a pleasure to work with."



Gladys Rios has worn many hats at Schaffer LA, including server, event captain, buffet designer, and supervisor. Photo courtesy Schaffer LA





## Vicki Repress

### office manager at Proof of the Pudding

Every organization has a heartbeat—a person who keeps things running smoothly, ensuring no detail is overlooked and no challenge is too great. At Proof of the Pudding, that person is Vicki Repress, the office manager who has become the backbone of the company's operations.

Repress joined Proof of the Pudding in August 2023. What was supposed to be a three-week assignment quickly turned into a full-time, permanent role—a testament to her exceptional work, dedication, and ability to thrive in a fast-paced environment.

As the first point of contact, Repress sets the tone with her warm, welcoming demeanor and unparalleled professionalism. She goes above and beyond in everything she does and reassures customers that their special occasions are in the best hands. Whether she's supporting her coworkers, assisting customers or finding ways to improve operations, Repress gives 110% every day.

A true customer service superstar, Repress takes pride in lifting the spirits of everyone she interacts with.

"My goal is to be happy, meet people where they are at, and elevate them," she says.

Vicki Repress is the Office Manager at Proof of the Pudding. Photo courtesy Amanda Mazonkey/Proof of the Pudding

## Darren Tyler

### pm operations & utility coordinator at Butler's Pantry

Darren Tyler's expertise in logistics, unwavering commitment to excellence, and passion for teamwork make him a pivotal part of Butler's Pantry's success. For over a decade, he has been instrumental in the operations department, implementing new procedures, tackling challenges head-on, and inspiring his team with his relentless dedication and positive spirit.

His main responsibilities currently involve ensuring accurate event preparation, truck loading, rental drop-offs, and collaborating with the service team on load-in/load-out processes. Tyler focuses on smooth operations and team coordination.

"Leave no crumbs on the table," he says, and ensure tasks are completed efficiently. He values doing things the right way and loves working with a team that shares a passion for getting the job done. He also mentors others and strives to maintain a positive impact, even on tough days.



Darren Tyler, PM Operations & Utility Coordinator at Butler's Pantry. Photo courtesy Butler's Pantry



*“The catering industry is filled with unsung heroes who work tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure not just the success of every event, but that day-to-day operations are also fulfilled. Each role, no matter how small it seems, contributes to the overall customer experience. These unsung heroes of hospitality are the heart and soul of every memorable event, often sacrificing their own family time and celebrations.”* —Julie Baron

## Sammy Dahlberg

### payroll & benefits manager at Proof of the Pudding

While Sammy Dahlberg might not be directly involved in the glamorous aspects of catering, her role is crucial to Proof of the Puddings' smooth operation and employees' well-being. As the payroll and benefits manager for Proof of the Pudding, Dahlberg helps ensure compliance with complex regulations like labor laws and tax laws. She manages and administers employee benefits, such as health insurance and paid time off, and oversees payroll processing, making certain that everyone receives their hard-earned wages without delay or error.

Team members know that they can reach out to Dahlberg if they have issues, whether it's logging in to the benefits portal or access to healthcare, and she's quick on the case. Even in large matters, she often resolves things within the day. Dahlberg's influence in fostering a culture of trust is undeniable, and it has positively impacted operations. Her hands-on approach, working closely with leadership, ensures a seamless timeline for hiring, compensation and benefits activation, and regulatory compliance. Her efforts make it a positive experience for all. She always goes above and beyond. Ultimately, people want to get paid accurately and on time, and Dahlberg does whatever it takes to make that happen.

“Many of our employees work evenings and on weekends,” says Dahlberg, “and I want to be there for them if they have questions. Our people are my clients, so whatever I can do for them, I'll do it. Their satisfaction is my priority.”



Sammy Dahlberg, Payroll & Benefits Manager at Proof of the Pudding. Photo courtesy Amanda Mazonkey/Proof of the Pudding





Umberto Rose, Pastry Chef at Vestals Catering.  
Photo courtesy Vestals Catering

## Umberto Rose

### pastry chef at Vestals Catering

Before joining Vestals Catering, Umberto Rose faced significant challenges, including homelessness. He was in the process of transitioning off the streets when an unexpected encounter changed his life. One day, while panhandling not far from the former Vestals Catering kitchen, Jordan Swim, the owner of Vestals Catering, recognized Rose from CitySquare's food pantry, where he volunteers. Swim stopped to talk to Rose, gave him his business card, and invited him to visit the kitchen sometime. The following week, Rose took Swim up on the offer. He met with Swim and another member of the team who had once been homeless as well, but with the support of others—including Swim—she had overcome her challenges and was now working at Vestals Catering.

Rose felt instantly at ease, thus giving him the courage to share his story with the Vestals Catering team: a scooter accident had resulted in a broken back, making it difficult for him to find and keep a job due to ongoing pain, and for two years he struggled to find an employer willing to hire him given his physical limitations. After hearing his story, Swim offered Rose a job on the spot.

## Janice Hope

### pastry chef at Marcia Selden Catering & Events

For 30 years, Janice Hope has been crafting deliciousness at Marcia Selden Catering & Events, and "honestly, I'm not sure what we'd do without her," says Chef Robin Selden. Hope started out as a prep chef, quietly working events and honing her craft behind the scenes.

Hope doesn't just bake; she pours her heart into every cookie, tart, and cake that leaves the kitchen. Some call it perfectionism, but the Seldens call it pure magic. Hope embodies the core values of the company: dedication, collaboration, integrity, service excellence, and a relentless pursuit of perfection. Her standards are as high as her heart is big. No tray of cookies, no cake or tart leaves the kitchen without her careful inspection, every edge clean, every glaze glistening. She doesn't just meet expectations; she exceeds them, ensuring that each sweet treat tells a story of care and craftsmanship. More than her baking skills, though, it's her heart that leaves the biggest impact. She's the one who keeps morale high, cracking jokes when stress is running wild. She has sweet terms of endearment for every team member which always brings a smile to their faces.

"We always say that our food tells a story, and Janice is one of the best storytellers we know," says Selden. "Every dessert she makes, every smile she shares, and every moment she spends lifting up her teammates is proof that Janice isn't just a talented chef, she's family to us. She's the heartbeat of our kitchen, the keeper of our morning rituals, and the reason half our team is secretly addicted to chocolate chip cookies. She's a true unsung hero, and we couldn't be luckier to have her in our family at Marcia Selden Catering."



Janice Hope, Pastry Chef at Marcia Selden Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Marcia Selden Catering & Events





Dionicio "Nicho" Cerecero, Scullery Lead at Tasty Catering.  
Photo courtesy Tasty Catering

## Dionicio "Nicho" Cerecero

### scullery lead at Tasty Catering

Dionicio "Nicho" Cerecero has been with Tasty Catering since 2001 where he does whatever it takes to ensure they have all the clean dishes, pots, pans, and equipment needed to execute their events. During the hectic holiday season or busy summer picnic season, he can be found in the kitchen around the clock, making sure the culinary and production teams have everything they need. Moreover, he does it all with pride and a big smile.

"It's the dishwashers, prep cooks, warehouse team, and inventory managers—those who don't often attend the events—who I consider the unsung heroes," says Kornel Grygo (Tasty Catering). "They handle all the behind-the-scenes work to ensure chefs have the pots and pans they need to cook, servers have dishes to serve on, and everything the sales team promises is delivered. These individuals rarely get to see the smiling faces of guests or hear the round of applause for a well-catered event, but they continue to bring passion to their work every single day. They understand how their roles contribute to the final catered product and the success of every event. It's these team members that I consider the true unsung heroes."

## Mario Busalacchi

### warehouse supervisor at Saz's Hospitality Group

The dishwashers and warehouse team members, including Mario Busalacchi at Saz's Hospitality Group, can be a forgotten entity until a challenge arises. They are the ones who swoop in to ensure that all of the equipment is cleaned, tested, and ready for the hands of the event teams so that they can focus on what matters—executing the event.

"They're the forgotten team with the least glamorous responsibility but the most impactful at the same time to the entire event," says Bryan Neuschaefer (Saz's Hospitality Group).



Mario Busalacchi, Warehouse Supervisor at Saz's Hospitality Group. Photo courtesy Saz's Hospitality Group

What makes these team members extraordinary is their commitment to excellence, often without public recognition. Their collective effort creates unforgettable experiences for guests while remaining invisible to many attendees. They embody teamwork, resilience, and professionalism, working long hours with smiles and steadfast dedication.

These unsung heroes may not always be in the spotlight, but without them, the magic of catering would be impossible. **CS**



# CATERING TO DIVERSITY

BY AMBER KISPERT

## Taking the Streets

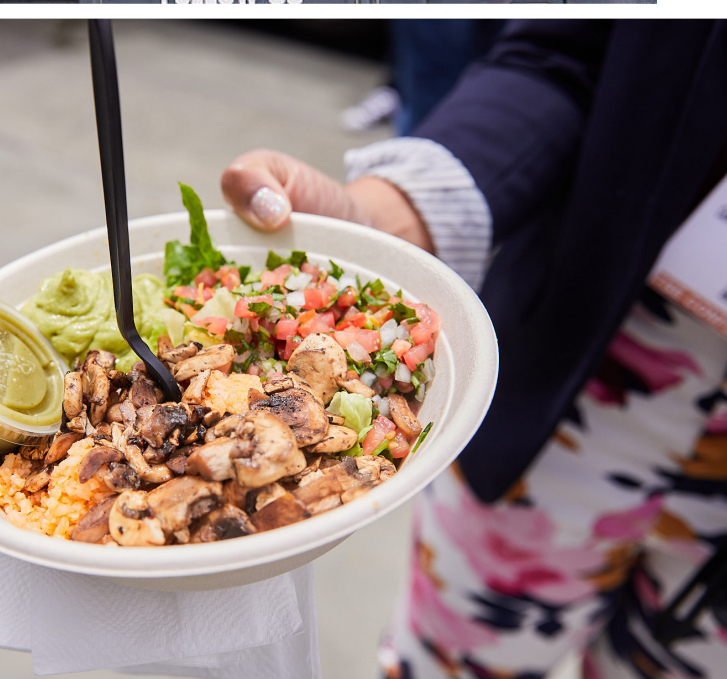


Catersource + The Special Event 2022 hosted a food truck roundup where attendees could grab lunch on the first day of the conference. All photos (this page) courtesy WASIO Faces





# it to eets



## Caterers can be on the road to success with the addition of food trucks

**In an industry where client expectations are on the move as quickly as culinary trends, staying relevant can be a full-time job.** Enter the food truck: part mobile kitchen, part branding machine, and 100% crowd-pleaser.

Once the scrappy cousin of traditional catering, food trucks have evolved into polished, chef-driven powerhouses. Now, they're not just complementing high-end events—they're starring in them.

"First they were pulling their kids away from the food trucks, and now they're hiring them for that same kid's birthday party," said Roy Choi ([Kogi Korean BBQ](#)) during Catersource + The Special Event 2022 (where he delivered the closing keynote).

### Food trucks are on a roll

Food trucks have moved well beyond the street corners and music festivals where they first earned their reputation, now becoming key players in the catered event space. They're pulling up to weddings, corporate galas, private parties, and even upscale fundraisers.

"People want unique experiences," says Sean Pals (ACT 3 Catering/Twelve Baskets Catering; ACT 3 Catering owns and operates the [El Koreano food truck](#)). "While catering can be incredibly creative, there's nothing quite like a food truck rolling up at the end of the night with hot, late-night snacks. It adds a cool factor that elevates the event."

"When you have a very detailed event with all the bells and whistles, there are expectations," adds Melissa Nelson ([Nelly Belly Woodfired Pizza Food Truck](#)), "but when you're dealing with something more casual and they're watching you cook in real-time, there just tends to be less complaints."

Last year, food trucks were a \$1.8 billion industry (and is expected to grow to \$6.8 by 2028), according to Pals (who delivered a session on food trucks during Catersource + The Special Event 2025; for details about On Demand Content access, send an email to [CS-TSERegistration@informa.com](mailto:CS-TSERegistration@informa.com)). There are currently 35,000 active food trucks within the U.S.

"It's a huge market and there's a lot of demand," says Pals. "It might sound like a lot of trucks, but when you spread that out across the entire country, it's actually not very many."





The El Koreano food truck (operated by ACT 3 Catering) features a menu inspired by both Mexican and Korean cuisine for an ultimate culinary fusion. Clients can enjoy everything from pork bulgogi tortas to fried rice quesadillas as well as homemade sauces to enhance the experience. Shown: Furikake Fries. All photos courtesy El Koreano

Although the pandemic cannot be credited with much of anything positive, it was in many cases the catalyst for the [food truck boom](#).

By mid-2020, as indoor dining remained restricted and traditional catering struggled to adapt, food trucks found themselves in an unexpected spotlight. Their open-air setup and built-in mobility made them a natural fit for the new normal, offering a safer, more flexible dining option that aligned perfectly with public health guidelines. Neighborhoods welcomed trucks as a much-needed culinary escape, while [micro-weddings](#), outdoor gatherings, and socially distanced events turned to mobile kitchens to provide gourmet experiences without the risk of enclosed spaces.

"It became more acceptable to have a casual menu that was still modern and cool," says Nelson.

## Food in the fast lane

With a food truck, caterers can experiment with niche or themed menus tailored to specific events. Food trucks give chefs the freedom to get quirky.

"Usually when people are looking for a food truck they want to specialize," says Nelson. "Anything that's popular can work for a food truck."

From Korean BBQ tacos to loaded barbecue mac and cheese, food trucks have pushed the boundaries of culinary innovation. This global appreciation for street food presents a golden opportunity for caterers looking to add flair and flexibility to their business models.

"The truck is the trend; what the truck serves is not necessarily trendy," says Steve DeAngelo (DeAngelo's Catering & Events).

Menu development for food trucks often looks similar to traditional catering, with the caveat that there are some tighter constraints, such as storage space, cook time, and equipment limitations, which all play a big role. Food trucks can also work in tandem with traditional catering menus, because many of the same ingredients and proteins can be used in multiple ways across both businesses. Be wary of replicating your catering menus on a food truck, though.

"You can't take Model A and replicate it in Model B when you're doing eight different things, with four or five steps each," says DeAngelo. "You have to put your menu on a diet."



## Street smarts

Food trucks bring with them not only inventive menus, but also a refreshing twist on traditional catering models. [For caterers](#), these mobile kitchens offer far more than novelty—they're a smart, strategic way to modernize, streamline, diversify, and elevate the client experience.

One of the biggest advantages food trucks offer is flexibility. Outdoor venues that once posed logistical nightmares due to the lack of kitchen access are now fair game. The truck is the kitchen, fully equipped and ready to serve. This mobility allows caterers to say "yes" to a wider range of events and spaces—farm fields, beaches, wooded areas, etc.—that once required major workarounds to deliver a full-service meal.

"The truck opened doors we didn't expect," says Pals. "It provided a lot of opportunities that we wouldn't have gotten otherwise."

At the same time, they offer a chance to break from traditional banquet-style formats and bring a sense of fun and interaction to the dining experience. Guests aren't just being served—they're engaging with the chef, choosing their own adventure from a chalkboard menu, and snapping photos of the vibrant truck design and creative plating.

"In traditional catering, everyone is eating the same thing across the board," says Kathy Craig (Castle Event Catering, which operates [13 Bones Urban BBQ Mobile Kitchen](#)), "but with food trucks, guests get a choice."

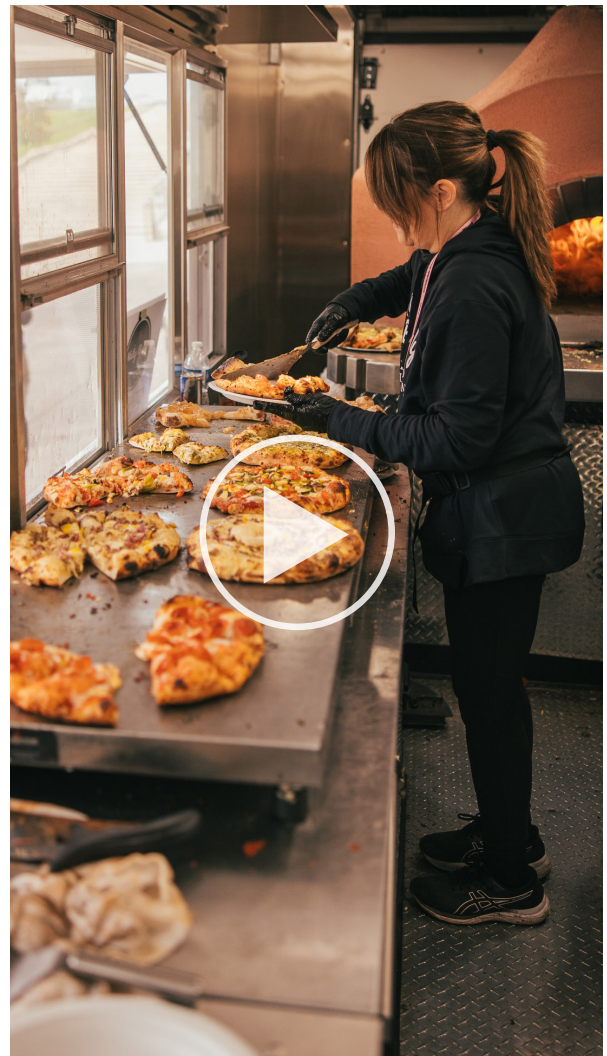
Speed is another win. Food trucks are built for efficiency and high-volume service. With the right prep and flow, they can feed hundreds of guests with minimal wait time, which makes them perfect for events like festivals or casual weddings where pacing and guest satisfaction are key; and "since you're rolling in and rolling out, it's not eating up your entire Saturday like traditional catering," says Nelson.

## On the road to success

Incorporating a truck doesn't mean abandoning white-glove standards. Many caterers are finding balance by using trucks as just one piece of a larger catering puzzle. Some use them as a main course station, paired with passed hors d'oeuvres and plated desserts to strike a balance between casual and elegant. Or maybe your corporate clients are looking to cater lunch during an employee appreciation event; some caterers might even build themed events entirely around the truck—think "Global Street Eats" with multiple trucks representing

*"While catering can be incredibly creative, there's nothing quite like a food truck rolling up at the end of the night with hot, late-night snacks. It adds a cool factor that elevates the event."*

—Sean Pals



For over 30 years, the Nelly Belly Woodfired Fire Pizza Food Truck has been delivering catering experiences with a professional team that's second to none. They serve fresh, made-to-order wood-fired pizzas and piadinas with their signature crispy crusts, high-quality ingredients, and fast, friendly service. Photo and video courtesy Nelly Belly Woodfired Pizza



different cuisines. There are even caterers using food trucks as satellite kitchens at large events to ease the load on the primary prep area.

"The food truck experience and catered experience are two different bottles," says DeAngelo, "but that doesn't mean they can't mesh together."

But before adding food trucks to your catering company's repertoire, the first step is to establish the intended use of the truck. Will it primarily be a retail business on street corners, at public spaces (such as breweries, wineries, business parks, etc.), and during festivals and fairs? Or are you looking to leverage it during private events as an alternative to traditional catering? Maybe you simply just want it for use as a field kitchen during offsite events where kitchen access is minimal.

"As a caterer, we always start with scope and objective—what are you trying to do and how are you going to achieve that," says DeAngelo. "Before you take the plunge, you have to think about those things."

Or, perhaps operating a food truck isn't something you're even considering, but rather you want to explore partnering with outside food trucks during your events.

"Being a truck wrangler still pays you money, but you don't have the maintenance costs," says Mark Lopez (Crave Catering).

Each one of these business models has its own unique challenges and approaches, so answering this question up front will help you facilitate your next steps.

## Getting your business in gear

Before venturing into the world of food trucks, there's a lot of upfront homework that needs to happen first.



BF Street Kitchen renovated a vintage school bus into a mobile kitchen to serve up woodfired pizzas at weddings. All photos courtesy Studio Veil







and other catered events.

First, evaluate your market. Understand your client base and local demand. Are clients asking for outdoor or unconventional venue catering? Is there an appetite for food trucks in your area? Know your target market before anything else.

"Making sure your demographic is getting what they want is big with food trucks," says Craig.

Next, weigh the pros and cons of custom-building a truck, or purchasing a pre-existing truck because "optimizing the flow of your truck is going to benefit you long term," says Pals. Each one has their pros and cons, so make sure to do your research to determine which one is right for you.

"The size of your events and the types of food you offer will determine what equipment to include in your truck," said Katie Hamuka, (Wandering Dago Catering Co. & Food Truck in an [article for Catersource](#), "as well as the layout of the equipment."

If purchasing a food truck seems like a big leap, consider renting one or partnering with an existing food truck operator. This allows you to test the waters before making a long-term commitment. Trailers also can ease some of the financial burden.

"We did not want to be in a position where we could not get to the event if the truck breaks down," says Nelson, who opted to add a trailer to their fleet of trucks.

Remember: Food trucks come with their own maze of permits, parking regulations, and health codes—which vary widely by city and county.

"Start by finding out what the rules are because that's going to be your number one," says Craig. "If your truck doesn't pass all the standards, you won't be able to operate."

Finally, one of the most important pieces to have in place before hitting the road with your truck is to have your business and marketing plan in place (including your branding guide); food trucks can quite literally be a moving billboard for your



(Far left) 13 Bones Urban BBQ Mobile Kitchen (operated by Castle Event Catering) first came onto the scene in 2012 at the Benton Franklin County Fair & Rodeo where their signature Apple & Cherry Wood Smoked Tri-Tip and Whole Smoked Pigs were introduced. Since then, they have continued to create a repertoire of locally inspired sauces and many creative menu items. All photos courtesy 13 Bones Urban BBQ Mobile Kitchen; (Left) The Spartanburg CanVan activation was hosted by Smalls Sliders as a relief event to help give back after the hurricane devastation. All photos courtesy Smalls Sliders



catering business. Eye-catching graphics, logos, and a cohesive brand aesthetic can attract attention both at events and on the road; and in an era where every event doubles as a social media moment, that kind of visual flair is a serious asset. Food trucks don't just serve meals; they create buzz. A colorful truck, a quirky menu board, and hands-on service? That's social media gold for both the host and your brand.

"It's free advertising because every single person who comes up to the truck sees our name," says Nelson. "When you're at a traditional catered event, not very many people ask who the caterer is."

## Caution ahead

Of course, when there is a complete operational shift from what caterers are used to, there's sure to be some speed bumps along the way. For starters, running a food truck isn't quite like staffing a traditional kitchen. It demands a nimble crew that can handle tight spaces, fast service, and high guest interaction.

"Don't just hand over the keys and expect people to be okay," says Pals. "Working on a food truck is not like working in a restaurant."

"Your staff has to be a MacGyver," adds DeAngelo, "so make sure your chef and crew have some mechanical knowledge as well as culinary knowledge because it comes in handy."

Additionally, timing becomes everything—from when to start cooking to how you stagger service so that guests aren't stuck in long, winding lines.

"The biggest difference is mobility—everything is done on-site, in a compact space," says Pals. "On the back end, it's a lot like traditional catering: from lead generation to event planning and prep, it's the same workflow."



Although now defunct, Crave Catering had previously operated Dio De Los Tacos. All photos courtesy Mark Lopez

Weather is another wildcard. That picturesque outdoor reception can turn into a logistical scramble if the skies decide to open up. Backup plans, tents, and solid event coordination are essential.

"The seasonality alone could bury some operators," says DeAngelo, "so it's never a good idea to have all of your eggs in one basket; if you drop that basket your eggs go away."

Food safety and quality are also non-negotiable (as it is with any catered event), but there's a few extra considerations added to the mix. When on the truck, caterers must maintain strict temperature control—hot food stays hot, cold food stays cold. Staff should be trained and certified in food handling and follow detailed checklists to ensure cleanliness and compliance throughout service. Regular maintenance of equipment (including vehicle maintenance) and a clean, organized workspace also go a long way in preventing issues and delivering consistent, high-quality food every time.

"You've got a full kitchen and then you've got a full vehicle," says Lopez, "and the two affect each other."

Everything else? It's business as usual for most caterers; food is prepped in the commissary kitchen and then prepared onsite for service.

"This is the same coordination that every caterer does between commissary and their venue or site," says Craig. "Food trucks don't stand alone, they always have to have a commissary kitchen."

Incorporating a food truck into your catering operation isn't just about keeping up with trends—it's about meeting modern clients where they are. They want flexibility, flavor, and a bit of flair. They want experiences, not just entrees; and when you roll up in a beautifully branded truck serving five-star street food, you're delivering exactly that.

"All of us caterers can go out and buy trucks, we all know how to make something on a grill," says DeAngelo, "but there's more to it than that." **CS**



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By Jennifer Perna



# Leads are Gifts

**Editor's note:** *Sales Talk with Jennifer Perna succeeds Successful Selling with Meryl Snow, who opted to take a step back from [her longtime column](#).*

**I** started my consulting business eight years ago. Prior to that, I spent years managing catering sales teams ranging in size from three to 32. No matter the number of salespeople, lead distribution and fighting over the “ownership” of inbound leads was always a hot topic. It still is today.

The most frequent question I hear from sales leaders is, “How do we teach our salespeople to sell and stop being order takers?”

Conversely, the most frequent question I hear from salespeople is, “How did you handle leads and make it fair for everyone?”

Different perspectives and priorities on salesperson roles, responsibilities, and expectations, right?

## Sales is more than account management

Sales leaders, it's time to take responsibility. You've created a team of order takers by:

- Calling some salespeople “salespeople” when many are truly “account managers”
- Letting salespeople just service inbound leads and wait for them to come in

- Relying on external venues and third-party websites to be your number one lead source
- Pushing salespeople out of their comfort zone by asking them to “sell” without providing any outbound business development skills training

Don't get me wrong, account management as a part of sales is really important. Is this even selling? Yes, *kind of*, maybe about 50% of your sales day: working your existing client base by nurturing and growing these clients into your top revenue accounts; building stronger relationships, listening, communicating, and understanding your clients' needs; knowing what clients want before they even ask; and educating clients on what they *have to have*.

These skills are the building blocks of account management, but anyone with *sales* in their title cannot rely on these skills alone to grow their individual pipeline and achieve their goal (assuming there is a structured, written goal—a topic for another time).

## Leading by example

Which takes me back to the leads. I spend more time coaching sales leaders on the how-to of lead distribution rather than growing existing accounts and finding new business. It really bothers me because *leads are gifts*. Leads should be appreciated. Leads should be special. Leads should be earned. Leads should never



# “ Make your salespeople realize their own efforts are more important than any lead coming their way.”

be expected. Leads should be the cherry on top. Leads are truly gifts, and based on conversations I've had this year, these gifts are becoming scarcer. The phone isn't ringing as much, and venues are not as busy as they've been. Leads are drying up; sales leaders are scared. Salespeople should be scared too.

So, what should a sales leader do? How do you encourage a salesperson to focus on what they can control versus waiting for those leads to come in? Do you even know if you have true salespeople on your team, or are they really account managers?

Start by acknowledging that your salespeople need to get out there and sell. Owners expect this. Do not assume your team knows how to sell, either. Some of your salespeople have never done this before; I can guarantee this, as several salespeople have told me as such. This is a skillset that needs to be taught, re-taught, audited, and developed by you, their sales leader, and you need to be comfortable doing it.

Here's my sales checklist to help get you started:

## ☑ **Schedule an individual conversation with each member of the sales team**

- Step away from your desk for an honest dialogue
- Ask what they love and don't love about their job
- Determine if they really are a salesperson
  - If not, is an account manager a realistic alternative?
  - Does this make sense for your team structure and goals?

## ☑ **Review each salesperson's existing client base and potential for growth**

- Encourage proactive outreach
- Provide ideas, tools, and treats
- Recognize re-introductions are often necessary
- Join your salesperson on client visits. It's fun!

## ☑ **Ask them if they have ever called on a new client**


- Don't be surprised with the responses you receive
- Define your expectations
- Do you start with an email, phone call, or text?

## ☑ **Be the client**

- See and hear how they introduce themselves and your services
- Review written initial outreach
- Practice initial calls (yes, I said *calls*)
- Invest in the follow-up
- Develop readily available branded marketing pieces in various formats
- Immediacy is mandatory (think: within the hour...)

## ☑ **Provide resources for research**

- Look at trade publications, your own database, LinkedIn, Google Alerts
- Share your own selling experiences
- Move out of your office
- Mix things up and sit with your team to audit outreach

Make your salespeople realize their own efforts are more important than any lead coming their way. How refreshing is it to be a sales leader fostering an environment of salespeople “fighting” for clients to reach out to? That, sales leader, is a gift in itself. 



**Jennifer Perna** started Fulton Market Consulting in May 2017 after developing an event experience and sales management portfolio for over 25 years in the Chicago catering and special events industry. Jennifer coaches various hospitality-related owners, managers and leaders on growing their sales revenue while also increasing bottom line profitability. She brings a dynamic, approachable and relatable communication style to all levels and members of the team. Jennifer is past president of the International Caterers Association (ICA), sponsor of MIBE (Make it Better Every day), education advisor to ECEP (Elite Catering & Event Professionals) and annual speaker at Catersource. She is a proud graduate of the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration. When Jennifer is not spending time with her clients, you can find her on a beach anywhere in the world.





# Four Traits that Separate Game-Changing Hires from the Rest

**D**uring periods of uncertainty, most businesses choose to take a conservative approach and rightfully so. It can be risky to make major decisions when there are questions about future demand; and at the same time, these situations are ripe with opportunity. The costs of expansion often come down, new product and service demands arise, and there are a lot of talented people looking for work. Unemployment in the hospitality industry recently reached the highest level it's been since just after the pandemic, which is good news for those looking to expand or level up their teams.

It may be easier to attract a wide pool of candidates than it's been the past few years, but it's more important than ever to have a well-structured hiring process—a process that is clear on the needs of the position and that can help you identify top talent. I've found there are four characteristics common among top performers, and these are attributes that I look for when hiring key positions within our company.

## 1. Perseverance

The road to success is never smooth and straight. There are obstacles, challenges, curves, and setbacks that litter the path. Those who can deal with adversity, bounce back from failure, and persevere when things get hard

rise above the rest. They are willing to take risks that can significantly move the business forward and they are the first to find solutions when things go wrong.

*Sample interview questions:*

- Tell us about a time in your career that you wanted something so badly that you were unstoppable in pursuing it.
- What obstacles did you overcome to get there?

## 2. Teamwork

The ability to work well with others is critical within high functioning teams. We all know how miserable it can be to work with someone who detracts from the efforts of the team, yet I've never had anyone tell me that they "aren't a team player." Gaining insight into the teams a candidate has been on and the dynamics within those teams is critical to determining how they will fit on your team.

*Sample interview questions:*

- Tell me about a time when you worked on a team that was not successful.
- What was your role and experience?
- Tell us about the situation from the perspective of your fellow team members.





It may be easier to attract a wide pool of candidates than it's been the past few years, but it's more important than ever to have a well-structured hiring process, a process that is clear on the needs of the position and that can help you identify top talent."



### 3. Initiative

Top performers don't need or want to be micromanaged. Once they are clear on the objectives of the company and their role within it, they will go above and beyond their responsibilities to move the business forward; they are always looking for ways to improve products, services, and processes. They aren't willing to settle for the status quo. They are constantly making themselves, their company, and the people around them better.

*Sample interview questions:*

- Give me some examples of times where you showed initiative.
- How did this have an impact on your previous company?

### 4. Positivity

We are drawn to people who are positive, energetic, kind, and helpful. They give us hope, provide reassurance, and inspire positivity within others. Positivity does not mean someone is in denial, simply looking for a silver lining, or ignoring obstacles; it's the act of affirming that there is indeed a solution even if it may not be clear. No matter what happens to us, we get to choose how we think about it. Negative thoughts steal creative energy and are a deterrent to success, so we either have faith in what can go wrong or faith in what can go right. I want people on our team who spread positive energy, and lift everyone up around them.

*Sample interview questions:*

- What bothers you?
- Are you lucky? (Do you want unlucky people working for you?)

The next time you're hiring, make sure you look for these four characteristics. When you hire people who can persevere through difficulty, have great teamwork skills, are willing to take initiative, and have an overall positive outlook, they will be the catalysts that take your business to the next level. **CS**



**Anthony Lambatos** grew up in the catering business working for his father and founder of **Footers Catering** in Denver, CO. Anthony and his wife, April, purchased the business in 2010 and have successfully made the transition to a second-generation family business.





# CHECKING IN ON HOTELS

Part 1 in a strategic  
look at how hotels are  
redefining the art &  
business of dining

By Amber Kispert



# L F&B



Commonwealth is the high-end dining experience at the Angad Arts Hotel St Louis, Tapestry Collection by Hilton offering elevated and bold interpretations of classic comfort food. Photo courtesy Angad Arts Hotel



**O**nce a footnote in the broader hotel experience, food and beverage (F&B) has emerged as a driving force behind guest satisfaction, brand differentiation, and bottom-line success. No longer just a convenience, today's hotel kitchens do more than feed; they tell stories, foster community, and shape memories. From luxury ballrooms to rooftop tasting menus, F&B has evolved into a complex, creative engine that fuels not just guests, but entire business strategies.

"A hotel is built just once—the rooms look the same, the lobby is pretty much the same, the carpets are the same—so there's nothing new that's happening on a daily basis," says Chef Ashfer Biju (Baccarat Hotel New York), "but with F&B you have so many opportunities to innovate and showcase that the hotel is a living organism."

Let's take a closer look at how the modern hotel is reimagining the culinary experience, and what operators and caterers alike can learn from the shift because, "food and beverage is one of the most authentic ways we can express a hotel's personality and connect guests to the [local destination](#)," says Tom Walters (Hilton).



## From lackluster to luxury

Hotel F&B (which encompasses both restaurants and catering) has long been synonymous with consistency, not quality—often viewed as an obligatory amenity focused on familiar menus, a predictable design, and a service model that mirrors the overall guest experience. Travelers knew what to expect, and this formulaic approach was the backbone of hotel dining, designed to cater to guests who valued reliability over excitement. But times are changing, and so are consumer expectations.

(Top row left to right) Seafood Cappelletti from Luce featuring basil egg pasta, seafood chorizo, dungeness crab, corn, basil sabayon, squid ink gastrique, and smoked trout roe. Photo courtesy InterContinental San Francisco Hotel; The American Gator Club in Ponte Vedra Beach, FL. Photo courtesy Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa; The "Taste of Seattle" banquet menu has a "Seattle Sweets" option featuring the region's favorite treats including a Starbucks latte panna cotta with chocolate crumble. Photo courtesy Hyatt Regency Lake Washington

(Bottom row, left to right) Bar Tilda at Sofitel Sydney Wentworth offers a tableside martini experience. Photo courtesy Jason Loucas; The MacCallum House focuses on using only the highest-quality foods from local farms. Photo courtesy Nikola Zvolensky Photography; Rose Tavern's Pan Roasted Salmon, JB's Focaccia, and Creamy Cajun Shrimp. Photo courtesy The Lake House on Canandaigua









"Hotel food has dramatically evolved, shifting from basic, uninspired offerings to highly curated, creative menus," says Danielle Minninger (Le Meridien St. Louis Clayton).

Driven by a mix of guest expectations, increased competition, and the global foodie movement, hotel brands have invested in elevated dining experiences. Think Michelin-starred concepts in major cities, celebrity chef partnerships, and hyper-local menus that double as cultural immersion. Even limited-service properties are rethinking the breakfast buffet and snack bars, embracing healthier options and regional flair.

What was once a revenue sideline has become a core pillar of brand identity—and a serious draw for [both leisure and business travelers](#).

"From our perspective, quality food and beverage offerings are more than just an amenity we offer," says Chef Paul Acosta (Four Points by Sheraton Norwood, and the [2025 DICED champion](#)), "It's part of our brand identity. We want people to look at us as more than just a place to sleep, but a place to have a great dining experience, whether that is just a fantastic full breakfast buffet with made-to-order waffles and omelets, a corporate lunch at our conference center, or a relaxing dinner at our restaurant."

## Food tourism at its finest

Once upon a time, hotel restaurants catered exclusively to the guests sleeping in the bedrooms above them, and everything tended to be cookie cutter across the board.

"Everybody had a Chicken Caesar Salad, a bland burger, and steak frites," says Kenneth Scharlatt (Savage Orchid Hospitality). "But where's the partnership with local farms and produce providers? Where's the chef that has not lost his passion for cooking? Why are we not bringing them into our hotels?"

"Why are we okay being stagnant and just being good enough? Why are we doing bland? Why are we doing boring? There is so much more on the table."

Now, the modern traveler's view of luxury extends beyond plush pillows and high thread-count sheets. They desire rich experiences at every touchpoint, including

(Right) Minami Japanese Restaurant at the Unexpected Ibiza Hotel. Photo courtesy Palladium Hotel Group; (Below) Chicken fricassee empanadas. Photo courtesy La Concha Key West





“Food and beverage is one of the most authentic ways we express a hotel's personality and connect guests to the local destination.”

—Tom Walters

food, wellness, and health, all available to them in one location.

“Today, hotel chefs and F&B professionals try to break the stigma of typical hotel food and offer something just as tasty and creative as the restaurant across the street and show guests that hotel food does not have to be boring,” says Aja Owens (Sawgrass Marriott Golf Resort & Spa).

It's no surprise, then, that savvy hotels are capitalizing on the idea of “food tourism” by positioning themselves not just as places to stay, but as places to taste. For foodies, the local cuisine isn't just part of the travel experience; it's the main event.

Consider this: 50% of global travelers book restaurant reservations before they even book their flights, according to the [annual trends report from Hilton](#), and 60% of luxury travelers prioritize staying at hotels with great restaurants.

“Hotel restaurants are increasingly becoming community hubs. Guests are seeking places that offer not only great food but also ambiance, storytelling, and authenticity. This evolution is encouraging hotels to innovate across all F&B touchpoints and to blur the lines between local and traveler experiences,” says Walters. “The primary challenge is shifting guest and local perceptions—moving beyond the traditional view of hotel restaurants as secondary to the local dining scene.”



(Left) The Michelin-starred Capa Steakhouse offers fresh Florida seafood, small plates, and expertly grilled cuts. Photo courtesy Four Seasons Resort Orlando; (Above) The reopened Waldorf Astoria New York has partnered with acclaimed mixologist Jeff Bell to craft bespoke cocktails for Peacock Alley and Lex Yard. Photo courtesy Hilton





(Left) Teatime in Wonderland is a multi-sensory culinary experience at Caesars Palace. Photo courtesy Electric Playhouse; (Right) T&T Innovation Kitchen offers an ever-changing five-course tasting menu for private events. Photo courtesy JW Marriott Desert Springs Resort

From show kitchens to pop-up tasting menus and chef collaborations to pool-side cooking, hotels are becoming magnets for both travelers and locals. Community-focused programming—like farmers' market brunches, local beer pairings, and cooking classes—help properties integrate into the fabric of their neighborhoods. In fact, one in five people will travel specifically to seek out new restaurants or culinary experiences, according to the Hilton trends study.

"Food is a thing that people are going to remember," says Scharlatt. "Food is something that is going to stick in the mind of people for good reason and get them to come back. Food can be a differentiator when it comes to the guest experience."

This idea of food tourism is also driving events. According to Eventbrite, 49% of fourth space seekers (gatherings that transform online interests into meaningful real-world connections and self-discovery opportunities, not to be mistaken with third places) want to come together through food and drink events. Whether it's mastering a culinary skill through baking and cooking classes (63%) or transforming dinner into a social sensory adventure through themed dinner experiences (39%), these gatherings become opportunities for creativity and connection.

"Plus, having an onsite restaurant that is highly ranked helps in selling private events; it leans into our goal to market weddings and social events as entire weekends versus just a few hours," says Acosta. "For social events, having our restaurants available for a rehearsal dinner or late-night gathering after an event is appealing to clients and assists us with landing many sales."

Trends like hyper-local sourcing, zero-waste kitchens, and global fusion cuisine are all playing out within hotel F&B, making them vibrant contributors to regional food scenes. It's often these extras that turn a meal into a memory. Hotels are investing in immersive, experiential dining elements that go beyond the plate: chef's tables offer a behind-the-scenes look at the kitchen; onsite gardens and apiaries double as both supply and storytelling; and curated tasting dinners provide guests with rare, personalized experiences.

"Twenty-some years ago you wouldn't see chefs in the room talking to groups," says Ed DiAntonio (Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resorts). "But today, chefs are in the room introducing every entrée; our chefs are coming out and looking forward to talking about the menu."

These experiences show travelers that hotels are putting great emphasis on food and beverage and serving one-of-a-kind opportunities they will remember and seek out in future trips. These finishing touches don't just wow diners—they deepen brand loyalty and justify premium pricing. They're also social media gold, providing valuable organic marketing and a digital footprint for the property's culinary credibility.

In a day when exclusive access and intimate experiences are heralded over material goods, a meal prepared by world-class chefs in a spectacular setting is something luxury consumers are willing to travel for.

*Don't miss the Fall Issue of Catersource for Part 2 where we'll take a look at the role of the executive chef within hotels and how they don't just lead a kitchen, they lead a culture, setting the tone for every outlet, event, and bite served under the hotel's roof. **CS***





By Amber Kispert


# A Capitol Spread

Design Cuisine catered several 2025 Presidential Inauguration events

*Editor's note: Design Cuisine has produced this event for over three decades in a non-partisan capacity, and for administration led by both parties.*

S

ince 1989, Design Cuisine has had the distinct opportunity to have catered at every inauguration, continuing their tradition of excellence through decades of these historic occasions. In January 2025, their team once again delivered exceptional service across several high-profile events during the 60th Presidential Inaugural Events.

They successfully coordinated with multiple agencies, including the Secret Service, Capitol Police, FDA, USDA, and the Virginia and Washington, D.C. health departments, ensuring seamless production and timely deliveries despite road closures and heightened security screenings. Over the course of three days, they served over 10,000 guests across multiple events—all executed with precision, expertise, and meticulous attention to detail. Here's a look! 

Aerial view of the Candlelight Dinner at the National Building Museum



## Vice President-Elect Dinner

This formal black-tie dinner took place two days before the Inauguration. Spanning multiple floors, the event featured a cocktail reception for 2,200 guests, followed by an elegant three-course plated dinner for 450 attendees, including members of the incoming presidential cabinet.

### Menu

- **Wild Mushroom and Truffle Gnocchi:** chanterelle and morel mushrooms, goat cheese cream sauce, fresh tomato, and parmigiano
- **Seared Branzino:** cauliflower purée, eggplant caponata, and lemon dill velouté
- **Caramelia Mousse, Chocolate Almond Dacquoise:** white chocolate whipped ganache, dark chocolate sablé and cocoa nibs with Graeter's Madagascar Vanilla Bean Ice Cream



(Top) The Vice President-Elect Dinner was held at the National Gallery of Art on January 18; (Above left) Members of the Design Cuisine Team: Back Row (from left): Gabriel Osorio, Kent Smith, and Jose Duran; Front Row (from left): Sara Giraldo, Lauren Stephens, and Devin Gramley; (Above right) From left: Diego Ochoa, Carlos Quintero, Gabriel Durna, Rodney Coronado, and Jonathan Sarmiento.



## Candlelight Dinner

On the eve of the Inauguration, a distinguished black-tie dinner brought together 1,904 esteemed guests for an evening of tradition and celebration. This event is one of the oldest inaugural balls in presidential history, dating back to President Grover Cleveland's inaugural celebration in 1885.

### Menu

- **Osetra Caviar in a Golden Egg:** savory chive custard, reggiano crisps
- **Classic Beef Wellington:** truffled madeira sauce, glazed heirloom carrots, turnips, and celery hearts
- **The American Pie:** Granny Smith Apple with salted caramel, and vanilla bean ice cream



(Above left) Osetra Caviar in a Golden Egg with savory chive custard and reggiano crisps. (Above right) The Candlelight Dinner was held on January 19 at the National Building Museum.





Greater Omaha Angus Ribeye Steak with Thumbelina carrots, broccoli rabe, carrot top herb sauce, red wine truffle jus, and potato gratin. Photo courtesy Birch Thomas



## Inaugural Luncheon

The Inaugural Luncheon is Congress's official welcome to the newly sworn-in President and Vice President following the Inaugural Address. This seated, three-course meal brings together 240 guests, including lawmakers, Cabinet nominees, Supreme Court justices, and other distinguished attendees for a momentous gathering in honor of the new administration.

To showcase ingredients from the home states of the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, the ribeye was sourced from a Black Angus cattle ranch in Omaha, NE, complemented by handpicked Chesapeake blue crab meat and crisp apples from Minnesota.

### Menu

- **Chesapeake Crab Cake:** tomato tartar, bay sauce, pickled vegetables, romanesco, dill, and chive oil
- **Greater Omaha Angus Ribeye Steak:** Thumbelina carrots, broccoli rabe, carrot top herb sauce, red wine truffle jus, and potato gratin
- **Minnesota Apple Icebox Terrine:** sour cream ice cream and salted caramel

(Left) Beyond the culinary mastery, DC Rental (Design Cuisine's sister company) brought timeless elegance to the National Statuary Hall with hand-selected design elements. Working with the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, they selected a slate blue Ultrasuede linen with intricate floral and paisley patterns, hand-crafted for each table. Gold-rimmed china, delicate glassware, and Elmwood Cane Back Chairs completed the refined setting, ensuring the Inaugural Luncheon was as visually stunning as it was historic.



## Starlight Ball

The Starlight Ball at Union Station was a grand cocktail buffet reception, welcoming over 5,000 guests for an evening of celebration.

### Menu

#### Passed Hors D'Oeuvres

- Beef & Arugula Crostini
- Sesame Tuna Poké
- Heirloom Tomato Tartlette

#### Savory Displays

- Polenta Bites
- Blanketed Franks
- Mojito Chicken
- Imported and Domestic Cheese Board with fresh baguette, assorted crackers and flat breads and enhanced with Caramelized Brie & Basil Mascarpone Torta
- Mini Ham Croissanwiches
- Smoked Salmon on Black Pepper Biscuits
- French Dip Cheddar Biscuits

#### Desserts

- Patriotic Petit Fours
- Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough Bonbons
- Blood Orange Raspberry Tartlet
- American Style Baked Alaska Brownie Sticks
- Carrot Cream Cheese Sandwich Cookies
- Vegan Donuts
- Chocolate Marquis Cake Squares
- Bourbon Butter Cheesecake Squares
- All American Cupcakes
- Assorted Chocolate Bark with Red, White & Blue Cocoa Swirls



(Top) Atlantic Salmon Blinis. Photo courtesy Birch Thomas; (Above) The Starlight Ball was held at Union Station on Inauguration Day, January 20; (Left) Members of the Design Cuisine team: (from left) Claire Alink, Abbie Prince, Maria Pestana, and Sarah Lusk.





# Edible Alchemy

**Molecular gastronomy has the ability to create visually stunning and sensory-rich experiences.**

At its core, molecular gastronomy combines the art of cooking with the science of chemistry and physics. Techniques like spherification, foaming, and using liquid nitrogen allow chefs to transform ordinary ingredients into extraordinary presentations and textures. Imagine serving bite-sized caviar pearls made from fruit juices, or a delicate foam that bursts with flavor when it touches the tongue—these are the kinds of wow factors that today's clients are craving. **CS** —Amber Kispert



Negroni Gels featuring Cazadores Blanco, Red Bitter, sweet vermouth, kumquat, and gelatin | Chowgirls Catering | **Photo courtesy Lucas Botz**



Goat cheese panna cotta, blood orange fluid gel, and beets | Elegant Affairs Weddings & Events | **Photo courtesy Andrea Correale**



Hamsa's Melody (gin infused with tom kha spices, clarified lime & coconut, ginger, and umami) | Catering by Michaels and Grand Bevy | **Photo courtesy Tim Tab Studios**



Smoky Mushroom "Self-Dressing" salad (dry ice combined with a molecularly crafted dressing means the rising bubbles and smoke dress the salad on the plate) | Eatertainment Events & Catering | **Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering**





Chef Nettie Frank freeze dried various candies, fruits, and vegetables during Art of Catering Food 2024 | Art of Catering Food | Photo courtesy Dana Gibbons Photography/AGNYC Productions, Inc.



Citrus & Honey Milsean (citrus yogurt, caramelized honey mousse, candied kumquats, and honeycomb gems | Ridgewells Catering | Photo courtesy Ronald Flores Photography



Cucumber cup, melon "caviar," and mint syrup | D'Amico Catering | Photo courtesy Bellagala Photography



Beet and goat cheese panna cotta with candied pecans and beet micro sponge | Elegant Affairs Weddings & Events | Photo courtesy Andrea Correale





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