

WINTER 2024

Catersource™

State OF THE Industry 2024



2025 Food Trends You'll Want to Sink Your Teeth Into {04}

Any Way You Slice It {08}

How COVID-19 Changed Corporate Delivery Catering {34}

The Perfect Ending {36}

EDUCATION, NEWS, PRODUCTS & IDEAS FOR PROFESSIONAL CATERERS

contents



WINTER 2024
VOLUME 22, NUMBER 4



features

04....2025 FOOD TRENDS YOU'LL WANT TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

A sneak peek of what will be shaping menus in the new year

18....STATE OF THE INDUSTRY 2024

This year saw a renewed focus on people, personalized experiences, and the planet



Behind the Cover

Chowgirls Catering showcased several festive holiday cocktails during a menu preview event including the Snow Angel (left), the Cranberry Sauced (center), and the Winter Break (right) as well as two non-alcoholic options, a Grapefruit Rosemary Shrub and a Spiced Cherry Fizz. Turn to [page 18](#) for our State of the Industry 2024 where we touch on the non-alcoholic cocktail trend.

Photo courtesy Lucas Botz

departments

03....FOREWORD

The little things

08....ON THE MENU

Pizza is consistently a crowd pleaser

16....CONFERENCE NEWS

The agenda is now live for Catersource + The Special Event 2025

32....ICA'S THE DISH

Blue Elephant's lobster bake at the ICA Summer Workshop

34....FROM THE CONSULTANTS

How COVID-19 changed corporate delivery catering

36....IN THE GLASS

Bringing digestifs to your bar program

40....CHEF'S CORNER

Growing pains

41....THE C-SUITE

Prevent burnout by addressing these four factors

42....CATERING TO DIVERSITY

The final farewell: navigating the nuances of funeral catering

48....STEAL THIS

Setting the scene



The Little Things

It is inevitable that we get to the end of a year and look back over accomplishments and failures, wins and losses. Our State of the Industry feature by Amber Kispert, beginning on [page 18](#), will report on the high and low points in 2024 catering. Be sure to check it out for the insight you need as you launch your Q1 2025 season.

Career-wise, I saw myself pass the 10-year mark with *Catersource* magazine (major win!) in June. Honestly, it is the longest I've ever stuck with a job and I feel a great sense of accomplishment that I've been at the helm for so long. The magazine has gone through many iterations but the goal (which you can read on our cover) has always been clear: Education, News, Products & Ideas for Professional Caterers. One element on our cover, however, is absolutely new with this issue. After multiple decades we have refreshed our *Catersource* "flag." We are *Catersource* with a capital 'C' now and the font used is called Aleo. It's perhaps a near-unnoticeable thing to most of you, but we love the new look.

Speaking of new looks, six months or so after I started my job as editor, I was asked to assist with the redesign of our website, [catersource.com](#). It was painful... I'm not going to lie. The result was a site that worked well for many years, but it became clear as technology evolved that it wasn't keeping up with the needs of our community.

The past few months we finally (finally!) had the opportunity to do a top-to-bottom website refresh. Though I loathe to repeat myself, it was painful... I'm not going to lie. But the result—we are absolutely delighted. Everything about it is an improvement, from SEO to how articles are displayed, and the ease in uploading content, slide shows, ads, and videos (i.e., our daily work) is more intuitive. I encourage you to go to [the site](#) and give it a look. If you find something awry, let us know—we are still working the bugs out, of course.

Wishing you the happiest of seasons and thank you for reading and supporting *Catersource* magazine. See you in 2025!

Kathleen Stoehr, Director of Community & Content Strategy

What do you think of this issue? Like it? Love it? Have something to contribute to our website? We'd love to hear from you. Write us at editor@catersource.com.

Catersource™

- Director of Community & Content Strategy** Kathleen Stoehr, kathleen.stoehr@informa.com
- Senior Content Producer** Amber Kispert, amber.kispert@informa.com
- Content Editor** Amanda Nicklaus, amanda.nicklaus@informa.com
- Art Director** Sarah Kolcheck, sarah@nxtgennetwork.com
- Sales Director** Michael Lindahl, michael.lindahl@informa.com
- Sales Account Executive** Devin Barnes, devin.barnes@informa.com
- Managing Director** Melissa Fromento, melissa.fromento@informa.com
- Ad Operations Specialist** Lauren Loya, lauren.loya@informa.com

WEBSITES

- catersource.com
- specialevents.com
- leadingcaterersamerica.com
- informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/
- informaconnect.com/art-of-catering-food/

CONTRIBUTORS

International Caterers Association, Anthony Lambatos, Robin Selden, and Paul Neuman

Foodservice Group

Catersource is published quarterly by Informa Connect Foodservice Group and Catersource llc, 650 Third Ave, 22nd Floor, New York, NY 10158. Subscriptions: Go to catersource.com and sign up to receive Catersource's quarterly issues and/or monthly e-newsletter products. Reproduction in whole or part without written permission prohibited. ©2024 Informa Connect Foodservice Group. All rights reserved.

2025

FOOD TRENDS

YOU'LL WANT TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

Get ready for a deliciously adventurous 2025! This year, the food scene is exploding with bold flavors, innovative ingredients, and playful takes on familiar dishes. In 2025, food is about exploring, savoring, and daring to try the unexpected. Here's a sneak peek of what's on the plate for 2025, and then head over to [Catersource's website](#) for a deeper look at each of these trends. **CS** —Amber Kispert



CRUNCH TIME

From crispy grains and granola to sprouted and fermented nuts to roasted chickpeas and mushroom chips, now more than ever, diners are looking to enhance their meals with the addition of texture.



DUMPLING DELIGHT

With their endless variations in fillings, wrappers, and cooking styles, dumplings are the ultimate versatile dish, reminding people of family gatherings, celebrations, and cultural heritage.



EGG-CELLENT

Eggs are set to be a major food trend in 2025, capturing global interest due to their versatility, nutritional profile, and adaptability to various diets. Plus, they're comforting.

(Crunch Time) Roasted cauliflower, currants, and pine nuts. Photo courtesy Diwas Photography; (Dumpling Delight) Xian Lamb Siu Mai. Photo courtesy Royal Palms Dim Sum Club; (Egg-cellent) These over-the-top paninis include all of the breakfast classics—cheese, sausage, and eggs—all on a cinnamon roll. Photo courtesy General Mills Foodservice



BACK TO OUR ROOTS

Heritage and indigenous ingredients are gaining newfound recognition and popularity, as chefs and food enthusiasts alike embrace the rich cultural histories and flavors these ingredients bring to the table.



CRAZY FOR COTTAGECORE

Seeds and honey are riding the wave of the cottagecore movement, as people lean into the romantic, rural-inspired lifestyle that embraces simple, natural, and self-sufficient living.



MANGO MADNESS

Known for their vibrant color, tropical sweetness, and juicy texture, mangoes are now being celebrated as both a refreshing snack and a versatile ingredient in everything from cocktails to desserts and even savory dishes.



PRIORITIZING PROTEIN

Unique and alternative proteins are making waves as people seek sustainable, nutritious, and creative options to traditional meat.

(Back to Our Roots) Saxifrage is an edible plant with a crisp, juicy, and refreshing mild flavor. Photo courtesy Alan Bergo; (Crazy for Cottagecore) Truffle Honey Ricotta Jar. Photo courtesy Kayla Denae; (Mango Madness) Mango mousse with jumbo lump crab, Regia Ova caviar, arugula oil, and micro greens. Photo courtesy Buzz Orr Multimedia; (Prioritizing Protein) Chicken liver mousse tartlet. Photo courtesy Gate Gourmet



MAKING A SPLASH

With the continued popularity of seaweed and the increasing interest in harvesting readily available aquatic plants for more-sustainable sources of protein and nutrients, the tide is turning toward foods made with more sea and freshwater greens.



SNACK ATTACK

International snacks will be bringing bold flavors and cultural flair to snack tables everywhere, offering a delicious way to explore diverse food traditions with every bite.



STRIKING A SOUR NOTE

Sourdough is being utilized in both traditional and innovative ways—pizza crusts (turn to page 08 for a deeper look at pizza), flatbreads, brownies, crackers, and more—with customers looking for the benefits and flavor that sourdough offers.



TEA TIME

There's tea talk everywhere you turn—both in flavor popularity, new steeping formats, and new products like plant-based milk teas and sparkling teas.

(Making a Splash) Crispy karaage chicken with Nappa seaweed slaw. Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering; (Snack Attack) French-inspired snack buffet. Photo courtesy Culinary Canvas; (Striking a Sour Note) Turkey croquettes with sourdough stuffing. Photo courtesy Eatertainment Events & Catering; (Tea Time) Afternoon tea. Photo courtesy Sergio Zacchi



SEE VIDEO



YouTube

DECORATIVE CHAFER WIND GUARDS

BUY NOW



amazon

BLOCKS WIND & KEEPS FOOD WARM

From casual parties to formal banquets, our wind guards provide protection from the wind, allowing you to keep your food warm, fresh and appealing. Perfect for parties, catering events, buffets & banquet setups.



P R O F E S S I O N A L



*
By Amber Kispert

ANY WAY YOU Slice It



This Potato Pizza from Mangia Catering is topped with sharp white cheddar, parmesan and mozzarella cheeses, russet potatoes, red fingerling potatoes, smoked paprika, rosemary, and hot honey. Photo courtesy Idaho Potato Commission

Pizza is consistently a cost-effective and convenient crowd pleaser at events

Once considered merely a casual dining option, pizza has evolved into a gourmet experience with endless possibilities for customization. For caterers looking to innovate and elevate their offerings, incorporating pizza into events and menus can be a game-changer.

“Pizza just has this way of sending shivers of shock and awe through guests,” says Christie Altendorf (D’Amico

Catering). “Just imagine their eyes lighting up with surprise as pizzas are marched out of the kitchen—they really hold a special place for people. “Plus, the most beautiful thing about pizza is its versatility; there’s something for everybody.”

A look at pizza’s popularity

According to *Datassential*, pizza is consumed regularly, with two-thirds of consumers having had pizza within the last week (that equates to a staggering 30 billion pizzas devoured annually). *Datassential FLAVOR* goes so far as to say that it’s America’s number one food, stating that virtually 100% of consumers know of pizza and nearly as many (91%) say they love it or like it, making it one of America’s favorite foods.

“Pizza is everywhere again and it’s such an easy and fun thing that just about everyone in the room enjoys,” said Michael Stavros (M Culinary Concepts) during a session on trends during Catersource + The Special Event 2024.

In fact, 83% of Americans eat pizza at least monthly, whereas 44% eat pizza weekly, and 30% of menus feature pizza as an entree course, according to *General Mills Foodservice*.

“Pizza is no longer a trend, it’s truly the way Americans prefer to eat a lot of the time,” Altendorf says. “It’s comforting, it’s accessible, and it’s recognizable. But now, it’s also about presenting something in a way that is mind blowing and unique.”

A good crust is a must

A good pizza begins with the crust. According to a nationwide survey conducted by The Harris Poll and commissioned by General Mills Foodservice, 91% of Americans



Primal Alchemy has hosted pizza pop-ups. Photo courtesy Primal Alchemy

agree that a bad crust can ruin a pizza. Additionally, more than three-quarters of Americans (80%) say they would pay more for a pizza with a high-quality crust.

“A good crust is the heart of any great pizza, yet it can be a challenge for many pizza makers to get consistent and quality results,” said Tom Santos (General Mills Foodservice) in a press release.

So, what makes a high-quality crust? According to General Mills

Foodservice, diners judge a pizza crust on taste/texture, thickness, texture, color (golden brown), and char. In terms of preferred texture, a good crust should have a dual texture of crispy on the outside and airy on the inside (33%).

“The crust is there as a vehicle to get it to your mouth,” says *Chef Paul Buchanan* (Primal Alchemy).

Chefs are also innovating by introducing alternative crusts crafted from cauliflower, sweet potatoes,

Crust Styles

New York

- Distinct chew
- Large foldable slices
- Holds shape, no sagging

Traditional American Hand Tossed

- Hand stretched and tossed
- Non-uniform crust
- Lean soft dough on inside; flat, crispy crust

Sicilian

- Thick rectangle shape
- Focaccia spongy texture
- Thick tomato sauce

Deep Dish

- Thick golden crust
- Crispy on the outside, fluffy on the inside

Detroit

- Focaccia-like crust with pronounced chew
- Topped with brick cheese spread to the edges
- Sauce spooned lengthwise

Neapolitan

- Made with “00” flour
- Airy edged crust
- Topped with San Marzano tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella cheese, and basil

California Style

- Combines New York and Neapolitan style crusts
- Thick or thin
- Gourmet style pizza characterized by nontraditional toppings

Chicago Deep Dish

- High-sided crust one to two inches high
- Ingredients in reverse, with slice of mozzarella lining the dough followed by toppings

Tavern

- Thin and crispy, cracker-like
- Cut in to three- or four-inch rectangles

Information above courtesy [General Mills Foodservice](#)

chickpeas, beetroot, spinach, and many more veggie options, further expanding the array of choices available (especially for those looking for gluten-free options).

Whether it’s store-bought or hand-made, the crust is the heart of any pizza, which is why perfecting it is such a labor of love for chefs; they have to roll the crust thin and large enough, they have to ensure that it doesn’t stick (sprinkling corn meal underneath the pizza before stretching it out is universally agreed upon as the secret to success), and the crust has to be sturdy enough to hold up to the toppings.

“A great pizza crust starts with quality ingredients and proper handling,” says Chef Kevin Relf (General Mills Foodservice).

Top it off

While there’s nothing wrong with pizza’s tried-and-true toppings such as pepperoni or sausage, more chefs and caterers are venturing into unconventional territory when thinking about how to top off their pizzas.

“I would say the topping experience is ever changing,” says David Lombardo (Lombardo’s Hospitality Group and Bardo’s Pizza). “From buffalo chicken to lobster and shrimp, you can really put anything on a pizza and have fun with it!”

According to [Pizza Today’s 2024 Pizza Industry Trends report](#), vegan meat and cheese alternatives; sweet and hot pepper varieties; Mexican-inspired meats like birria, chorizo, and carne asada; as well as caramelized and [pickled vegetables](#) are the hottest trends in toppings for 2024.

“A pizza is different every single time because of the ingredients,” Buchanan says. “No two pizzas are the same because you want it to be an individual expression every single time—you don’t want it to be generic.”

Let’s take a deeper look into some of the trends shaping pizza toppings.

Globally-inspired ingredients

More than two-thirds (70%) of operators indicated that they are experimenting with globally inspired pizza ingredients more than they were two years ago, according to Technomic’s 2023 Pizza Study.

“Every culture has something that’s similar to a pizza,” says Chef de Cuisine Andy Dombrowski (Cowell & Hubbard) in an [article for US Foods](#).

“I think pizza is the gateway to everything; no matter what culture you’re from, everybody loves pizza.”

The new age of pizza is fusing the Italian classic with international cuisines. Think Greek lamb gyro pizza with tzatziki on a pita crust; an elote pizza topped with street corn, Mexican crema, and cilantro; or how about a pizza topped with yellow vegetable curry, a mozzarella and provolone cheese blend, crispy chickpeas, and spicy cilantro chimichurri?



D'Amico Catering offers a Broccoli & Ricotta Pizza (baby spinach, mozzarella, provolone, and ricotta cheeses, steamed broccoli florets, salt, pepper, pesto cream, lemon juice, and chopped pistachios). Photo courtesy Travis Anderson Photography

Indulgence redefined

When tasked with choosing between healthy and indulgent, many consumers are looking for the best of both worlds.

“Pizza is great, but guests sometimes feel it’s not a ‘healthy’ enough option for them,” Lombardo says.

According to *Datassential’s* 2024 Pizza Keynote report, half of all consumers surveyed (51%) agreed equally that pizza is an indulgent meal, and that they prefer pizza made with healthy ingredients.

In response to the new trend in health-conscious and specialized diets, the pizza landscape has evolved to embrace dietary diversity, with gluten-free, dairy-free, and vegan options in meats and cheeses. Healthy options are now widely accessible, catering to a broader spectrum of customers.

Another popular trend is to top pizzas with local, farm-fresh vegetables.

“All of those little things you could add to a salad you can probably put on a pizza,” Buchanan says. “Also, think about any ingredients that you have on hand for other orders; for a caterer there’s always leftover amounts of things, and those are the perfect things for pizza because I may have nothing else on my menu that is going to call for that, but you can put anything on a pizza—the combinations are endless.”

The finishing touch

Now that we have the crust and the toppings, all that’s left is the finishing flourish: the dips, sauces, and drizzles.

This is where sweet toppings like hot honey, balsamic glazes, fig

Top 20 Pizza Toppings in the U.S.

1. Pepperoni
2. Sausage
3. Mushroom
4. Extra Cheese
5. Bacon
6. Chicken
7. Onion
8. Red/Green Bell Pepper
9. Ham
10. Black Olives
11. Meatballs
12. Canadian Bacon
13. Jalapeño
14. Pineapple
15. Beef
16. Basil
17. Banana Pepper
18. Fresh Garlic
19. Tomato
20. Spinach

Information above courtesy [Pizza Today](#)



(Top left) During the Minnesota Bride Best of 2024 Awards (held at Equestria West at Bavaria Downs) D'Amico Catering featured a Margherita Pizza, a Sausage & Cipollini Onion Pizza, and a Pepperoni & Hot Honey Pizza. Photo courtesy Laura Alpizar Photography; (Below) Rosemary & Rye Catering offers a live action pizza station. Photo courtesy Rosemary & Rye Catering



24 Carrots Catering & Events' custom pizza station features four pizzas, each crafted on-site and baked in their pizza oven. Guests enjoy watching their chefs in action, creating an interactive and fun experience. Photo courtesy Ashley Paige



jam, and maple syrup or savory drizzles like basil, chive, or chili oil and siracha can bring a pizza from exceptional to extraordinary.

“The things we are drizzling on the pizza are really fun,” Altendorf says. “How can we add an extra layer of kick and flavor?”

Rising to the occasion

As you prepare to make pizza a star at your next event, remember that it’s not just about serving a meal—it’s about creating memorable experiences that leave guests raving and coming back for more.

One way to make pizza the star of the show is to bring a pizza trailer (or in some cases a pizza bus) onsite for a chef action station where guests can serve themselves from a buffet.

Create an interactive experience with a pizza-making station where guests can customize their own pizzas. Provide a range of fresh ingredients, including high-quality cheeses, cured meats, and seasonal vegetables. This adds a fun and engaging element to any event.

“These pizza stations are more than just about eating—they’re all about entertainment,” says Carizza Rose (24 Carrots Catering & Events*). “Guests get to see the dough being spun, toppings carefully arranged, and

pizzas whisked into the oven, to be served golden and ready to enjoy; it’s the perfect blend of personalization and pizzazz, creating memories as mouthwatering as the pizzas themselves.”

This live-action cooking adds a captivating element to your event, making the food service part of the celebration itself.

Or why not allow each table to put in a pizza order, and then deliver their customized pie right to the table?

“Sometimes I think weddings can be too stuffy, so you can surprise them and have something common and universal,” Buchanan says. “It’s not really a plated item because pizza is to be shared by everybody—it’s much



delicious
s can
delicious



(Video) 24 Carrots Catering & Events offers a custom pizza station during their events. (Social Media Credits) Lead Planner & Signage Designer: @mikala_mongeamoreevents; Lead Planner: @mongeamoreevents; Assistant Coordinator: @taylor_mongeamoreevents; Venue: @oakcreekevents & @oakcreekgolf; Catering + Bar: @24carrotscatering; Rentals: @sigpartyrentals; Specialty Rentals: @townandcountry_eventrentals; Beauty Team: @beachbridalbeauty; Mini Desserts + Groom's Cake: @honeyandgather; Italian Cake: @poulsbakeryoc; Groom: @brandonmoshenkoo; Bride: @eeecopp_ ; Photography: @ashleypaigepphoto; Videography: @pressfilms; Florist: @thebloomoftime; Coffee Vendor: @moonwoodcoffee; Stationary: @papermintpress; Live Painter: @artbybiancaga; Candling: @carinafloral; Content Creator: @2.adventure.capturing; Bridal Salon: @styledbytc; Wedding Dress Designer: @watters; Bridal Shoes: @dolcevita

(Below) Brickfire Pizza refurbished an old school bus into a mobile pizza oven where they bring pizza buffets to myriad events, including weddings. Photo courtesy Studio Veil



more interesting to do family style.”

If bringing a pizza oven onsite is beyond your company’s capabilities (or if your venue isn’t suitable for this), Buchanan suggests par-baking your pizzas ahead of time in your kitchen and then finishing them onsite with a portable Rocbox or small tabletop pizza oven.

“It takes one minute to put on the ingredients, one minute in the oven, and one minute to cut and present it,” he says.

Pizza as a passed appetizer or late-night snack is always a crowd pleaser, and don’t forget about outside-the-box ideas such as breakfast or dessert pizzas.

“For a bit of bite-sized brilliance, we offer tray-passed gourmet pizza slices—mini masterpieces that are sure to mingle as effortlessly as your guests,” Rose says.

In terms of how many and what size pizzas to make for an event, Lombardo and Buchanan suggest one 12-inch pizza per person. There will most likely be leftovers, so provide pizza boxes for guests. You can even take it one step further and provide custom pizza boxes, such as with the couple’s name for a wedding, or a company logo or branding for a corporate event.

Also, don’t forget to consider what will be served alongside the pizza (if it’s the main course and not

an appetizer or late-night snack). The classics are of course salads, breadsticks, and chicken wings.

“I think most anybody would be happy at any event with that,” says Buchanan. “Maybe it’s just what we’re used to, but I don’t associate pizza with roasted baby carrots or mashed potatoes or anything like that.”

In terms of display and presentation, play into the pizza aesthetic by decorating buffet tables with peppers, tomatoes, artichokes, and lemons or use red and white checkerboard tablecloths evoking pizzeria vibes. You could even use cans of tomato sauce as risers to give the pizzas height.



recipe

BALSAMIC CHERRY & BURRATA PIZZA

Recipe courtesy D'Amico Catering

Photo courtesy Travis Anderson Photography



ingredients

- 1 ea. pizza dough or crust of your choice
- 1 cup baby spinach
- ½ cup mozzarella and provolone cheese
- 2 T ricotta cheese
- 2 T shaved red onion
- 3 T macerated Bing cherries (recipe at right)
- Pinch of Kosher salt
- Pinch of ground black pepper
- 2 oz burrata

ingredients for finishing

- 2 tsp balsamic glaze
- 1 T basil, chiffonade
- 2 T chopped pistachios

method

1. Hand toss dough into approximately 10" circle.
2. Build pizza by evenly distributing the ingredients in order listed.
3. Remove the pizza and carefully place burrata ball in the center of the pizza. Return to oven for 90 seconds, just until it starts to melt.
4. Cut into six even slices and garnish with basil, pistachios, and balsamic glaze.
5. Serve on pizza plate.

MACERATED BING CHERRIES

ingredients

- 4 cups frozen Bing cherries
- 1 cup balsamic vinegar
- ¼ cup granulated sugar

method

1. Whisk sugar and vinegar together in a bowl. Place cherries in half gallon container, add balsamic/sugar mixture and sink cherries in it.
2. Allow to macerate for a couple hours or longer. You can reuse the mixture a couple of times.

“Pizza just has this way of sending shivers of shock and awe through guests; just imagine their eyes lighting up with surprise as pizzas are marched out of the kitchen — they really hold a special place for people.” —Christie Altendorf

Be cautious when bringing pizza to your catering menus though, because there is plenty of room for error (i.e., burns, not enough cheese, too many ingredients causing the pizza to get soggy, etc.).

“Maintaining the perfect pizza at events presents its own set of unique challenges,” says Barbara Brass (Wolfgang Puck Catering). “Keeping it hot without compromising quality is a balancing act—some heating methods leave the crust soggy, while others dry out the toppings. Then there’s the issue of temperature; some solutions just don’t keep the pizza hot enough to capture that fresh-from-the-oven appeal. Despite its simplicity, pizza can be surprisingly finicky when it comes to preserving its ideal texture and flavor. These hurdles highlight the skill and precision required to serve pizza that’s as good hours into an event as it is the moment it’s made.”

“It’s a simple process cooking pizza, but many things can go wrong,” adds Buchanan. “Building a pizza is an art, so it’s a talent that you get better at every time; test it out on yourself first to make sure that you can do it. You could even have a pizza party for your staff and do it that way.”

Pizza’s adaptability makes it an ideal choice for modern catering. Embrace this beloved dish with creativity and finesse, and watch it become a standout feature of your catering offerings.

“Pizza brings people together,” says Buchanan. **CS**

**24 Carrots Catering & Events 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.*

Modulite™

F&B SERVING STATIONS TAILORED TO FIT YOUR VISION!



Flexibility & Versatility
Quick Setup & Breakdown
Easy Storage & Mobility
Indoor & Outdoor Use

Contact Rosseto event specialist today
847 763 1215 brianh@rosseto.com or visit rosseto.com

rosseto
SERVING SOLUTIONS

*
by Amber Kispert

Photo Courtesy Visit Lauderdale



Conference news

catersource® + **THE SPECIAL EVENT®**
FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

It's Official! The Agenda is Now Live for Catersource + The Special Event 2025!

[Check it out here](#) and be sure to sign up for updates on this year's show.

Catersource + The Special Event, February 24–27, 2025 in Fort Lauderdale, FL will provide support and reimagined possibilities when you need it most. Always designed to inspire and deliver the necessary skills and tactics needed to succeed, Catersource + The Special Event 2025 will provide you with an unmatched opportunity to learn and network. And this year's conference program is no different; it will feature strategies and original ideas transforming the catering and event industry.

Don't miss your opportunity to learn from the best and [register today](#).

In the [conference session](#) area of the website, you can search by track, conference, or association to find the sessions you're looking for.



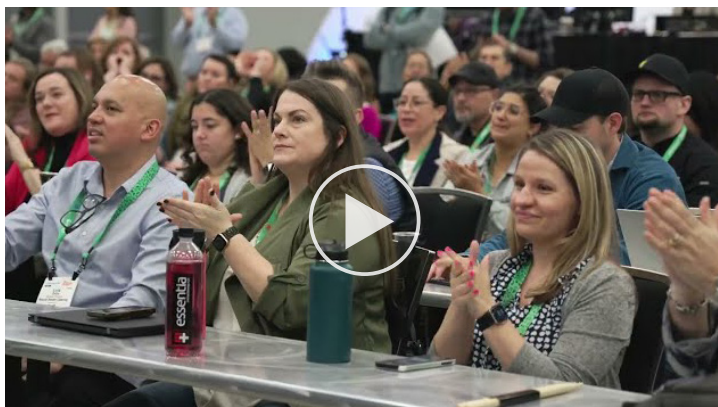
Start your week early by attending [Art of Catering Food](#), two packed days (February 23–24, 2025) of [chef-forward sessions](#) that promise to inspire and elevate the work you do, be it on-prem, off-prem, from large festivals to intimate weddings to corporate

fundraisers. Taste samples as chefs demo the cuisines on stage, ask questions, and network with other chefs from around North America during breaks, lunches, and an end-of-day happy hour. [Chef Eric LeVine](#) will deliver this year's keynote session.

(Chef Eric Levine) Photo Courtesy Moe Morales Photography LLC



Former White House Director of Events Laura Schwartz interviews Chef Robin Selden.



Art of Catering Food 2024



Get ready for Catersource + The Special Event 2025!

Introducing our 2025 Keynote Speakers!



Are you ready for some Unreasonable Hospitality? Have an amazing start to your Wednesday morning by joining author, producer, and restaurateur **Will Guidara** as he discusses how to care a little bit

more and try a little bit harder with his lessons in service and leadership he learned over the course of his career in restaurants. No matter whether you are in events or catering, you will leave with nuggets of inspiration to bring back to your work. Guidara will be signing copies of his book after his keynote.



Brett Culp is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker whose work inspires audiences to embrace change, empower others, and spark innovation. His short "StageStory" appearances have captivated the

CS+TSE audiences in past years. This year, join him as he takes his storytelling even further with his first keynote address at the 2025 show!

[Register now](#) to join us this February in Fort Lauderdale! **CS**

CATERSOURCE

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

2024

This year saw a renewed focus on people, personalized experiences, & the planet

By Amber Kispert



The catering industry is experiencing a period of dynamic transformation. From adapting to evolving consumer preferences to embracing technological innovations, caterers are navigating a landscape that is both challenging and brimming with potential. As 2024 comes to a close, it's clear that the industry is in a state of flux, influenced by a range of factors from economic conditions to shifting social trends.

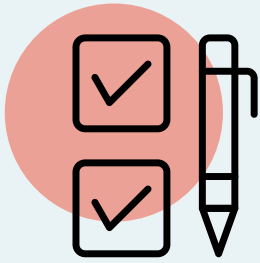
“Our clients all wanted to believe in a brighter future and the general shift was to move to booking events further out, but there was still some trepidation and unease as to how the landscape would look in the next months,” says Sebastien Centner (Eatertainment Events & Catering). “We had to understand this frame of mind and empathize with it, not fight it, to give our clients the confidence to feel supported by a partner, not just a supplier.”

Let's take a look at the trends, challenges, and opportunities that have shaped 2024.

Table of Contents

- 1. Survey says...**
- 2. Operations outlook**
- 3. The crucial case for company culture**
- 4. Sustainability in 2024: a green revolution**
- 5. Talking trends**
- 6. Technology means streamlining**
- 7. Inclusive business**
- 8. Turning the page**

(Clock-wise starting at top) The incorporation and importance of cultural backgrounds are becoming essential. Shown: This intercultural wedding (from Events by Ayesha) between two grooms from different backgrounds (Indian-American and Midwestern) featured whimsical elements from the couple's collection of curios. Photo courtesy Forever Photography; A prom-themed corporate holiday party from Vibrant Table Catering & Events featured a warm and hearty winter menu and kitschy nods to the school dance experience. Photo courtesy Evrim Icoz Photography; Dish Food & Events' ACE-nominated 420-person wedding featured a Mediterranean-inspired menu that highlighted the area's local produce and featured many ingredients from the venue, such as heirloom tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers. Photo courtesy Corbin Gurkin



SURVEY SAYS...

Earlier in the third quarter, *Catersource* released a survey to our readership. Let's first look at the questions we asked, and some of the interesting responses we received, and then we will move into the overall *Catersource* State of the Industry 2024.

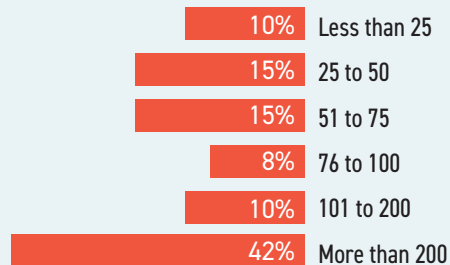
Who responded to our survey?

- 38% identified as Owner/CEO
- 19% as Sales/Marketing
- 18% as Director/VP
- 15% as Event Planning & Staff
- 7% as Culinary
- 3% as CFO

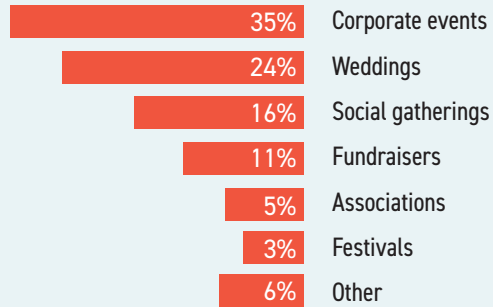
Interestingly, 20% noted that they have been in the events industry for 10–14 years, 19% have been in the industry for 15–20 years, and an impressive 42% have worked in the industry for more than 20 years.

This year's survey looked at everything from staffing to challenges to trends to client requests. Take a look at the accompanying data to hear from your peers on what they encountered this year.

How many events of any kind have you been contracted for in 2024?



Which business sector have you garnered the most business from thus far in 2024?



What are the greatest professional challenges facing you in 2025?



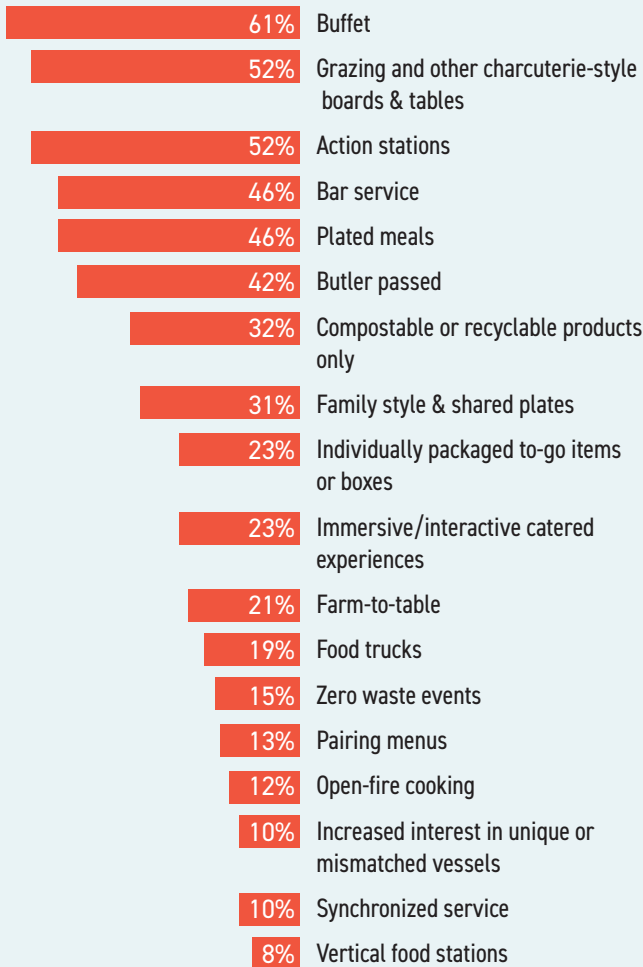
What has been the most concerning for your company in 2024?



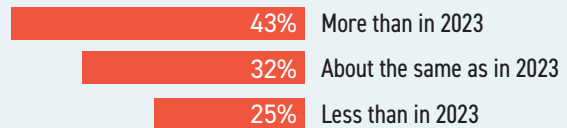
“The catering industry in 2024 was hopeful. With the pandemic wreaking havoc on hospitality that had long-lasting ramifications, 2024 was a year where many organizations were able to settle into what felt something like a new normal. With that normalcy on our side, hope for more stability in the future was able to grow.”

—Christie Altendorf

What catering styles or requests were highly requested throughout 2024?



How does the 2024 projected profit compare to 2023?



What key steps are you taking in 2025 to improve your business?





Proof of the Pudding's staff preps in the kitchen in advance of the ACE-winning corporate event, Standing the Test of Time. Photo courtesy Amanda Mazonkey

Operations outlook

The post-pandemic boom may still be in effect (45% of survey respondents saw an increase in events over 2023 while 26% did not see any change), but now the industry is settling into its new normal.

“The catering industry in 2024 was hopeful,” says Christie Altendorf (D’Amico Catering). “With the pandemic wreaking havoc on hospitality that had long-lasting ramifications, 2024 was a year where many organizations were able to settle into what felt something like a new normal. With that normalcy on our side, hope for more stability in the future was able to grow.”

For starters, planning timelines are getting shorter and shorter. Whereas previously caterers had months to plan and execute a corporate event, today they are being tasked to turnaround in mere weeks, and in some extreme cases, even days. In fact, 30% of survey respondents cited this as one of their greatest challenges in 2024.

“It seems to be the year of last-minute booking requests,” said Betty Kalin (Dish Food & Events) during an operations roundtable with the International Caterers Association. “It’s not economic uncertainty anymore,



Miniature Quesabirria Grilled Cheese sandwiches from 24 Carrots Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon

though there may have been an element of that during the pandemic; now what's really driving the shift is the change in our consumer base and the focus on convenience. Our clients can order anything on their phone, and have it delivered within a matter of hours or within a matter of days, so why not catering? We must decide what is most important to us and what is operationally possible.”

“This shift required caterers to be flexible and fast in order to accommodate shorter lead times,” adds Michael Stavros (M Culinary Concepts). “For many in the industry, the rapid response to these bookings became a crucial part of the business model.”

Meanwhile, costs have risen—everything from staffing to food (28% of survey respondents expect expenditures to increase by an average of 10% in 2025). Caterers are now juggling the need for efficiency while delivering high-end service in an environment where every decision costs more than it used to. Striking the balance between customer experiences and [managing costs](#) is more critical than ever. Caterers are navigating these challenges by optimizing their supply chains, exploring cost-effective ingredient alternatives, and offering flexible pricing options. In response to economic pressures, many caterers are also diversifying their services. “The best part of the year is that brief moment when I can look back at what we have accomplished, and plan for the future. Numbers don't lie, but if you don't listen closely, they can definitely bamboozle you,” said Craig Cooper (Pinx Catering) in an [article for Catersource](#). “At the end of the year or quarter when you have a moment, take a deep dive into your numbers to understand where your bread is buttered. You will be shocked to find how much money was left on the table. Once you look and you identify the opportunities, make a plan and work that plan.”



The team from Marcia Selden Catering & Events can frequently be found exploring together during off-site conferences, such as Catersource + The Special Event. Photo courtesy Marcia Selden Catering & Events

The crucial case for company culture

Despite improvements in the overall economy, labor remains a critical issue in the food and beverage industry with nearly a quarter (23%) of the industry expressing concern over shortages today, according to [Expert Market's food and beverage report survey](#).

Additionally, 82% of businesses are actively seeking new hires, highlighting the long-term difficulty of staff recruitment, retention, and training, according to the survey. This is particularly acute in hiring skilled culinary roles like chefs and cooks who represent 30% of open roles across the industry.

To put this in perspective, 19% of respondents to the *Catersource* survey indicated that the number of employees has decreased since this time last year, whereas 44% of respondents didn't see any change. In fact, 57% of survey respondents said labor shortage/lack of skilled labor was their biggest challenge in 2024.

Many caterers have implemented training programs (41% of survey respondents said increasing staff training will be a focus in 2025) aimed at attracting and retaining talent, as well as an increased focus on employee well-being and work-life balance. Companies are seeking to create supportive [work environments](#) through strategies such as flexible scheduling, competitive wages, and opportunities for career advancement.

“The challenge now is how we evolve our training and culture to meet these expectations while maintaining high standards for clients,” says Chris Sanchez (LUX Catering & Events*). “Retention is crucial, and it hinges on continuous training, mentorship, and a shared sense of core values. It's about fostering accountability, ownership, and teamwork to navigate the shifting dynamics together. Success comes when teams are fully aligned and moving forward as one.”

This is where things like the “family meal” have become such an asset within the hospitality industry.



During Parléview’s Innovate Canada (which won the Gala Award for Sustainability in Events) guests were served meals with locally-sourced ingredients, including fully vegetarian lunches. Photo courtesy Destination Canada/Johnson Studios



Chef Alyson Zildjian (Zildjian Catering and Consulting) is a committed leader in green business practices and her dedication to sustainability extends beyond the kitchen, teaching and educating the community on the benefits of reducing our impact on the planet. Her passion for clean food leads to supporting local farms and sourcing local and seasonal food. Photo courtesy Zildjian Catering and Consulting

[Holistic well-being improvement programs](#) are also being implemented, which will quickly amount to a better work environment and satisfied customers. An [employee wellness program](#) can serve as a key differentiator and critical means of long-term staff retention. In fact, 79% of employees indicated that they would leave a job for one that supported their well-being, said Anthony Lambatos (Footers Catering) during a session on employee well-being during Catersource + The Special Event 2024 (turn to [page 41](#) for Lambatos’ thoughts on employee burnout).

“We need to start valuing people for more than the job that they do,” said Lambatos. “It’s not so much a work-life balance anymore, but a work-life blend. I don’t think ‘Personal Anthony’ stays behind and ‘Professional Anthony’ shows up and is ready for work—we need to hold space for both because they are equally important.”

These programs aim to promote healthy lifestyles, prevent illness and injury, and improve employee morale and productivity. Studies have shown that [80% of employees](#) at companies with robust health and wellness programs show increased [employee engagement](#).

Sustainability in 2024: a green revolution

One of the most noteworthy trends in 2024 was the industry’s commitment to [sustainability](#).

“As you all know, the new trend supposedly is sustainability,” said Dana Buchanan (Primal Alchemy) during a session on zero-waste events at Catersource + The Special Event 2024. “While we love the fact that it’s a new trend, we don’t like the fact that it might only be a trend—we want it to remain permanent.”

Throughout 2024 caterers increasingly prioritized eco-friendly practices, everything from sourcing local and organic ingredients to minimizing food waste (32% of survey respondents indicated that compostable or recyclable products were one of the most requested trends in 2024).

Many catering companies implemented composting and recycling programs, aligning with consumer demand for environmentally responsible practices. This shift not only appeals to eco-conscious clients but also improves operational efficiency, demonstrating that sustainability can enhance profitability.

“Putting on green events isn’t going to necessarily cost us more green,” said Chef Alyson Zildjian (Zildjian Catering and Consulting) during a session on green events at Catersource + The Special Event 2024.

Numbers don’t lie, and [57% of consumers say sustainability practices](#) at least somewhat influence their choices when dining away from home.

Environmental concerns are no longer a niche consideration but a mainstream expectation.

“Sustainability is no longer optional—clients are demanding it in every aspect, from zero-waste initiatives to eco-friendly décor,” says Sanchez. “They want luxury, but they want it with a conscience.”

One third of consumers say they will pay a premium for sustainable products. Operators should prepare for demand to grow and for sustainability to become the expectation and not the exception.

As awareness and demand for eco-friendly practices continue to rise, innovation in this field will likely lead to even more solutions. Adopting sustainable practices will allow caterers and event organizers to make a significant positive impact and play a crucial role in fostering a healthier planet while delivering exceptional experiences.

“By modeling what’s possible, we pave the way for everyone to adapt a green mindset,” said Zildjian.

Talking trends

This year saw several new trends (and a few continuing trends) take hold of the catering industry. Here’s a look at a few that helped to define the year (turn to [page 04](#) for a sneak peek of what food trends to expect in 2025).

The personal touch

Today’s clients are seeking more personalized and customized catering experiences. Whether it’s a corporate event, a wedding, or a private party, guests want menus that reflect their unique tastes and preferences. Events are experiences, and these days, those experiences need to be filled with dramatic flair. Every aspect of the event should be entertaining.

“Really get to know your clients and listen to what they’re saying and find a way to bring it to life because one size does not fit all,” said Susie Perelman (Mosaic) during a session at Catersource + The Special Event 2024.

This year clients were seeking customized menus that reflect individual tastes. The incorporation and importance of cultural backgrounds are also becoming essential. This trend extends beyond just food; caterers also embraced experiential dining (more on that next), incorporating elements like interactive food stations, chef demonstrations, and [themed events](#).

“Clients rely on us to help tell their story through thoughtful design and curated experiences,” says Sanchez. “From branded stir sticks with company values to custom cocktail napkins featuring quotes from the founder, it’s the little details that leave lasting impressions.”



TOP TRENDS OF 2024

We asked, you answered! Here are the top trends that took the spotlight throughout 2024 according to the *Catersource* State of the Industry survey.

- Dietary restrictions and/or allergies
- Composed small plates
- Grab and go
- Premium cocktails and mocktails
- Eco-friendly practices (such as compostable materials and reducing single-use plastics)
- African-inspired food
- Chef-attended stations
- Charcuterie boards and family-style
- Locally focused menu items
- Comfort food with a twist
- Dessert bars
- Heavy appetizers in place of a full sit-down
- Family-style service
- Finger foods
- Global flavors and the incorporation of bold spices and ingredients from regions like Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America
- High-level décor and upscale presentation of food
- Martini bars
- Burrata bars
- More personalized menus
- Lower headcounts, but not lower budgets
- Korean and South Asian flavors
- Simple, basic, traditional foods
- Snacks
- Walking action stations

Sharing an experience

In all aspects of life, we're demanding bigger, better, more vibrant experiences that we won't forget—and why should the food we eat be any different? We're in an era of sensory overload, and it's time to lean into that. Diners are keen to see chefs tear up the rulebook and experiment more—they want wild fusion and a no-holds-barred approach to the dishes they see on the menu.

The future of dining is about seeing food as a form of escapism, a vision that is achieved through the need to surprise and challenge diners with sensorial dishes that are designed to delight.

“One of the biggest wins has been meeting the demand for personalized, story-driven events—clients want experiences that feel unique, and we've delivered that through creative, tailored menus and setups,” says Lauren Eck (Wolfgang Puck Catering). “Clients are looking for events that don't just entertain but also feel memorable and unique, with every detail customized to reflect their vision, company, or theme. Whether it's bold décor, interactive food stations, or stunning presentation, these memorable touches are now essential to be successful and almost a requirement for every event. Gone are the days of a standard buffet with chafing dishes.”

Additionally, we're living in a time of increased connectivity, which means that unique, playful, and multi-sensory dining experiences are more celebrated than ever; through [beautiful food boards](#) or [cross-cuisine mash-ups](#), diners have the opportunity to enjoy food together, creating organic conversations and a sense of community.

“We have this crazy, upside-down world, and it's such a heavy world, and people really want to escape from that world and enter into a dream,” said Perelman.

Good food is great; good food wrapped up in an immersive, photo-worthy, theatrical experience is better (23% of survey respondents indicated that immersive/interactive experiences were one of the top requested trends in 2024). This highly engaging form of food service is in high demand, too: [Eventbrite](#) found that 75% of diners believe it's worth paying more for a one-of-a-kind experience.

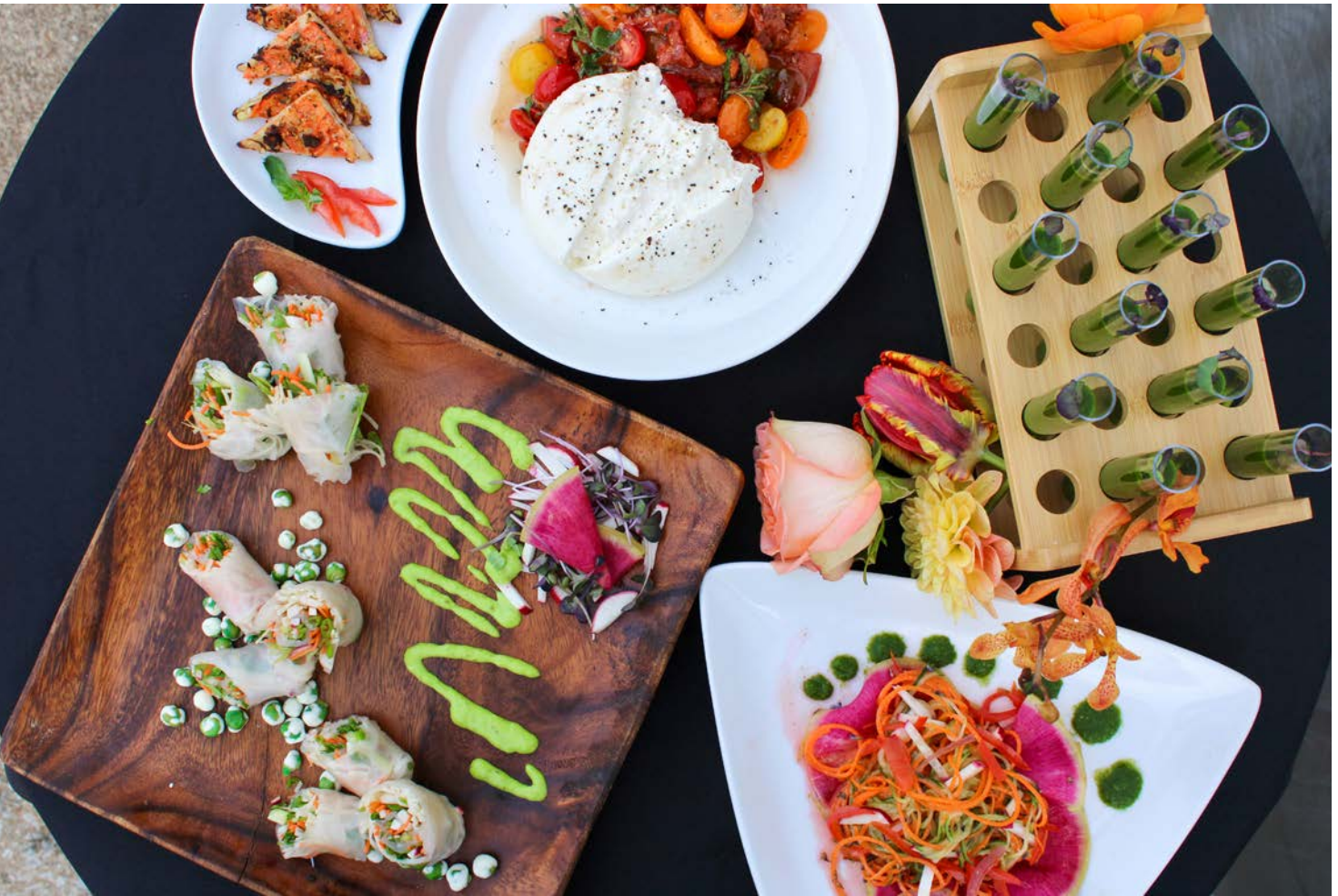
Gone are the days of an isolated activation moment. Now, clients want to weave the photo moments into the entire fabric of the event. Caterers now need to make the full duration of their event social media-ready—it's time to say goodbye to the singular Instagram moment.

“Creative food displays have become a popular element of photo opportunities at catered events, with food displays now designed not just to satisfy taste



(Above) As guests took their seats at the table during a dinner with Unilever Food Solutions (as part of the National Restaurant Association Show) at Esmé, they were welcomed with an elaborate arrangement at the center of the table. This centerpiece wasn't just for show, however; hidden within the grass was the evening's first course, thus challenging guests to “forage for their dinner.” Featured items included: Fava Bean Tarts, Sunflower & Caviar bites, and Strawberry and Wagyu tartlets. Photo courtesy Ambercita; (Right) Perfect Paloma + Sparkling Tropical Mocktail from Colette's Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Lisette Gatliff





(Above, clockwise from top left) Filo Pizza (artichoke, red onion, tomato, parmesan, and garlic); heirloom tomato with burrata and herb pesto; nut-free pesto shooters (made with fresh herbs); Seasonal Vegetable Salad (romaine, parmesan crisp, cucumber, marinated tomato, pickled red onion, and balsamic vinaigrette); and Spring Rolls (rice paper, mixed vegetables, cilantro, and sweet Thai chili sauce). Photo courtesy Culinary Canvas; (Below) This year clients were seeking out customized menus that reflect individual tastes. Shown: wild mushroom and cheese roulade, braised red cabbage, and seasonal local greens from Zingerman's Cornman Farms*. Photo courtesy Julia Bartelt



Catersource State of the Industry 2024

buds but to capture attention on social media,” says Meg Grasso (Constellation Culinary Group). “These visually striking setups serve as both décor and conversation starters, encouraging guests to snap and share photos. As a result, food presentation has become an integral part of creating a memorable and Instagram-worthy event experience.”

“One of the biggest trends we saw in 2024 was the return to fine dining at weddings,” adds Altendorf. “From restaurant-like atmospheres with cozy banquettes and table lamps, to multiple courses at the table with perfectly paired wines—intuitive table service fueled by warm hospitality took center stage.”

It’s no longer about traditional buffets and sit-down meals. Interactive dining experiences are on the rise, with options such as [live cooking stations](#), grazing tables (see the fall issue of [Special Events magazine](#) for a deeper look at grazing tables), [smoke and fire](#), food bars, and tasting events becoming popular. These setups not only engage guests but also create memorable moments, allowing them

to connect with the food and the chef.

“Today’s clients are looking for experiences, not just events,” says Sanchez. “Caterers are creating immersive moments where food and drink become interactive parts of the event.”

Modernizing menus

The wellness trend continued to gain traction on menus, with consumers becoming more [health-conscious about their food choices](#). Caterers adapted by offering nutritious menu options, highlighting superfoods, and providing transparency regarding ingredient sourcing. These health-conscious options reflect a growing desire for holistic, mind-body connection.

In the coming years, health and wellness will likely become even more central to catering services. Expect to see a rise in functional foods—those that offer additional health benefits beyond basic nutrition—as well as increased demand for transparency around ingredient sourcing and nutritional content. Additionally, the integration of personalized nutrition advice into catering services could become a standard offering.

Beverage programs are also evolving beyond the standard fare. Clients now want immersive beverage experiences—from build-your-own cocktail stations to mobile mixologists and curated pairing experiences.

There’s also been a rise in [zero-proof cocktails](#) and non-alcoholic pairings, as wellness trends drive inclusivity for those who prefer not to drink alcohol. “Mocktails” are gaining recognition for their complexity and craftsmanship, right alongside their alcoholic counterparts.

Menus are also responding to seasonality and supply chain changes. Caterers are designing

menus in real time, creating seasonal cocktails and limited-time food stations based on ingredient availability.

“Menus not only help keep guests energized and engaged,” says Altendorf, “but also act as a community building opportunity.”

Technology means streamlining

Another theme of the year has been technology and the best ways to implement it within catering operations (34% of survey respondents said technology will be a focus in 2025). The integration of technology is weaving its way into the fabric of catering services, revolutionizing how caterers and clients interact.

“Tech is non-negotiable and AI and automation are becoming essential tools for planning, executing, and managing real-time client interactions,” says Sanchez. “From dietary preferences to guest experience tracking, technology is now deeply embedded in the event process.”

Caterers are leveraging digital tools for everything from booking and payment processing to menu customization and event planning. Online ordering systems, interactive apps, and virtual tastings are streamlining the catering process, making it easier for clients to plan their events. Technology has proven time and again its ability to improve efficiency and customer experience (turn to [page 28](#) in the adjoining [Special Events magazine](#) for a deeper look at the technology trends that shaped 2024).

One tool that has taken the catering and events industry by storm in 2024 is the continued rise of artificial intelligence (see the [fall issue of Special Events magazine](#) for a crash course on everything AI).

catersource + **THE SPECIAL EVENT**
FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

Hear more from these industry experts during Catersource + The Special Event, February 24-27, 2025 in Fort Lauderdale, FL.

- Dana Buchanan
- Sebastien Centner
- Betty Kalin
- Anthony Lambatos
- Michael Stavros



Every caterer knows the importance of displaying common food allergens and dietary information at food stations. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



These chicken meatballs are not only Certified Gluten-Free, but they are also free of the USDA Big 9 Allergens including soy, wheat, and dairy. They're also free of fillers, binders, and breadcrumbs, making them the perfect option for catered events where guests have varying dietary restrictions. Photo courtesy Jones Dairy Farm



Earlier this year Ben Garelick unveiled an AI-generated Barbiecore-inspired wedding photo album, tapping into the pop culture phenomenon. Photo courtesy *Special Events* magazine

With AI readily accessible, caterers can leverage this new technology to build more efficiency into their workflows and reduce time spent on routine tasks. After all, repeating the same processes over and over is a waste of time—letting AI take over allows you to dedicate your brainpower elsewhere in your business to maximize your efforts.

“The future is all about balancing efficiency with creativity,” says Sanchez. “The brands that blend tech with personal service will stand out. Companies that thrive will be the ones that fully embrace AI and tech tools and find ways to integrate them into every part of the business.”

Inclusive business

In today’s diverse society, catering businesses face an evolving landscape that demands more than just excellent food and service. As client expectations shift toward inclusivity, caterers have a unique opportunity to enhance their offerings and build stronger connections with their communities. Embracing inclusivity not only fosters a welcoming environment for all clients but also positions caterers for success in a competitive market.

Inclusivity in catering means creating an environment where everyone feels valued and catered to—literally. With dietary restrictions on the rise, including allergies, veganism, and gluten intolerance, it’s crucial for caterers to recognize and accommodate these needs.

To put this into perspective, Centner says that 75% of the menus being requested are predominantly gluten-free, dairy-free, or vegan.

“Inclusivity has become more than just a box to tick,” adds Centner, “it’s woven into how we plan and execute every event.”

Beyond dietary concerns, inclusivity extends to cultural representation. Events celebrating diverse traditions and backgrounds provide a platform for caterers to showcase a variety



Think outside the typical snack break setup and consider setting out various breads and accompanying spreads. Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon

of cuisines (such as [Kosher](#) for example). Engaging with different cultures not only enriches the menu but also demonstrates respect and appreciation for diverse backgrounds, creating memorable experiences for guests.

Additionally, caterers and planners are now focusing on making events physically accessible and welcoming to guests of all backgrounds. This means ensuring that events are easy to access and engage with for individuals of varying abilities. As the topic of event accessibility grows, it's time to take inventory of your practices and make sure that you're providing event services that are indeed accessible to all your potential clients and guests.

There are three main types of accessibility: physical, sensory, and cognitive accessibility, according to an article on accessibility that appeared in the [fall issue of *Special Events* magazine](#).

"We're trying to level the playing field in order to allow [everyone] to connect, participate, engage in, and benefit from the events you are creating," said Cazoshay

Marie (Divine Intervention Design) during a session on inclusivity at Catersource + The Special Event 2024. "Inclusivity is no longer an 'ask,' it is now an expectation—it's the standard, not the exception."

Turning the page

The catering industry in 2024 was characterized by a blend of innovation and adaptation. As caterers face challenges ranging from economic pressures to labor shortages, they are also seizing opportunities to differentiate themselves through sustainability, technology, and personalized experiences.

Caterers are stepping up, transforming from mere food preparers to holistic experience creators. As we set our tables for the remainder of 2024 and beyond, it's clear that the industry is moving forward with purpose, creativity, and an unwavering commitment to excellence.

Looking ahead to 2025, the industry will continue to evolve, driven by advancements in technology,

a deepening commitment to sustainability, and increasingly sophisticated consumer demands. By staying attuned to these trends and embracing new approaches, the catering industry is poised to thrive in a rapidly changing world. As we move forward, innovation and adaptability will be key to navigating the future landscape of catering.

"The best way to describe the industry is 'resilient,'" says Centner. "Despite economic headwinds, catering businesses that thrived were the ones that embraced change and leaned into creativity. The most successful players were those who invested in their people, in sustainable practices, and in staying on top of technological innovations. Flexibility and foresight became critical assets." **CS**

**LUX Catering & Events and Zingerman's Cornman Farms are proud members of the [Leading Caterers of America](#), a consortium of the top catering and event planners throughout the United States and Canada.*



JUNGLE

GREEN ADDICTED

CIAO!

We were born in Italy and now immigrating to the United States. We are bringing our unique Italian designed compostable tableware products, our customer experience first approach and our collaborative culture.

OUR PRODUCTS

Jungle is characterized by a diversified offering in a creative and contemporary way. The Italian culture is the flavor through the line, from product design to our culture. The various style collections of compostable foodservice items are for every taste and need.

FROM NATURE FOR NATURE

The Jungle collection features sustainable items with high-standard quality, in compliance with the latest environmental and safety standards and available in a variety of sizes, designs and combinations. All Jungle items are manufactured under fair and sustainable conditions with our partners, protecting mother nature from the beginning.



www.jungleusa.com



704-421-6288



anna@jungleusa.com



The “Maine” Event: Blue Elephant’s Lobster Bake at the ICA Summer Workshop

When it comes to celebrating Maine, few things capture its spirit better than a lobster bake. On July 23, 2024, Blue Elephant Events and Catering hosted a “shell-ebriation” of Maine’s finest at the ICA Summer Workshop Welcome Dinner. Held at their historic headquarters in Saco, Maine, this seafood feast, hosted by Blue Elephant President Reuben Bell and Vice President Fausto Pifferrer, was nothing short of a culinary and design masterpiece. We caught up with Pifferrer to get a closer look at how this unforgettable event came together.

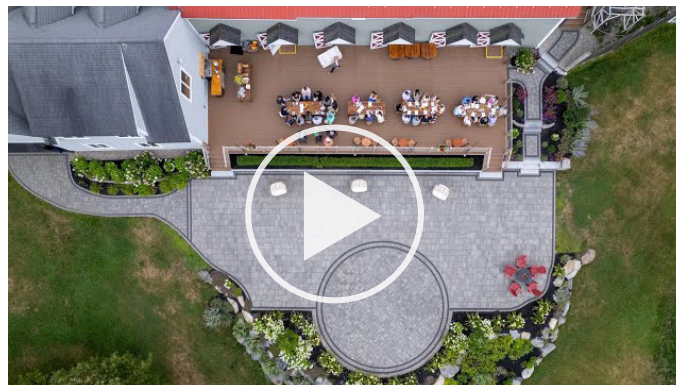
Event: ICA Summer Workshop Welcome Dinner - Lobster Bake

Location: Blue Elephant Events and Catering, 265 North Street, Saco, Maine

Hosts: Reuben Bell, President; Fausto Pifferrer, Vice President

Menu Highlights:

- **Lobster Madness:** 1½ lb steamed Maine lobsters with drawn butter
- **Bang Island Mussels:** white wine, garlic butter, and herb broth
- **Maple Bourbon Steak Tips**
- **Roasted Fingerling Potatoes**
- **Strawberry Shortcake**



Blue Elephant Events and Catering welcomed members of the International Caterers Association for a workshop

Q&A with Fausto Pifferrer

Q: When did the planning phase for the event begin?

Fausto Pifferrer: The minute the ICA asked if we could host the workshop, my brain went into overdrive. I’d say it was only about an hour later that the real brainstorming started. I couldn’t wait to involve all the incredible professionals I work with regularly. Hosting an ICA event was new for us, so the excitement really kicked in early.

Q: Who helped you pull off this incredible event?

FP: It was a team effort from start to finish. Reuben Bell, our staff, and I worked closely with several local pros—rental companies, florists, photographers, and even a plane operator for air permissions! We had so many moving parts, but that collaboration is what made it magical. Everyone, including first-time visitors to Maine, felt like they were getting a fully immersive experience.

Don’t miss the ICA during Catersource + The Special Event
Stop by the ICA Inspiration Zone during [Catersource + The Special Event 2025](#) to join friends, peers, and colleagues.

Are you ready to be inspired?
Experience the Art of Catering Food, presented in partnership with the International Caterers Association, February 23–24, 2025 in Fort Lauderdale, FL.
AOCF is an event designed for chefs and taught by chefs. Over the course of two days leading into Catersource + The Special Event, you’ll connect with experienced catering chefs sharing new culinary techniques, the latest trending ingredients, food costing, and everything else you need to know to turn your menus into works of art.
Whether you are looking for ways to enhance your operations or want to liaise with, learn from, and see what catering chefs around the country are doing to appeal to new clients, the Art of Catering Food has something for you!

[Find all the details here](#)



(Top) Little red trailers held all the utensils; (Above) Table settings featured candelabras, florals, and stunning lighting accents from Sterno. Photos courtesy Life in Focus



The menu included 1½ lb steamed Maine lobsters with drawn butter. Photo courtesy Life in Focus

Q: Did you have a budget in mind for the event's creative phase?

FP: Honestly, I didn't start with a set budget. I went with what I envisioned and what we wanted to create for the attendees. It was more about curating a memorable experience than sticking to numbers in the early stages.

Q: Which comes first for you: the menu or the event design?

FP: The design always comes first for me. I start by imagining the event setting—the tent, the florals, the tables, and even the lighting. That sets the tone for the menu. I knew right away that we couldn't host a Maine event without lobster. It had to be the star of the show, and we wanted a true sea-to-table moment. We had the culinary team serve steaming hot lobsters straight from a boat, which went table to table. It was like bringing the ocean directly to the guests.

Q: How did you incorporate local ingredients into the menu?

FP: All the key ingredients were sourced locally. The lobsters came from our own waters here in Maine, the mussels from Casco Bay, and the greens from a nearby farm. Even the berries in the strawberry shortcake were Maine-grown. We wanted every bite to reflect the authenticity of the region, and it really added to the overall experience.

Q: Tell us about your historic headquarters and its role in the event.

FP: Our headquarters is in a house built in 1909, located in the historic district of Saco. [Bell] and I had our eye on this place for 18 years, so when we finally made it our home base in 2020, it was a dream come true. It took us four years to move in and get the city's approval for events, but it was all worth it. Hosting the ICA dinner here was special because we've poured so much love into the space. It felt like the perfect setting for such a unique evening.

Q: Any final thoughts about the evening?

FP: The feedback we've received has been incredible. One guest, Tony

Santos from Smashing Dishes in California, told me the workshop completely changed his business. After hearing our presentation on Venue Brokering, he signed a contract to be the exclusive caterer at the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose. That's what ICA is all about—supporting each other, learning, and growing. We're so grateful for the connections we made at this event and can't wait to keep that momentum going.

From lobsters served fresh from the sea to thoughtful event design, Blue Elephant Events and Catering gave ICA Workshop attendees a true taste of Maine. Their commitment to local sourcing, creativity, and professional collaboration shined throughout the evening. **CS**

Blue Elephant Events and Catering is a proud member 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.

*
by Paul Neuman

How COVID-19 Changed Corporate Delivery Catering



The COVID-19 pandemic struck the catering industry in 2020, forcing caterers to adapt to a nearly unrecognizable business landscape. The impact was felt across the board, with both short and long-term effects reshaping corporate catering. Here's a summary of how several caterers with a presence in the corporate delivery market adjusted to these challenges.

During COVID-19

During the height of the pandemic, catering shifted to individually portioned, safely wrapped meals, leading to a rise in packaging and labor costs, which were often passed on to clients. Many caterers focused on maintaining employment for key staff, utilizing this time to refine best practices and enhance operational systems in preparation for a post-COVID recovery.

Inflation

Post-COVID, the most significant impact has been the rising costs of food, energy, and labor. Costs have risen faster than caterers could increase their prices. Although clients accepted that catering would be more expensive, many cut back on the amount and frequency of orders. To combat these challenges, caterers adopted operational software to better manage portion sizes and reduce waste, while others used technology to lower energy costs. Yet price increases for clients have lagged rising operational costs, squeezing profit margins.

Weekly business rhythm

Corporate catering used to follow a predictable Monday-to-Friday pattern, with peak revenues on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Now, the business rhythm has shifted to a Tuesday-to-Thursday model, resulting in staffing and delivery challenges due to concentrated activity. Caterers are adapting by giving hourly employees more hours during peak days and fewer on Mondays and Fridays. This concentration necessitates greater efficiency, leaving less room for error.

While the office population in many industries may never return to the Monday-to-Friday standard, there has been some trend towards office repopulation. For example, completely remote office work has been on a downward trajectory for the last several years. According to a survey of large companies, the number of companies allowing fully remote work decreased drastically

catersource + **THE SPECIAL EVENT**
FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

See the Certified Catering Consultants in Action

Don't miss your chance to hear from the Certified Catering Consultants directly during **Catersource + The Special Event 2025** being held February 24-27 in Fort Lauderdale, FL. This year's lineup of speakers includes:

- Anthony Lambatos
- Meryl Snow
- Bill Hansen
- Carl Sacks

REGISTER NOW

“COVID-19 fundamentally changed corporate drop-off catering. While many caterers are thriving again, capitalizing on new opportunities and improved operational efficiencies, they are doing so in an entirely new environment.”

between 2022 and 2023. Eventually this will drive improved delivery catering opportunities.

Employees

The hospitality industry no longer attracts young talent as it once did, leading to a smaller pool of candidates to fill key positions. Millennials and Generation Z are often perceived as entitled by older generations, yet many employers recognize that these younger workers are talented but may have different work expectations and values.

With the exception of sales, remote work is generally not feasible in the catering industry, but retaining young talent requires listening to their needs. Skilled workers remain essential, and catering's hands-on nature makes it difficult to accommodate remote arrangements.

Clients

Client profiles haven't dramatically changed, but new opportunities have emerged in amenity services, such as subsidized coffee and lunches for large employers to encourage employees to return to the office. During the pandemic, clients were generally understanding of the challenges faced by caterers, but there's been a shift to a younger cohort of catering buyers who are more transactional and less collaborative than their predecessors. These younger clients prefer efficiency over relationship-building, which contrasts with traditional catering practices.

Caterers now find themselves confirming orders more frequently due to a lack of communication from these clients. Last-minute orders have

become commonplace, presenting both challenges and opportunities, as clients who plan better may be more demanding.

Clients are increasingly interested in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, sustainability, and women-owned business status. However, price remains a primary deciding factor for caterers, often requiring them to have these policies merely to “check the box.”


The competitive landscape

Prior to COVID-19, corporate caterers faced competition from third-party delivery services like DoorDash and Uber Eats. The pandemic intensified this competition, as these services provided affordable options for clients. Now, caterers compete for clients who value quality over the lowest price, seeking to reclaim their market share.

Food

While COVID-19 didn't fundamentally change caterers' menus, it did lead to significant scaling back during the peak of the pandemic. Some caterers suspended their standard menus and are just beginning to resume their pre-pandemic offerings. Ongoing trends toward local, sustainable ingredients and allergen awareness continue to drive culinary changes in the industry.

COVID-19 fundamentally changed corporate drop-off catering. While many caterers are thriving again, capitalizing on new opportunities and improved operational efficiencies, they are doing so in an entirely new environment. As companies encourage or demand that employees return to work, they will be using

food to attract and retain talent. This battle will be fought in part with food and beverage services. The industry may never return to its former state, but these adaptations may help caterers thrive in a transformed market. 



Paul Neuman has been in the food business for over four decades, coming from a family

with three generations of history in the New York food world. His career included building successful full service and delivery catering businesses in New York City and Philadelphia. In the pre-pandemic era, his Neuman's Kitchen business was one of the top 10 largest caterers in New York. Since recently selling his New York business to a large contract foodservice company, he joined Certified Catering Consultants. Paul's particular areas of expertise include creating and building drop-off catering divisions for caterers, restaurants, and food retailers. He brings the knowledge necessary to help both start up and established caterers to increase revenues and profitability.

The **Certified Catering Consultants (CCC)** will offer free half-hour appointments on site during Catersource + The Special Event 2025 to address your catering-related challenges, identify your highest value opportunities, and/or help you improve your business and ROI. The CCC team has been consulting with caterers for over 20 years and many of them ran businesses of their own—or still do!

The Perfect Ending

A wooden tray with four different digestif glasses and two white plates with chocolates. The glasses contain various colored liquids, likely liqueurs. The chocolates are small, round, and some are wrapped in gold foil.

Various digestifs served at The Club Room at Campiello in Naples, Florida. Photo courtesy D'Amico Catering/The Club Room at Campiello

The ins and outs of bringing digestifs into your beverage program

While digestifs have long been a cherished tradition in European dining, their potential to elevate the end of a meal is now being recognized here in the United States as well. Integrating these sophisticated after-dinner drinks into your beverage program can provide a memorable conclusion to any event, enhancing both the culinary experience and guest experience.

“There’s always that bottle on the back bar that just sits there and collects dust,” says Ross Kupitz (D’Amico Catering), referring to the many digestifs found behind the bar. “I think they’re brilliant because they all have so much complexity, and it turns a bar into a playground with a spice rack that would rival any kitchen.”

The bookends of a meal

Within the United States, we may not be as familiar with digestifs because



(Above) D’Amico’s Catering’s Negroni Bar during an event at International Market Square in Minneapolis featured both a Classic Negroni (featuring Campari and sweet vermouth) and a White Negroni (which featured Lillet Blanc and Suze). Photo courtesy Anna Grinets Photography; (Right) D’Amico Catering served a Black Manhattan (which used bittersweet Averna amaro instead of vermouth) during an event at International Market Square in Minneapolis. Photo courtesy Anna Grinets Photography

there is less emphasis on elaborate, formal, multi-course dinners. In contrast however, Europeans typically bookend their multi-course meals with aperitifs and digestifs—while aperitifs help whet the appetite for the meal ahead (similar to a happy hour or cocktail hour), digestifs are served after a meal and are meant to aid digestion.

Essentially, the tradition of an aperitif and digestif is more about preparing and calming the body and setting a tone of conversation and relaxation so that patrons can fully enjoy the company of their dining cohorts (and in some cases hit the dance floor after a big meal).

“I think of digestifs more as a service style, or more specifically a service time,” says Anthony Caporale (director of spirits education at the Institute of Culinary Education). “You can essentially serve any spirit as a digestif; the defining factor is that it’s being served after a meal.” Although Caporale believes that while any spirit can be served as a digestif, the best digestifs are herbaceous and bitter, such as amaro, cognac, Armagnac, grappa, sweet liqueurs (such as Grand Marnier, Drambuie, sambuca, and limoncello), or fortified wines (such as port, vermouth, and sherry).

“What I really like about this category is that the bitterness comes from botanicals, so it balances the sweetness and the bitterness,” says Caporale.

These same spirits can actually overlap as aperitifs or pre-meal

drinks; however, these nightcaps tend to be sweeter and are usually consumed neat (only about an ounce or two) or with coffee or espresso (as opposed to cocktails). Additionally, digestifs also tend to be lower in alcohol content.

“You don’t want a lot of volume in a drink that is supposed to make you feel less full,” says Caporale. “You have the balance of a cocktail, but you only have to pour one bottle—they are the original ready-to-drink serves.

“We don’t want to just make an after-dinner drink; the idea is to serve something that is low volume, low alcohol.”

Digestion hour

When you’re stuffed after a big meal, another drink may seem like the last thing you’d want; but these after-dinner digestifs aren’t just an excuse for one more drink—they make a great meal even more satisfying by alleviating fullness. Taking a sip of liqueur after a meal is thought to aid digestion due to its alcohol content, and there’s some truth to the tradition. Alcohol stimulates the stomach’s production of the enzyme pepsin and increases secretions of the pancreas and gall bladder. Herb-based digestifs work best at this, and ingredients like caraway, fennel, and savory are thought to be especially beneficial for the digestive system.

“When you ingest a digestif, since there is such a high herbal component to it, it tricks your body into thinking it’s been poisoned,” says Kupitz. “So, what’s your stomach going to do? It’s going to try to neutralize that poison by producing gas; by creating bubbles your stomach creates more surface area for stomach acids to digest your foods.

“Rather than feeling like someone has to wheel you out of the restaurant, you feel a little lighter—some people don’t like them, but they like the effect.”



“I think of digestifs more as a service style, or more specifically a service time. You can essentially serve any spirit as a digestif; the defining factor is that it's being served after a meal.” —Anthony Caporale



Digestifs actually have quite a unique history in Europe, having initially started hundreds of years ago with an eye toward wellness. For example, chartreuse was developed by monks at a French monastery as an “elixir of life.” Drambuie, on the other hand, was developed by a royal physician as a secret elixir. “There’s incredible storytelling that can go along with the products,” says Caporale.



(Left) Candied walnuts with chocolate accompany various digestifs at The Club Room at Campiello in Naples, Florida. Photo courtesy D'Amico Catering/The Club Room at Campiello; (Top) Pink Cosmopolitan from Windows Catering featuring cranberry syrup, vodka, lime juice, and Cointreau. Photo courtesy Steve Legato; (Right) Lambrusco served alongside Salted Caramel Chocolate Cups from D'Amico Catering. Photo courtesy a.m. Photography



recipe



PAPER PLANE

*Recipe courtesy Ross Kupitz, D'Amico Catering
Photo courtesy D'Amico & Partners*

ingredients

- ¾ oz bourbon (such as Pinhook Bourbon)**
- ¾ oz Aperol**
- ¾ oz Amaro Nonino**
- ¾ oz lemon juice**
- 1 ea. lemon peel for garnish**

method

- 1. In a shaker tin full of ice, pour all liquid ingredients and shake well.**
- 2. Double strain into either a coupe or Nick & Nora glass and serve with a lemon peel garnish expressed over the top of the cocktail.**

“They were very medicinal in the early years,” adds Kupitz. “These health tonics were sold in herbalist shops to help people with what ails them—I’m not saying its witchcraft or anything like that though.”

Savoring the moment

Beyond the health effects of digestifs however, there is the social aspect of them as well, which is why they are often served as a formal course during the meal (typically at the table). Digestifs add a layer of sophistication and tradition to your events. They offer guests a chance to relax and savor the end of their meal, creating a memorable experience that can set your catering service apart from the competition.

“It’s just a way to reconnect with the fact that spirits should primarily be about the communion of people, shared experiences, conviviality, celebrating a meal [and] celebrating occasions,” says Caporale.

“It pushes the boundaries of how you finish a meal,” adds Kupitz.

As a way to incorporate a digestif course into a meal, both Caporale and Kupitz suggest conducting a formal tasting experience, rather than simply asking a guest if they’d like a digestif course following their meal.

“It’s unlikely that people are going to appreciate what you’re offering them simply by asking if they want a digestif course,” says Caporale.

Offering a curated selection of digestifs can be an excellent upsell opportunity for caterers, especially given that there is very few ingredients and labor involved.

“Tastings don’t force the guest to try it,” says Kupitz, “but if something’s in front of you, it’s human nature to try it.”

When creating a digestif tasting, there’s a great opportunity to have a bit of fun with it, says Caporale. Maybe

sample several digestifs in varying shades that work within a wedding’s color palette, or perhaps showcase regional variations of a digestif during a corporate event made up of international guests.

Additionally, unlike other spirits, digestifs can showcase local ingredients.

“It’s your color palette and spice rack all rolled into one,” says Caporale. “You’re never going to get a local tequila in the United States, but we can make local cordials anywhere so you can capture a sense of place in the bottle—you can taste your way around these countries.”

When serving digestifs, it’s best to serve them following the dessert or cheese course. Additionally, the preferred glassware is often a snifter or small cordial glass that showcases the drink’s aromatics. While it is most common to serve them neat at room temperature, they can also be served chilled, with a twist of citrus or alongside coffee (such as an Italian coffee with Strega or a French Connection with cognac and amaretto).

There are also several cocktails that rely on digestifs as one of their core ingredients, such as a Black Manhattan, a Paper Plane, or a B-52.

Building up the bar

Proper training for your staff is crucial. Ensure that your team understands the different types of digestifs, their flavor profiles, and the best ways to serve them. Knowledgeable staff can offer recommendations and answer questions, enhancing the guest experience and ensuring that the digestifs are enjoyed as intended.

“You have to experience the flavor to understand how to serve the product,” says Caporale.

Start by tasting your way through various digestifs, whether at a

restaurant or at home. Consider the flavor notes, the aromatics, the mouth feel. If you think that digestifs might be a good addition to your beverage program, Kupitz suggests starting small by adding one or two to your beverage menu (preferably on the sweeter or lighter side, and products that can be incorporated into cocktails as well).

“It’s a bit of trial and error with this type of product,” he says. “If you go too aggressive from the start, you might lose your guests immediately, so start small and then graduate to those more bitter profiles.”

“The goal is to have the experience, so getting it in front of the guests is half the battle. You don’t have to automatically think this is going to be an unpleasant experience, so if you stay curious and ask questions, hopefully we can be a little bit of a driving force in offering these products—if you’re willing to try something, you reap the rewards.” **CS**

catersource + **THE SPECIAL EVENT**
FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

Join Us in the Beverage Garden
Catersource + The Special Event 2025 is excited to announce the addition of a new Beverage Garden to the Tradeshow Floor during this year’s conference.

Join us in the Beverage Garden on the Tradeshow Floor for a bespoke tasting experience—only open to ticket holders—that will inform the myriad ways you approach beverages and how they are built, garnished, and served. Walk the garden and compare cocktail bitters (i.e., not all bitters of the same “flavor” taste the same!), sample garnishes, assess Bloody Mary mixes, and enjoy a signature cocktail to round out your experience, among other tastes.

[Learn More](#)

*
by Robin Selden

Growing Pains



Growth is exhilarating and exhausting—there’s a unique satisfaction in knowing that clients can’t get enough of what we do best. But growing at the speed of light as we are today brings with it its own set of challenges.

catersource + **THE SPECIAL EVENT**
 FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
 FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

See Robin Selden LIVE!

You can see **Robin Selden** in-person during Art of Catering Food (February 23-24, 2025) and at Catersource + The Special Event, February 24-27, 2025 in Fort Lauderdale, FL during the following sessions:

- **Art of Catering Food 2025 (emcee)**
- **DICED Competitor (emcee)**
- **Love to Love you Baby! Crafting Trendy, Instagram-Worthy Themed Parties**

Visit <https://informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/> for all the details.

Ever feel like you are on a hamster wheel and just cannot get off? The whirlwind of back-to-back bookings, unavoidable overtime, and watching the incredible dedication of our teams who work tirelessly to make each event unforgettable is amazing... especially knowing where we came from over 47 years ago! This relentless rhythm is both challenging and rewarding, and I’m sure many of you out there can relate. As demand skyrockets, we’re faced with the ongoing task of rethinking our space, staff, and workflows to keep up.

Room to grow

One of the trickiest parts? Finding room for everyone—both literally and figuratively. Our kitchen team are working cutting board to cutting board and our office space is desk to desk. After two years of searching, we’re still on the lookout for a bigger location to allow for expansion, but available spaces have been hard to come by and land available to buy in a property zoned area is nonexistent. Much like how we run our business, we are just not willing to compromise on our next move.

In the meantime, we’re doing what many catering businesses are doing: maximizing every square foot, fostering creativity within our super tight quarters, and getting as resourceful as we can. Yup, my brother’s (**Jeffrey Selden’s**) basement has become one of our storage units. While expansion is exciting, the journey there requires patience, persistence, and, most importantly, adaptability.

Balancing growth

Then there’s the balance of it all. We’re deeply passionate about the artistry in our work, from developing new recipes to envisioning unique presentations. As the demands of our business grow, finding time for our creative pursuits, like the cookbook I’ve been writing for the last three years, experimenting with new ideas, or focusing on marketing,

can sometimes feel elusive. In this time of catering madness, finding ways to protect our team’s wellbeing and avoiding burnout (turn to [page 41](#) for Anthony Lambatos’ thoughts on employee burnout) becomes paramount. In a culture where “always on” can seem like the norm, maintaining morale and productivity requires proactive steps.

Giving our team the space to make decisions instills a sense of ownership and allows us all to remain agile during these times. Stop micromanaging your teams and choose what’s important to focus on. This keeps everyone engaged, embracing ownership, and proud of their contributions... especially when we use them, and they see them at an event. Encouraging our team to propose and implement these “micro-innovations” fosters a creative environment, even during the busiest times, and adds a spark of excitement to the routine helping to keep them from burning out.

We need to help each other thrive along the way. Catering is a hustle, but it’s one filled with passion, purpose, and opportunity. Let’s keep growing one delicious event at a time! **CS**



Robin Selden is the Managing Partner & Executive Chef of Marcia Selden Catering & Events and Naked Fig Catering, where she oversees the culinary and marketing

operations for her family’s multimillion-dollar company. In October 2019, Robin was honored to be named to the BizBash1000 celebrating the top 1,000 event professionals in the USA in 2019 and to the BizBash 500 celebrating the top 500 event professionals in 2020 in the United States. Selden is in the President’s Council as a past President of the International Caterers Association and won their Chef of the Year award. She’s a past Innovative Chef of the Year and a current Ambassador Chef for the Greenwich Wine & Food Festival.

*
by Anthony Lambatos

Prevent Burnout by Addressing These Four Factors



Employee burnout at work is not new, but it is getting worse in companies across the country and creating a major problem. According to SHRM’s Employee Mental Health Research Series, 44% of U.S. employees surveyed were burnt out and emotionally drained from work. Burnout can lead to missed deadlines, mistakes, and sub-par work. Additionally, burnout is near the top of the list when it comes to reasons the best employees leave an organization (turn to [page 18](#) for a deeper look at the current state of staffing in our State of the Industry 2024 report). There is a misconception, though, that burnout is only about the number of hours worked. Have you ever worked for extended hours on a project and at the end felt energized and pumped up? On the flip side, I’m sure you can also recount a time when you worked for only an hour on a project, and it absolutely drained you. So, what does make the difference? Burnout is about far more than hours worked, and while there are several influences that lead to it, here are four factors that leaders can leverage to help prevent burnout in their organizations.

1. Have your pulse on what team members need

Great leaders can discern the difference between someone who is truly at their limit and someone who doesn’t know they are operating below their potential. When leaders take time to ask team members how they are doing and what they need, they can learn a lot. Sometimes a

push to get over the line is the charge that is needed to get them energized; sometimes it is a helping hand that boosts the reserves and morale.

2. Leveraging strengths

Think about how you feel when you are doing activities that you are great at. It’s a much different feeling than the frustration and even embarrassment that creeps in when you are not able to lean into your world class strengths. It is critical for leaders to identify the strengths of individual team members and then put them in positions at work where they can use those strengths most of the time. When people are doing work they are good at, they are more productive, they feel better about their contributions to the team, and they ultimately have more confidence at work.

3. Why does their work matter?

It’s important for leaders to communicate the reason the company exists to everyone who works there. When employees understand how their job contributes to the purpose of the organization, it becomes more than just a job. There is purpose in their day-to-day activities and that purpose helps to ward off burnout because they begin to feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves. People are generally inspired by big goals if they are infused with purpose that they personally resonate with.

4. We get by with a little help from our friends

Close connections have been proven to be one of the most important

factors to living a long and happy life. And when those relationships exist at work, they go a long way to improving morale and job satisfaction. When team members love, trust, and respect the people they work with, they have more fun, they are better able to overcome challenges, and they are inspired to keep improving, which then leads to more pride in the work done. As leaders we can be intentional about helping team members build closer connections with one another and fostering these relationships within our organizations.

Burnout at work causes many problems within companies and it will continue to be a challenge for leaders across the country. By engaging in frequent conversations with team members, putting them in positions where they can use their strengths, communicating the purpose of their work, and helping them develop close connections with their coworkers, leaders can ward off these negative implications and prevent burnout. **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.

CATERING TO DIVERSITY

BY AMBER KISPERT



Emory University delivered a Celebration of Life for beloved former First Lady Rosalynn Carter. Recognizing the magnitude and logistical intricacies, forging a partnership beyond the conventional producer-client relationship was imperative. Proof of the Pudding provided catering for the event. Photo courtesy AP



The Final Farewell:

Navigating the Nuances of Funeral Catering

In an industry often focused on celebration, funeral catering offers a unique opportunity to blend culinary artistry with compassion.

Although the intersection of food and mourning may not immediately be evident, funeral catering does in fact serve an essential purpose in the grieving process. As families gather to honor loved ones, food plays a crucial role in creating a comforting atmosphere.

“Eating is important for both nourishment and as a way to bring people together during grief and loss,” said Beth Hiler (Partyman Catering*), “so we must recognize the human experience behind the event. Caterers need to bring their whole heart and empathy to what they offer.”

Support through partnership

Funeral planning presents a special kind of challenge for caterers. For starters, in many situations the client isn’t necessarily the grieving family; rather, caterers work directly with funeral homes to provide

catering services. This is where coordination and collaboration with funeral directors and funeral homes becomes so important.

One approach is to create formal partnership agreements with local funeral homes, outlining services, pricing, and delivery options to ensure consistency and reliability.

Additionally, caterers should prioritize prompt service, as families often require arrangements on short notice. This can often lead to challenges with securing rentals, which is why leveraging past relationships is key.

“That’s the trickiest of everything,” said [Fausto Pifferrer](#) (Blue Elephant Events and Catering*), “the food is easy, but the rentals become a problem.”

By fostering strong relationships and demonstrating understanding and support, caterers can become a valuable resource for funeral homes and grieving families.

Another challenge that caterers should be aware of is that families often don’t know how many people to order food for (and whether there are any dietary restrictions) since people don’t always announce that they’re attending a funeral.

“Building rapport with grieving families is essential,” says Chef

Eric Centeno (Exquisite Delites Catering Company). “By asking thoughtful questions, we can create a personalized menu that honors the deceased and comforts the living.”

Where professionalism & empathy collide

Close coordination with funeral directors helps ensure that food service aligns seamlessly with the funeral service. Providing promotional materials, such as brochures or flyers, to funeral homes can discreetly inform families of available services. Be aware of the words you use in your materials, however.

“No detail is too small to consider when thinking of your client experience during this process,” says Hiler. “Are the words and information you provide appropriate for them to know, [but also] built with the tone and language for someone going through the grieving process? Names of offerings or automations that might be a point of fun or celebration for any other event may need to be altered

“Eating is important for both nourishment and as a way to bring people together during grief and loss, so we must recognize the human experience behind the event and caterers need to bring their whole heart and empathy to what they offer.” —*Beth Hiler*

to empathize with your client and what they and their family are going through. Be patient and be willing to navigate some frustrations since emotions are high and often out of our control.”

As much as caterers can try and streamline operations for these short turnaround times, they also need to have a degree of flexibility while maintaining high-quality offerings and service.

“It’s easy, especially once you’ve established efficiencies internally, to forget that there is a huge emotional component that we do not have control over,” says Hiler.

Additionally, training staff to interact with compassion and empathy is crucial, as a caring approach can significantly impact families during a difficult time. Train your staff to be both attentive and discreet. They should be prepared to serve with empathy, maintaining a low profile while being ready to assist as needed. Your team should handle any issues with grace and efficiency, ensuring that the focus remains on supporting the bereaved.

“You must both be able to solve problems or logistical complications while also being as unobtrusive as possible, which can be challenging for the team if they aren’t trained to balance these concerns with the emotional aspects of funeral events,” says Hiler.

Simplifying service

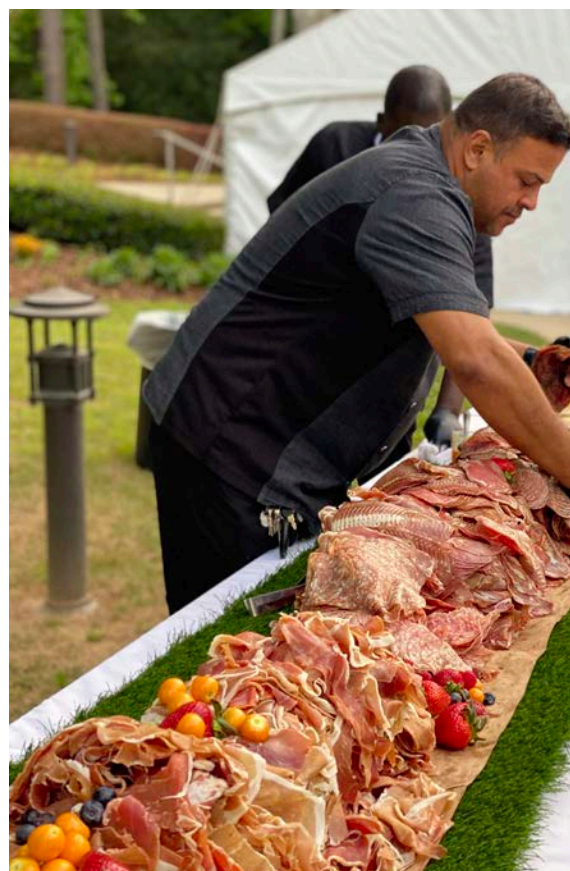
There are varying degrees to approach funeral catering from a service perspective. Whereas some caterers specialize in “drop-off” menus, others go the full-service route.

“Having a range of catering services available is important when planning for and logistically handling funeral services,” says Hiler. “By acknowledging the complexities of family dynamics and expressions of grief, offering a variety of styles ensures that each funeral service receives personalized care and customization, tailored to exactly what the family wants or needs.”

Drop-off

This style of catering is one of the more frequently requested services for funerals.

“This option provides a quiet, unobtrusive way to offer a comforting meal during a sensitive time, allowing for privacy and reflection,” says May Cleary (Partyman Catering). “It is perfect for more intimate or informal funeral gatherings, where minimizing disruption is paramount, but we can still provide a thoughtful meal for grieving loved ones.”





It is also a cost-effective choice since funeral expenses can often be a sudden stress for family and friends coordinating the services.

Casual catering

With this style of service, the catering team sets up the main meal buffet-style and stays for the duration of the meal service, usually with two to three staff members on-site to ensure everything runs smoothly.

“This option offers a comforting balance between support and privacy, making it ideal for informal receptions where a full-service approach may not be needed, but you still want a level of care and attention to make the meal seamless and stress-free,” Cleary says.

Full-service catering

Buffets are often the preferred choice here, offering guests the flexibility to choose what they want and serve themselves at their own pace.

“You wouldn’t normally do a sit down with funeral catering,” adds Pifferrer. “Some people would, but in our neck of the woods it wouldn’t be appropriate.”

For more formal events, family-style and plated meals can also be options.

“Family-style dining combines the convenience of a buffet with the intimacy of a seated meal, adding a warm, personal touch during a time of reflection and connection,” says Cleary. “This style creates a comforting atmosphere, making it ideal for funeral receptions where closeness and shared memories are central.”



(Top) Lobster-themed funeral lunch. Photo courtesy Blue Elephant Events and Catering; (Left) Chef Eric Centeno of Exquisite Delites Catering Company sets a cheese and charcuterie table for a 5,000-person repast reception (Exquisite Delites Catering Company was the recipient of the 2024 ACE award for Best Off-Premise Catering for companies under \$2 million annual revenue). Photo courtesy Sandra Centeno; (Above) A fruit and cheeseboard alongside a charcuterie board from Partyman Catering. Photo courtesy Rebecca Loomis

FUNERAL FOOD

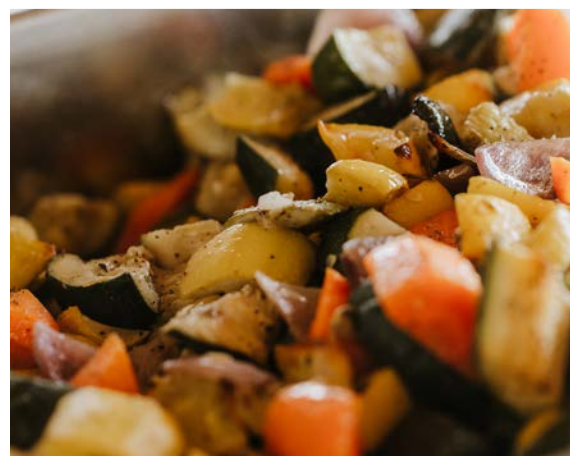
Throughout history, food has played a significant role in funeral traditions across cultures.

Some of these traditions include:

- In the **Hindu** faith, baskets of fruits and vegetables are gifted to families.
- The **Amish** bring a raisin-filled funeral pie.
- In **Sweden**, Funeral Glogg is used to toast the deceased.
- Rice is a symbol of life in **Asian** cultures and is included in all funerals.
- The eating of chicken in **some countries** symbolically helps the soul of the dead to fly to heaven.
- In **China**, the eating of sugar in the form of sweets or candies, distributed after a funeral, is meant to purify mourners after encountering the dead.
- In **Italy**, funeral gatherings often feature an array of hearty foods like lasagna and risotto. These communal meals encourage shared memories and provide a sense of solidarity during times of sorrow.
- During the shiva period, **Jewish** mourning customs involve the delivery of special platters filled with bagels, lox, and various comfort dishes. This practice symbolizes support for the grieving family.
- In the **southern United States**, funeral food usually features comforting classics like fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, and pecan pie. They reflect a commitment to providing solace through shared meals.
- In **colonial America** (particularly among German and British settlers) a tradition emerged where individuals would consume molasses cookies or funeral biscuits and imbibe alcoholic beverages while proceeding from the church to the gravesite.
- **New Orleans** sees jambalaya as the preferred funeral food.
- The **Midwest** is renowned for its classic funeral hot dishes, funeral potatoes, and casseroles.

Information above courtesy the following sources:

- [Mortician in the Kitchen](#)
- [Bachelor Brothers Inc Funeral Services](#)
- [Curious Foodies](#)



Finding comfort through food

As humans, we often turn to food as a source of comfort and solace. In times of grief, a well-crafted catering menu can provide mourners with a small sense of familiarity and warmth, helping to ease their pain. It's not just about providing sustenance; it's about feeding their souls and giving them a moment to rest and recharge amidst the heartache.

“We must strike a balance between elegance and simplicity,” says Centeno, “ensuring that the food is both delicious and appropriate for the occasion.”

Opt for dishes that are comforting



(Top Left) Salad and rolls on Partyman Catering's buffet setup. Photo courtesy Brittany Austin Photography; (Bottom Left) Roasted veggies from Partyman Catering. Photo courtesy Brittany Austin Photography; (Below) Salted mini caramel tartlets from Partyman Catering. Photo courtesy Partyman Catering



and easy to eat. Think of classic options like casseroles, hearty soups, sandwiches, and finger foods. These meals should be satisfying but not overly rich or complex, respecting the somber tone of the occasion. While traditional comfort food remains popular, there's a rising trend toward gourmet takes on classic dishes. Caterers are enhancing comfort food with high-quality ingredients and refined techniques. Expect to see elevated versions of mac and cheese, artisanal soups, and creatively presented finger foods. This trend allows families to enjoy familiar, comforting flavors presented in a way that feels special and sophisticated.

"You don't do filet mignon because those foods are not comforting," says Pifferrer, "you switch it to mac and cheese and sandwiches—you have to make the food work for the client."

It's important to remember that if you decide to partner with funeral homes to generate business, many of them may have pre-set funeral menus you must work within.

"Nine times out of 10 the funeral home has a set menu, so you don't have the luxury of setting a menu or even the timeline," says Pifferrer. "It can be hard sometimes because it seems a little bit cookie cutter."

However, don't be afraid if you are asked to include family recipes or traditional dishes from the deceased's cultural background. This might involve creating a menu based on a beloved family recipe or incorporating regional specialties that hold significance to the deceased or their family.

"We can tell a story with the food while we're serving it," says Pifferrer.

Keep in mind that guests are not

looking for a messy or heavy meal that will take away from the reason they have attended. Additionally, thoughtful table settings, such as elegant tablecloths and simple floral arrangements, can provide a sense of tranquility. Soft lighting, whether from natural sunlight or gentle artificial sources, can also contribute to a serene and calming ambience.

"It's a time to be respectful, listen to the client, and understand what they're going through," says Pifferrer. "It's not the time to push everything that you can upsell."

Funeral catering is a special niche within the catering world, one that requires a deep sense of empathy and professionalism. By focusing on providing comforting food, respecting the occasion, and delivering your service with care, you can play a vital role in supporting families during their time of need.

"By understanding the unique challenges and opportunities of funeral catering" says Centeno, "we can provide compassionate and delicious meals that honor the lives of the departed."

Remember, the goal is to offer solace and support through your culinary creations, helping to make a difficult time a little more bearable for those grieving the loss of a loved one.

"In many instances, catering is important but not on a family's top priority list, so it is important that the catering company can ensure good quality food and can handle most if not all of the logistics," says Hiler. "Our goal is to provide peace of mind, allowing families to focus on what matters most." **CS**

**Blue Elephant Events and Catering and Partyman Catering are proud members of the [Leading Caterers of America](#) (a consortium of the top catering and event planners throughout the United States and Canada).*

STEAL THIS



Fresh ideas to use or adapt at your next event

Setting the Scene

While colors, shapes, and materials in dinnerware may cycle in and out of fashion, the integration of restaurant-quality design into catering marks a significant trend that elevates [setting the table](#) into an art form comparable to that of fine dining—a craft that embodies taste and sophistication. Today, many caterers own and/or rent small batches of artisanal place settings. The rise of specialty rental services, alongside major rental companies expanding their china offerings to encompass diverse styles, empowers caterers and their design teams to innovate and inspire with their [table designs](#). Head over to [Catersource.com](#) for more inspiration.  —Amber Kispert



Casa de Perrin Rentals | 24 Carrots Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon



The Ark Rentals | 24 Carrots Catering & Events | Photo courtesy Sally Pinera



Ceramics students at Arcadia University crafted banchan dishes for a tasting menu pop-up | Philadelphia Museum of Art | Photo courtesy Michelle Corban



Miniature Ginger Crème Brûlée (ginger-spiced custard with a brittle caramelized crust and garnished with candied ginger and edible flower) served in ceramic cups | Occasions Caterers | Photo courtesy Elisabetta Marzetti



Bingsu (banana, makgeoli, soybean, red bean, melon, and dduk) | Philadelphia Museum of Art | Photo courtesy Michelle Corban



(Above left) **Raspberry Almond Tartlets** (pâte sablée tartlets filled with almond-scented pastry cream and topped with fresh raspberries and gold foil) served in custom jewelry cases | Occasions Caterers | Photo courtesy Elisabetta Marzetti; (Above right) **Artisanal glassware** | Windows Catering | Photo courtesy Steve Legato



Sign Up Now: Tablescape Competition 2025

Dive into a world of Tablescape design and event magic with Michelle Joy Howard, along with Matthew Crowe and Colton Staver, on Thursday, February 27th from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. (during Catersource + The Special Event 2025 in Fort Lauderdale). This is your chance to shine in an engaging, hands-on Tablescape Competition where your creativity takes center stage. Join one of 12 exclusive teams, each made up of five talented individuals, and embark on a journey to craft a stunning tablescape. You'll be surprised with many unknowns as you work against the clock to design and assemble your masterpiece. The winning team will earn coveted passes to the 2026 Catersource + The Special Event! Secure your spot and let your imagination blossom!

Sign up now to participate in the competition!

Where caterers
meet event planners

under one roof!

Catersource + The Special Event™

FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025

**BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA**

Catersource + The Special Event is the only annual event of its kind. A show of unrivaled influence and inspiration, it's a spirited gathering of all the people, ideas, and trending innovations shaping the catering and events industry.

SECURE YOUR SPOT!

**EARLY BIRD RATES
END FEBRUARY 7, 2025**

CATERSOURCE-TSE.COM

EXCLUSIVE: Positive Predictions for 2025 (p. 48)
Inside a Night of Circus Amusements (p. 42)

Special Events™

WINTER 2024

2024

State OF THE Industry

A LOOK
DOWN
THE AISLE
P. 10

MIX, MINGLE,
CHEERS!
P. 20

WINTER 2024 THIS ISSUE



VOLUME 42
NO. 4

COVER STORY

28 2024 STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

Amidst challenges, creativity blossoms

FEATURES

48 POSITIVE PREDICTIONS FOR 2025

A forecast for the new year



ON THE COVER:

A winter wedding by Jaclyn Watson Events that featured evergreens by Apotheka Florals. Turn to [page 10](#) to read all about this year's top wedding trends. Photo courtesy J. Harper Photography

COLUMNS

03 Editor's Page

Small changes, big impact

50 The Last Word

A word of grace

DEPARTMENTS

04 Conference News

CS+TSE agenda is now live!

06 Business of Events

Four industry shifts to expect in 2025

08 Marketing & Media

AI-driven marketing for event pros

10 On Trend

A look down the aisle at this year's hottest wedding trends

18 Tech Talk

The 2024 tech glow-up (and what's next)

20 Food for Fetes

How to plan a flawless cocktail-style reception

42 Confetti

Inside a 2024 Gala-nominated Night Circus



EDITOR'S PAGE



Small Changes, Big Impact

Kathleen

Kathleen Stoehr
Director of Community & Content Strategy

Special Events™

- Director of Community & Content Strategy** Kathleen Stoehr, kathleen.stoehr@informa.com
- Content Editor** Amanda Nicklaus, amanda.nicklaus@informa.com
- Senior Content Producer** Amber Kispert, amber.kispert@informa.com
- Art Director** Sarah Kolcheck, sarah@nxtgennetwork.com
- Sales Director** Michael Lindahl, michael.lindahl@informa.com
- Sales Account Executive** Kevin Hacke, kevin.hacke@informa.com
- Managing Director** Melissa Fromento, melissa.fromento@informa.com
- Ad Operations Specialist** Lauren Loya, lauren.loya@informa.com

WEBSITES

- specialevents.com
- catersource.com
- informaconnect.com/catersource-thespecialevent/

CONTRIBUTORS

Meghan Ely, Brian Green, Christie Osborne, Nora Sheils

Foodservice Group

Special Events magazine is published quarterly by Informa Connect Foodservice Group, 650 Third Ave, 22nd Floor, New York, NY 10158. Subscriptions: Go to specialevents.com and sign up to receive *Special Events*' quarterly issues and/or monthly e-newsletter products. Reproduction in whole or part without written permission prohibited. ©2024 Informa Connect Foodservice Group. All rights reserved.

● ● ●
CONFERENCE NEWS



Conference news

The Agenda is Now Live for Catersource + The Special Event 2025!

Photo courtesy Visit Lauderdale

catersource® + THE SPECIAL EVENT®

FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

It's time to start planning out your week for Catersource + The Special Event. The agenda for the 2025 show is now live!

[Check it out here](#) and be sure to sign up for updates on this year's show.

[Catersource + The Special Event](#), February 24–27, 2025 in Fort Lauderdale, FL will provide support and reimagined possibilities when you need it most. Always designed to inspire and deliver the necessary skills and tactics needed to succeed, Catersource + The Special Event 2025 will provide you with an unmatched opportunity to learn. And this year's conference program is no different; it will feature strategies and original ideas transforming the catering and event industry.

Don't miss your opportunity to learn from the best and [register today](#).

A video player interface with a dark red background featuring palm tree silhouettes. At the top left, it displays the event logo 'catersource + THE SPECIAL EVENT' and the dates 'FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025' and location 'BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA'. At the top right is a QR code. The main area shows two video thumbnails. The left thumbnail features Laura Schwartz, a woman with blonde hair in a bright pink top, against a blue background. The right thumbnail features Jenice Stallings, a woman with dark hair in a pink top, against a dark background with curtains. A large white play button is centered over the two thumbnails. Below each thumbnail is the name of the person: 'LAURA SCHWARTZ' and 'JENICE STALLINGS'.

2024 Catersource + The Special Event keynote Laura Schwartz interviews event co-chair Jenice Stallings



Introducing our 2025 Keynote Speakers!

Will Guidara

Are you ready for some Unreasonable Hospitality? Have an amazing start to your Wednesday morning by joining author, producer, and restaurateur Will Guidara as he discusses how to care a little bit more and try a little bit harder with his lessons in service and leadership he learned over the course of his career in restaurants. No matter whether you are in events or catering, you will leave with nuggets of inspiration to bring back to your work. Guidara will be signing copies of his book after his keynote.



Brett Culp

Brett Culp is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker whose work inspires audiences to embrace change, empower others, and spark innovation. His short “StageStory” appearances have captivated the CS+TSE audiences in past years. This year, join him as he takes his storytelling even further with his first keynote address at the 2025 show! [SE](#)

catersource + THE SPECIAL EVENT
 FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
 FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

LAURA SCHWARTZ **BRETT CULP**

[Learn More](#)



(Above) Former White House Director of Events Laura Schwartz interviews Brett Culp, our Catersource + The Special Event 2025 closing keynote; (Left) Catersource + The Special Event 2024 in Austin, TX

**Register now to join us
 February 24–27 in
 Fort Lauderdale!**



Looking Ahead: Four Industry Shifts to Expect in 2025



Event professionals must actively future-proof their businesses by leaning into innovation, refining client experiences, and aligning their brands with modern consumer values.

By Meghan Ely

From technological advancements to evolving consumer behavior, event professionals have had to stay nimble to keep pace with an ever-changing industry. As we look toward 2025, several key trends are expected to shape the landscape further, influencing how brands operate and interact with consumers.

The year ahead promises both opportunities and challenges, depending on how you approach the upcoming industry shifts. Whether it's navigating brand loyalty or getting comfortable with artificial intelligence, staying ahead of the curve is essential for long-term success and sustainability.

What's in the forecast for 2025? Here are four ways the industry will transform next year and how event professionals can prepare for change.

BRAND LOYALTY: HARDER TO MAINTAIN

The modern event client has a healthy dose of conviction in their decisions, even if family members are chipping in financially. Thus, event pros must focus on earning trust directly from the hosts rather than appealing to parents, siblings, and other loved ones.

But here's the catch: Statistics show that brand loyalty decreases with each generation, so brand abandonment will challenge industry professionals as younger generations enter the market. For example, a photographer who has shot weddings for three Millennial sisters should not assume the fourth sister will book for her Gen Z wedding.

What does it take to satisfy a prospective client's expectations? Fighting brand abandonment comes down to two things: an authentic brand presence and a seamless digital experience. Today's consumers want to know your values align with their own, whether sustainability or inclusivity—and they expect your brand to live up to them.

On the other hand, they desire a smooth online-to-offline transition without surprises. Is it easy to navigate your website? Are you gatekeeping information they need for an educated decision? Does your client experience measure up to the promises made on your Instagram feed? In their fast-paced lives, give them an easy user experience that flows effortlessly into an offline conversation that affirms their hunch that you're the one.

SOCIAL PROOF: MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

If you're picking a new restaurant for dinner, you probably start by checking out the online reviews to see what others have said about quality, cleanliness, and service. The same goes for any business, whether someone is looking for a tailor, mechanic, or event planner. That's the power of social proof! People value what others say about a company more than the branded messaging on their website or social media profiles.

Going into 2025, run an audit to understand what people say about your brand and consider how you can leverage social proof to highlight all



the positive feedback. If you haven't already, build testimonial requests into your offboarding workflow to fill up your profiles on Google, Facebook, The Knot, and WeddingWire with glowing reviews. You can also feature great testimonials on your website and social media.

Another way to demonstrate social proof is through press and accolades. Event features are low-hanging fruit to start building your press portfolio, but do not overlook the power of podcast features, expert quotes in the media, and industry awards. Share these wins on a dedicated press page, an "as seen on" section of your website, your social media profiles, and even your email signature. This type of third-party validation goes far in earning a potential client's trust!

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A PARTNER, NOT A FOE

It's no secret that AI will continue to be a part of the industry conversation. Looking ahead, it is time to shift the mindset from fear that AI is eliminating

jobs to curiosity about how to harness it as a resource. AI will only become more woven into the fabric of the industry, so it's better to lean into the opportunity than resist an inevitable change.

As AI becomes a valued tool in both the home and workplace, more people will see it as a vital component of the event planning process. For industry professionals, this shift can lead to expectations of quicker turnaround times and a more personalized experience. If you can leverage AI to adjust your client experience, you will be ahead of the curve when market demands begin to evolve more rapidly in the coming years.

Any mention of AI begs a disclaimer that, while helpful, this nascent technology comes with its limitations. Chatbots, image generators, and other machine-learning tools are valuable resources but should not be relied upon for accuracy or authenticity. Always fact-check AI-generated content, and do not forget to add your personal touch!

SHORT-FORM VIDEO: AN UNPOLISHED APPROACH

Reels this, TikTok that—[short-form video](#) content has been on the rise for several years, and you can expect to see that trend continue into 2025. It's not just that social media algorithms love bite-sized content (as do our brains!), but that these brief videos offer a way to engage with your audience more authentically. While a gorgeous portfolio can attract interested clients, you can't win them over without showing off your personality.

Here's where things start to change. While a curated Instagram feed is still the norm, there is a shift away from picture-perfect videos. Think rough cuts and behind-the-scenes content: going forward, "less-than-perfect" videos are perfectly acceptable (even embraced) on Stories, Reels, and TikTok. There's no need to put on a full face of makeup or spend an hour editing. Be yourself—it's what people want to see!

As 2025 approaches, adaptability is key to maintaining a competitive edge. However, it is not enough to merely react to change. Event professionals must actively future-proof their businesses by leaning into innovation, refining client experiences, and aligning their brands with modern consumer values. As accomplished businessman Max DePree once stated, "We cannot become what we want by remaining what we are." In other words, by remaining agile in the face of change, event pros can position their businesses for success in 2025 and beyond. Get ready, stay ready! [SE](#)

Meghan Ely is the owner of wedding PR and wedding marketing firm [OFD Consulting](#). Ely is a sought-after speaker, adjunct professor in the field of public relations, and a self-professed royal wedding enthusiast.



AI-Driven Marketing for Event Pros: Simple Solutions that Drive Results



AI isn't about making you or your brand robotic. It's about amplifying what you already do best—creating unforgettable events and delighting clients.

By Christie Osborne

Picture this: You're in the midst of planning a lavish wedding when your phone buzzes. It's another inquiry about your services that needs an immediate response.

As you juggle centerpiece decisions and vendor negotiations, you can't help but wonder—isn't there a smarter way to handle marketing and client communication?

Enter [AI-driven business practices](#): your secret weapon for growing your event business without stretching yourself thin.

Demystifying AI for the event industry

"AI? That's not for me," you might think. "I'm in the business of creating experiences, not creating impersonal marketing bots."

Here's the thing: AI isn't about making you or your brand robotic. It's about amplifying what you already do best—creating unforgettable events and delighting clients.

Think of AI as your behind-the-scenes assistant, handling repetitive tasks while you focus on the creative aspects that truly require your expertise.

Why AI matters for your event business

In an industry where creativity and personal connections are paramount, AI can be your secret weapon. When used strategically, it can:

- Save time on routine tasks, allowing you to focus on building client relationships and crafting unique experiences.
- Improve your business operations, from streamlining workflows to personalizing client proposals.
- Amplify your expertise by providing data-driven insights to refine your offerings and target your ideal clients more effectively.

Remember, AI isn't here to replace your unique skills—it's here to augment them, helping you deliver exceptional events more efficiently and creatively than ever before.

The AI advantage: start small, think big

Ready to dip your toes in the AI waters? Here's how to begin without getting overwhelmed:

Step 1: Identify your time drains.

What tasks eat up your day? Client inquiries? Social media posts? Start there.

Step 2: Explore user-friendly AI tools. Look for platforms designed for non-tech users. Many offer free trials—perfect for testing the waters.

Step 3: Start with one task. Maybe it's using an AI writing assistant for your blog posts or an automated scheduling tool for client meetings.

Step 4: Set aside exploration time. Carve out a few hours each week to experiment with different AI platforms and prompts. This dedicated "play time"

allows you to discover what works best for your business without the pressure of immediate results.

Step 5: Create a tool and prompt library. Establish a system to track which AI tools and prompts work well for your specific needs. This could be a simple spreadsheet or a notes app where you record successful strategies, making it easier to replicate and build upon your wins.

Step 6: Measure and adjust. Keep an eye on your results. Are you saving time? Reaching more clients? Use these insights to guide your next steps.

Overcoming AI hurdles: easier than you think

Concerned about implementing AI? Let's address those worries:

“I’m not tech-savvy enough.”

Solution: Many AI tools are designed with simplicity in mind. If you can use a smartphone, you can use these tools.

“I’ve tried it and the results were terrible.”

Reality check: AI tools are improving rapidly. If you have had a bad experience, try newer tools or different approaches, like establishing a prompt library of tried-and-true prompts. Remember, AI is a tool—your expertise guides its output.

“I’m worried about losing the personal touch.”

Pro tip: AI isn't meant to replace your personal touch—it's designed to enhance it. Use AI for behind-the-scenes tasks, freeing up your time to focus on client relationships and creative aspects that truly require your personal expertise.

AI in action: event industry examples

- **Writing marketing copy:** AI can help craft compelling content for your website, emails, and social media. While you'll need to experiment with prompts, many AI experts share their most effective ones. Start with

these and tailor them to your unique voice and brand.

- **Crafting diplomatic responses:** When faced with negative reviews or challenging client communications, AI can help you respond thoughtfully and professionally. It can suggest language that addresses concerns while preserving relationships, giving you a solid starting point for your replies.
- **Optimizing operations:** AI can streamline your business processes by analyzing your workflow and suggesting efficiencies. It can help create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), identify tasks ripe for automation, and even assist in optimizing staff schedules and logistics.
- **Generating design ideas:** While early attempts at AI-generated designs may have been hit-or-miss, the technology has improved significantly. Use AI to brainstorm innovative concepts, color schemes, or layout ideas. Remember, these are starting points—your expertise will refine and personalize these ideas to match your client's vision.
- **Personalizing client proposals:** AI can analyze past successful events and client preferences to help you create tailored event proposals. By inputting key details about a potential client, AI can suggest personalized elements that align with their tastes, increasing your chances of winning their business.

Remember, in all these applications, AI is a tool to enhance your creativity and efficiency, not replace your unique skills and industry knowledge. The key is to view AI as a collaborative partner in your event planning process.

The future is AI-enhanced (not AI-replaced)

Remember, AI is here to enhance your skills, not replace your expertise. Your creativity, personal touch, and event know-how? That's what truly sets you apart. AI is just a tool to help you shine even brighter.

Your next steps

1. Choose one area of your business to experiment with AI.
2. Research and try out a user-friendly AI tool in that area.
3. Give it a month, then assess the impact on your time and efficiency.
4. Share your experiences with fellow event pros—we're all learning together.

Ready to take your first step into the world of AI-driven marketing? The future of event planning is innovative, efficient, and still deeply personal—with a little help from our AI friends. [SE](#)

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.

catersource + **THE SPECIAL EVENT**
FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

Christie Osborne at Catersource + The Special Event

See Christie Osborne speak more on AI at Catersource + The Special Event in Fort Lauderdale, FL this February!

- [AI-Driven Marketing for Small Businesses: Harnessing Innovation on a Budget](#)
- [Marketing Masters 2025: Effective Marketing Strategies for Wedding & Event Professionals](#)
- [Social Media Ads Playbook in the Age of AI](#)

A LOOK DOWN

The Aisle

This year's
hottest wedding
trends

By Amanda Nicklaus

Whether scrolling TikTok, chatting with clients, or attending weddings yourself, you've likely been noticing some interesting trends taking place at the altar. 2024 has been quite a year for couples getting creative, whether they're going big and bold or keeping festivities to a minimum. As this year comes to a close, let's look back on wedding trends that have gained traction, and look forward to what is on the horizon for 2025.

Let's talk numbers

According to *The Knot's 2024 Global Wedding Report*, the global average marrying age ranges between 33–35 years old. Winter continues to be the most popular engagement season, and technology is playing an increasingly important role in weddings.

In our *Special Events* annual State of the Industry survey, 56% of respondents said that the average wedding budget of their clients has been in the \$25-50K range.

Turn to [page 28](#) for a more in-depth review of the state of weddings.

Untraditional seating was spotted throughout the year, like this circular ceremony by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy John Meyers Photography

Ceremony magic

Whether micro weddings or lavish destination weddings, ceremonies are increasingly being sandwiched between (at least) two extra days of activities. The day before is no longer limited to the rehearsal dinner; guests are invited for a casual pre-ceremony event to break the ice and amp up excitement. In some cases, the hype takes different forms; Sebastien Centner (Eatertainment Events & Catering) told *Special Events*, “pre-ceremony activities, such as welcome kits for out-of-town guests, are becoming more common.” The day after is popular for brunches and official goodbyes.

Yet even on the wedding day, formal dinners are sometimes replaced by cocktail receptions, and vibrant [after parties](#) keep everyone partying until the wee hours of the morning. That being said, not everyone wants to party hard—some couples are [calling it an early night](#), or even holding ceremonies in the morning. Timelines are at the whim of the couple.

“The trend toward intimate, luxurious celebrations will continue, with many couples opting for smaller weddings followed by big parties months later,” says Jaclyn Watson (Jaclyn Watson Events).

Centner adds, “We also expect to see themed wedding weekends grow in popularity, turning weddings into immersive festival-like experiences.”

On top of these flourishes, there are other changes afoot: some couples are opting for private vow readings, and many are choosing a pre-ceremony look, doing away with the superstition of old traditions.

Increasingly, officiants are someone that know the couple well. “One of the more memorable things I have seen at weddings this year is family members or close family friends marrying



the couple,” says Kelsey Strickland (Twickenham House and Hall). “The intentionality of this choice reflects the couple’s values, and it is so refreshing to hear a first-hand account of their love for one another.”

[Mixed heritage weddings](#) are also continuing to stick. Melani Lust (Melani Lust Photography) notes, “I am excited to see more interfaith marriages. I recently photographed a Catholic church ceremony where the bride was Catholic and the groom was Jewish. The priest incorporated some Jewish traditions into the Catholic ceremony, including the breaking of the glass. A small note describing this Jewish ceremony custom was placed next to the bibles in the pews.”

Lastly, we’re seeing the continuation of [scaled-back weddings](#). “Intimate micro-weddings were a major theme in 2024, with couples opting for weddings that focused more on the experience than the guest count, creating highly personalized events with fewer people,” notes Craig Peterman of Craig Peterman Photography & Videography.

For the guests

As traditions change and leave, couples are refocusing their priorities. “It seems like couples want less focus/attention on them and are focused more on the guest experience,” says Kevin Dennis (Fantasy Sound Event Services). “They’re wanting to get to the party portion of the evening as early as possible!”

Julian Ribinik of Julian Ribinik Studios echoes this sentiment. “I think we will see more focus on the guests, less time spent on ‘wedding traditions’ but more investment in cultural traditions, more simplification and longer receptions to allow for more time to party and connect.”

One thing that has stayed in the back of some couples’ minds is keeping the wedding free from heated political division. Some couples carefully curate seating charts to avoid any divisive conversation, while others have opted for a “[no politics](#)” sign to avoid the discussions altogether, keeping the night light-hearted and focused on celebration.

(Opposite Page) Extravagant floral arches have been quite in vogue in 2024. Photo courtesy Tracy Autem Photography



ON TREND

“With the economic landscape changing, many are prioritizing experiences over material things, focusing on creating memorable moments with loved ones.”

—Jaclyn Watson

Decorative touches

Whether simple or extravagant, sophisticated is in.

“This year has been all about refined elegance,” says Watson, “with simplicity leading the way—clean lines, natural palettes, and flowers that seamlessly complement the wedding’s surroundings.”

This look is often deemed the “Nancy Myers aesthetic”: inspired by the interior designs of Nancy Myers’ movie sets (*Something’s Gotta Give*, *The Holiday*, *It’s Complicated*), this vibe is charming, cozy, and elegant, with neutral tones and coastal flair, and we expect to see more of it in 2025.

Bold colors provide an interesting touch, draping is in, and bows are everywhere—on candlesticks, linens, walls, even the wedding party themselves (more on that in a bit). We’re also seeing fruit and vegetables stealing the spotlight as part of the décor; think pearl-encrusted pears set upon each plate, or a centerpiece spilling with artichokes, lemons, even carrots.

When it comes to tents and other outdoor “rooms,” extravagant glass structures have taken the spotlight. “There has been a trend in tented weddings toward those having clear tops with black trim,” says Lust. “This is starting to become the norm, and I’m seeing more black trim on tents, and I rarely see sailcloth tents now. I think this trend will continue to build in 2025.”

Looking forward, Lust says, “We will also see the continuation of the circular wedding arch, which is shaped in a pure circle, with every point on

its circumference equidistant from the center.”

Florals have made a splash, too. “Florals took center stage, with extravagant installations, floral arches, and even floating flower arrangements making bold statements,” says Centner.

Joan Wyndrum (Blooms by the Box) foresees a mix of tradition and trend for the foreseeable future. “It’s safe to say that traditional floral trends will continue for many years to come. Rising costs of living may also lead couples to choose smaller, more budget-friendly floral arrangements with loose, organic shapes, incorporating a mix of different flowers, textures, and shapes,” she observes. “There are no rigid structures—just letting the flowers’ natural curves and personality shine through! Look out for flowers being used in surprising ways, such as in infused floral cocktails, ice displays, and whimsical florals in hairpieces.”

Strickland sees other floral options on the rise, too. “I hope that fun floral arrangements will remain for 2024, but it seems people are opting for fake flowers and candle-heavy receptions.”

Wedding wardrobes

This year, overarching trends in matrimonial garb hovered around bold yet simple touches. “The bridal space is getting creative, with plenty of bold designs that push the envelope,” *Vogue* noted of the looks from the 2024 New York Bridal Fashion Week.

2024 has been the year of floral touches, elegant bows, long and intricate veils (a holdover from Kourtney Kardashian’s iconic Dolce & Gabbana [wedding veil](#) in 2022,



Guest engagement was revamped in 2024, like with this audio guestbook. Photo courtesy Amy Kolo Photography



Wedding desserts saw all kinds of creativity in 2024. Photo courtesy Tracy Autem Photography

perhaps?), even bold pops of color (and in many cases, entirely black dresses). Wedding gowns feature unique structural elements, like dramatic skirts and Basque waists, or gowns are being swapped for pants. Suits are a chance to make a bold statement. Multiple outfit changes are also becoming a staple. And as for hair, it seems simple, flowing curls and elegant ponytails tied with a bow are becoming the preferred style.

Wedding fashion is on the path of intentional, expressive looks for all

wedding party members. In fact, according to Zola's [2024 Wedding Trends report](#), 5.99% of those surveyed said that wearing non-traditional or unexpected attire was a way to make the wedding feel more personal to who the couple is.

Dinner & drinks

We can't talk about wedding trends without touching on changing catering preferences.

The Zola report noted that 42.6% of survey respondents were most willing to splurge on an open bar, while 28.54% splurged on catering. In fact, the report found that couples used catering as a way to personalize the event, looking for a caterer who is willing to accommodate dietary preferences and needs. Likewise, *The Knot* reported that "a significant portion of the cost per person is allocated to expenses like catering and beverages."

Beverages are always an important part of the wedding reception, and in recent years, [zero-proof cocktails](#) are making their way onto menus in an attempt to provide something for everybody. Alcohol pairings for each course of the dinner are also gaining popularity as the dining experience becomes an elevated moment.

As far as the revered wedding cake goes, vintage styles may stick around for a moment but not for long. Ribinik shares, "The traditional, old-school '80s cakes are making their way back in. Most memorable, we had a bride from Texas who had a St. Regis wedding in New York ... who ordered a huge, very traditionally shaped cake from Ladurée."

"In 2025, it seems like large-tiered cakes will be back in style," says Strickland. "These will also take the place of passed desserts because cakes of this size will feed the entire guest count, if not more."

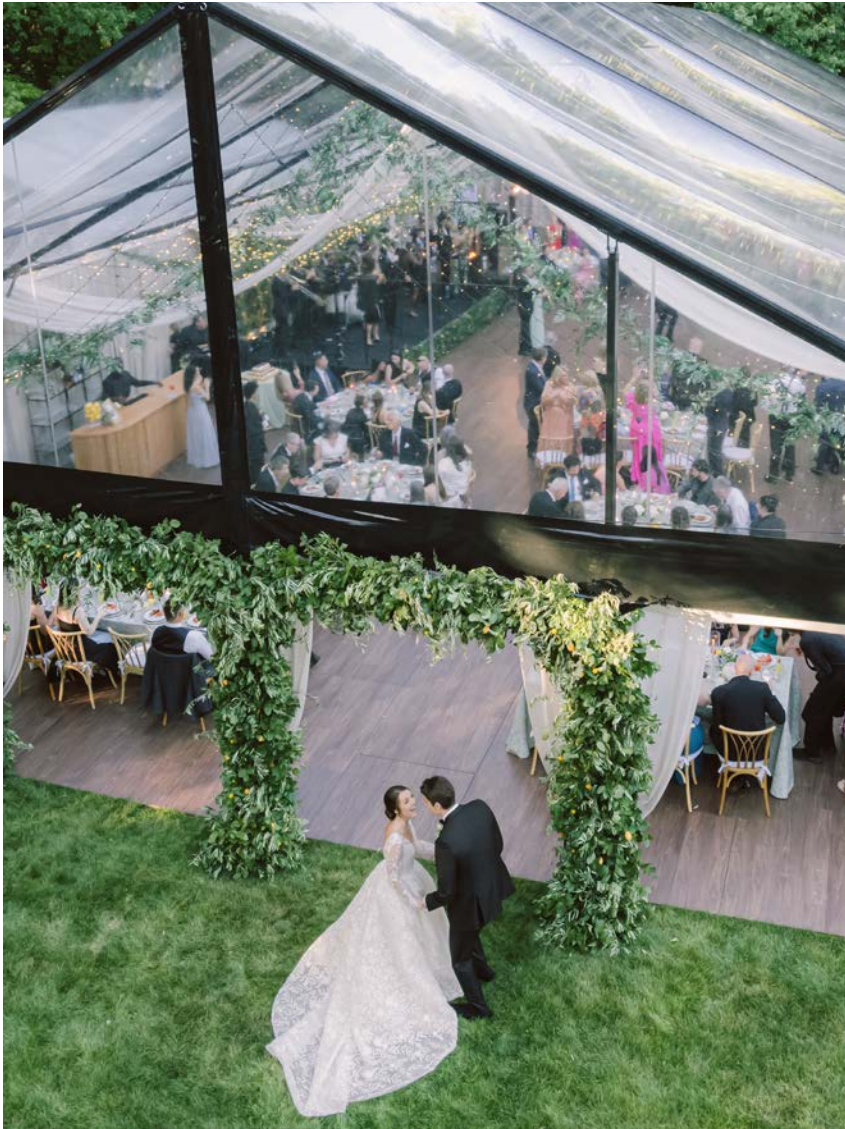
We're seeing a lot more personalization, too—custom flavors, cake toppers, even cultural elements all play a part in making cakes that represent the couple as individuals. Be on the lookout, too, for dome-shaped cakes, textured icing, and metallic elements. Plus: a plethora of extra, surprising desserts to win over the guests with a sweet tooth.



(Above) Bold pops of color are in! Photo courtesy Rosy and Shaun Photography; (Left) 2025 will see more creative food stations. Shown here: Miniature Chicken Tacos and Tequila Cart by Occasions Caterers. Photo courtesy Elisabetta Marzetti



ON TREND



Black-trimmed clear tents are having a moment. Photo courtesy Melani Lust Photography

Centner says, “We see minimalist cake designs or deconstructed ‘cake tables’ gaining popularity, offering individual treats instead of a traditional multi-tiered cake.”

When it comes to food, a few noticeable trends have been established this past year: **late night snacks**, farm-to-table dinners, plant-based menus, street food, sushi bars, and post-wedding brunches. “I predict we’ll see even more interactive elements, like live food stations and entertainment, keeping guests engaged throughout the event,” says Watson. In fact, according to *Brides*, we can expect to see more

activities like “blending your own wine, making pastries that double as favors, catching and grilling your fish file for dinner, or learning about local foods through tastings.”

As we’ve seen in events the past couple years, dining is an experience, a chance to bring guests into the moment and leave lasting memories.

Let us entertain you

More and more weddings are relying on over-the-top entertainment to impress guests. Watson has observed the return

of silent discos, and Penny Haas (Penny Haas, LLC) recalls, “I liked interactive wedding vendors this year. Vendors like live painters were great. It was another conversation starter, a wow factor (which I love!), and the first piece of art for the couple.”

Music playlists are hyper-personalized, and **3D immersive music soundscapes** give guests a chance to sink into the moment. Of course, the aforementioned after-parties are the top way couples are hyping up guests, creating a more relaxed scene for the night owls (often the couple’s inner circle) to let loose and celebrate.

In the case of luxury spectacles, *The New York Times* reported on a couple that turned their wedding into a **private music festival**, hiring A-list artists including the Isley Brothers, Davido, Quavo, and Moneybagg Yo. For some couples, nothing is too much when it comes to creating a unique and memorable wedding.

Visionary venues

Traditional ballrooms are still popular, but **unique wedding venues** are gaining traction. Watson predicts we’ll “see a rise in destination weddings in unexpected locations.” As couples look to make a statement and create a personalized experience, the venue itself offers a way to impress guests by offering a one-of-a-kind setting for the celebration.

Regardless of how unique or traditional, according to the Zola report, the top three priorities that couples look for in a venue are the **ambiance/vibe of the location** (57.34%), being in line with their budget (55.81%), and having an outdoor space (31.83%).

On top of that, many couples are choosing wedding dates based on the availability of their preferred venue or vendors (33.72%).

The *Special Events* State of the Industry survey found that hotels, private homes/estates, restaurants, open areas like fields and parks,

and museums/art galleries/cultural centers are the top five most popular venue types.

Picture-perfect

According to the Zola survey, 54.76% of respondents prioritized photography as the element of the wedding they were most willing to splurge on, making it the top spend above having an open bar and the venue itself.

Wedding photos are no longer a stiff, posed affair. Couples want their special day captured creatively—on the rise is candid, documentary-style film photography. “Photographers are getting inspired by magazine-styled shoots, fashion, cinema, bringing abstract vibes and bold colors into their work,” says an article from [BrideLifeStyle Wedding & Lifestyle Media](#). “Couples are looking for photographers who can add that avant-garde flair, making their wedding portraits pop in a way that’s totally refreshing.”

Some couples are even hiring wedding content creators to take charge of documenting the day for socials. “As social media continues to rise, people will hire creators to make content for them. These would be reels, posts, TikToks, and more,” says Strickland. “I experienced my first time with a content creator this September, and it was so fun. I am really excited to get her media back because, as a wedding professional, it is one less thing on my plate to create.” In the social media influencer era, couples want the photography to tell the story of their love and to be shared with everyone they know.

Hi-tech nuptials

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in weddings—not just the ceremony, but in every aspect before, during, and after.

“In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the reliance on online resources and advancements

in technology to support wedding planning around the world,” noted the report from *The Knot*. “Many couples utilize technology from start to finish—whether that means watching videos or turning to social media for wedding inspiration, connecting with vendors via video conferencing or using AI to help plan.”

Tech doesn’t just help couples; event pros are amping up the incorporation of [recent technology](#) in both the business and events side of things.

“AI will play a larger role in design and other elements, sparking even more creativity,” notes Watson.

Centner agrees. “AI-powered photo booths will become more popular, offering personalized images on the spot.” Every part of the wedding day will continue to see technology take hold in new ways. “Elopement celebrations with virtual guest streams will likely rise, allowing couples to combine adventure with technology.” Another use? “Stationery is also shifting toward digital RSVPs and augmented-reality invitations.”

Technology can offer an elevated guest experience. “Tech-driven entertainment such as drone shows, interactive art installations, and virtual reality booths give you memories for a lifetime!” says an article from wedding destination company [Destify](#).

In the past few years, various forms of fun and flashy technology have been

integrated throughout the wedding experience in the form of audio guest books and even holograms—and this will only keep getting more creative as event pros learn how to use the latest tech. Anything to stay on the cutting edge!

Circle of life & love

Sustainability is no longer a trend; it’s a shift that has found roots in the past few years, producing real changes. “These smaller weddings allow couples to focus on the details, creating thoughtful moments that leave lasting impressions. Eco-conscious weddings have also made a strong impact, with couples opting for sustainable florals, reusable décor, and zero-waste catering,” says Centner. “Sustainable wedding gowns and rentals will become the norm, reflecting a broader shift toward eco-conscious living.”

Couples increasingly want to work with vendors who are mindful of their footprint and actively create [sustainable experiences](#).

This setup at a wedding venue crawl featured video mapping projected onto the walls and floors for added flair. Event by VT Group. Photo courtesy Ambient Sky





ON TREND

Traditions leaving the group chat

Now more than ever, couples are personalizing their wedding to fit who they are, and that often means leaving behind longstanding traditions. Parent dances, parents walking their progeny down the aisle, garter and bouquet tosses, and long speeches are among some of the most ditched traditions as of late.

Ceremonious cake cuttings are out, too. “The traditional cake-cutting moment has taken a back seat as couples embrace creative alternatives to put their own spin on wedding cakes. We see silent cake cuttings or skipping cake altogether, with inspired dessert stations serving late-night food, such as waffle sundaes, pastries, espresso martinis, and espresso cappuccino bars,” says Wyndam.

“2024 is going to continue to see couples planning weddings that fit their vision for their celebration, forgoing traditions, norms, and expectations that don’t align with their priorities,” Mara Mazdzer (WIPA, Fuse Weddings) predicted for *Special Events* in 2023. This prediction was accurate, and 2024 saw immense creativity as couples cultivated their own traditions that felt authentic to them.

Peterson notes: “I have personally seen a decline in traditional, formal wedding structures like assigned seating and formal sit-down dinners. A more casual, free-flowing event that will allow for mingling and more relaxed vibes throughout the day.” Couples are opting for warm and inviting celebrations that keep guests engaged, rather than lose guests over stale rituals of the past.

As couples recraft their [traditions and rituals](#), personalization and authenticity reign supreme.



Wedding dresses are becoming more expressive, with fun and flashy elements like this fringed dress. Event by Jaclyn Watson Events. Photo courtesy Caroline Moretz Photography

2024 in context

Couples are on a mission to make a memorable experience that expresses their personalities and tells their story.

“Social media has turned life into a game of showing off and keeping up/beating their friend’s weddings. Everyone is committed to having the best wedding and they want their guests to show off on socials on their behalf,” says Dennis.

In a post-pandemic world, couples are choosing the elements that matter to them, while working what they have—no matter the size of their budget.

“Current wedding trends reflect broader social, cultural, and economic shifts. Couples are focusing on creating experiences that feel authentic to their personal stories, moving away from rigid traditions,” notes Centner. “Culturally, sustainability and inclusivity are at the forefront, with couples making conscious choices about décor, catering, and guest experiences.”

Watson agrees. “Right now, personalization and sustainability are trending because couples want their day to feel unique and reflect their values,” she says. “With the economic landscape changing, many are prioritizing experiences over material things, focusing on creating memorable moments with loved ones.”

As we enter 2025, prepare for celebrations to let the couple shine and connect with their guests for as long as they can. And as couples practice their authenticity and individuality, practice yours, too: incorporate trends that resonate with you and leave the ones that don’t. As couples leave room for more organic experiences, event pros can offer truly creative and meaningful services that set them apart and showcase their brand.

At the end of the day, love, connection, and enjoyable memories are what make a lasting impression—on the couple, on their guests, and certainly on your event business. [SE](#)

The premier awards recognizing the finest work in catering & special events worldwide



Catersource
+ The Special Event™

ACE & Gala AWARDS



The ACE and Gala Awards will be presented during Catersource + The Special Event, February 24-27 in Fort Lauderdale.

Find all the details at
ace-gala.awardsplatform.com

Catersource™

Special Events™



Tech to the Rescue: The 2024 Glow-Up & What's Next for 2025



One thing is clear: technology isn't just a tool—it's become a vital part of how we run our businesses.

By Nora Sheils

As we say goodbye to 2024 and look ahead to 2025, it's time to reflect on how far the wedding and event planning world has come—and, let's be honest, how much we've all come to rely on tech to keep us sane! Whether you're juggling catering menus, floral arrangements, or seating charts that change more often than the weather, this past year has been a whirlwind, we've all had our moments where we've thought, *If I have to send one more email!* But technology has stepped up its game in a big way. Let's look at the tech tools transforming our workdays from chaos to calm and see what trends are gearing up to make a splash for us all in 2025.

THE RISE OF AI: A POWERFUL NEW ASSISTANT

AI has made its mark in every industry, and the event world is no exception (turn to page 08 for more on AI). One of the biggest benefits is its ability to automate time-consuming tasks, like scheduling meetings and setting reminders. AI tools can save you countless hours while ensuring your communication is consistent and on-point.

Pros:

- Time-saver: AI can quickly handle repetitive tasks, freeing you up to focus on more creative work—like crafting email responses or giving ideas for a blog or social content, etc.
- Personalization at scale: Many AI tools allow for tailored responses based on client preferences, making interactions feel personal, even when automated.

Cons:

- Lacks human touch: Despite the personalization options, clients can feel like they're talking to a robot.
- Learning curve: It's not a quick fix. AI tools require a bit of learning before they can be fully integrated into your workflow.

Looking ahead to 2025, expect AI to continue to evolve, making it easier than ever to manage client relationships—but be sure to keep one hand in your business and add your personal touch to all AI content to keep that valuable authenticity.

MARKETING TOOLS: STREAMLINING YOUR OUTREACH

Marketing will always be a crucial part of any business, and as technology has evolved, so have the tools we use to reach new prospective clients. This year, marketing platforms that help you manage email campaigns, track customer journeys, and automate follow-ups have become must-haves. These tools allow event pros to stay in front of potential clients without spending hours designing.

Pros:

- Automation: Set it and forget it! Marketing tools can automate all outbound communication, saving you lots of time while also ensuring consistent communication.
- Data-driven insights: Marketing tools often come with amazing analytics that give you a clearer understanding of what's working and what's not so you can adjust your strategy throughout the year.

Cons:

- Over-reliance on automation: It's easy to set it up and forget to check in, leading to missed opportunities for more personalized engagement.
- Subscription costs: Many of the best marketing tools come with a big price tag, so balancing functionality and cost is key to not draining the bank on the wrong tools.

As we roll into 2025, expect even more integration between marketing tools and social media platforms, making it easier to manage your outreach across multiple channels.

**SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS:
KEEPING YOU CONSISTENT**

If there's one thing we've learned in 2024, it's that social media consistency can make or break your brand's online presence. Social media scheduling platforms have been a lifesaver for event pros looking to keep their feeds fresh and engaging without constantly being tied to their phones. These tools help you plan out your content in advance, schedule posts, and track engagement, all from one dashboard.

Pros:

- Time management: Scheduling tools allow you to batch your social media posts ahead of time, ensuring you stay top of mind across your social channels.
- Analytics: Most platforms offer insights into which posts are resonating with your audience, helping you fine-tune your strategy and hashtags to reach the right audience

Cons:

- Lack of spontaneity: When everything is pre-scheduled, you miss out on those real-time, in-the-moment opportunities to engage with your audience.
- Content fatigue: Keeping up with social media trends is exhausting, and relying solely on scheduled posts makes your content feel repetitive and robotic.

Looking forward, social media platforms will likely continue to evolve (oh, that algorithm!), so it's essential to keep your eye on the latest trends and features and be sure to follow accurate business advice.

**TECH STACK PLATFORMS:
SIMPLIFYING YOUR
WORKFLOW**

One of the biggest challenges for event professionals is juggling multiple platforms for different aspects of their business—booking, client management, social media, floorplans—and so on. In 2024, there's been a growing demand for platforms that integrate more tasks into one seamless experience, making it easier to keep everything organized.

Pros:

- All-in-one functionality: Having everything in one place can reduce the overwhelm of managing multiple apps and tools.
- Improved organization: With your streamlined workflow, you can track where clients are in the process and ensure nothing slips through the cracks.

Cons:

- Learning curve: Not everything is meant to work together. Many all-in-one platforms are complicated and hard to grasp, and they are just an okay solution. There is no unicorn platform out there; it's all about perfecting your tech stack.
- Price point: The more features a platform offers, the more expensive it tends to be. It's important to weigh the cost against how much time it will save you in the long run and what features you are actually using versus paying for.

In 2025, expect tech platforms to become even more integrated, with added features and more intuitive interfaces, making them even more indispensable for small business owners. As your business grows and changes, so will your needs. Be sure

to check out every platform often; you never know when one might all of a sudden work better for your business than another.

LOOKING AHEAD: 2025, HERE WE COME!

Besides the usual wedding and event trends (yes, even pampas grass is still hanging on), we're predicting even more tools for 2025 aimed at making your business run smoother than ever.

One thing is clear: technology isn't just a tool—it's become a vital part of how we run our businesses. Whether it's AI helping you communicate more efficiently, marketing tools driving your outreach, or social media platforms keeping you consistent, embracing the right tech solutions can help you grow and thrive.

Keep an eye on emerging trends and remember that while technology can be your best friend, it's all about finding the right balance between automation and the personal touch that makes the event industry so unique.

Here's to a future filled with innovation, creativity, and success! **SE**

Nora Sheils is the founder of award-winning planning firm **Bridal Bliss** and co-founder of **Rock Paper Coin**, a client management platform that offers a streamlined approach to contract, invoicing, and payment processing for the wedding and event industry. Nora is a well-known and sought-after speaker on national stages. Recognized as one of the Top 500 Event Professionals by BizBash, Nora has also been heralded as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the Event Industry by Eventex.



MIX, MINGLE, CHEERS!

How to plan a flawless
cocktail-style reception

By Amanda Nicklaus

LUX Catering & Events
partnered with Visit Salt
Lake for an event, using
the mayor's signature Old
Fashioned recipe for a unique
and memorable touch. Photo
courtesy Billow & Mull

You don't need to close your eyes to picture it: the hum of conversation, the clinking of glasses, soft music in the background punctuated by laughter here and there. Cocktail receptions are a timeless style of events, great for gathering people together to enjoy beverages and each other's company.

At social events, they allow people to connect with ease while chattering and drinking, often in between activities. The past few years have seen the rise of cocktail-style receptions replacing seated dinners at weddings (for more on wedding trends, turn to [page 10](#)).

In the corporate world, there are plenty of reasons to host a cocktail reception. "A company plans a cocktail party for two primary reasons: budget and variety," says Fausto Pifferrer (Blue Elephant Events and Catering, Saco, ME).

Chris Sanchez, Managing Partner of LUX Catering & Events (Salt Lake City), adds, "Cocktail receptions give clients the chance to create a dynamic, engaging atmosphere where networking is effortless, and connections are made in a more experience-driven setting. Guests get to relax and immerse themselves in the brand in a way that's natural and memorable." It's an easy way for a company to reinforce their brand, reconnect their team, and boost employee morale.

But there are benefits for event pros, too. "For us, it's an opportunity to flex our creative muscles—from designing stunning hors d'oeuvres to crafting signature cocktails that complement the event's aesthetic," says Sanchez. "The logistics may be complex, but the payoff is worth it when you see guests delighted and the brand elevated to new heights."

You've likely hosted a cocktail reception or two in the course of your career. Sometimes, as we learn and grow, it can be helpful to go back to the basics once we've mastered finer detail work.

Here's a crash course on how to plan a successful cocktail reception.

Set the scene

The venue is one of the most important factors in creating a great cocktail reception. [Jim & Tonic](#), a distillery based in London, recommends choosing a venue "appropriate for your [client's] company's brand and image. It should be large enough to accommodate your guests and have a good layout for mingling. It should also be convenient for your guests to get to and have good amenities."

Sanchez notes a few things to look for in a venue. "The venue needs to reflect the client's vision for the guest experience while offering practical solutions for everything from acoustics to lighting. The architecture and natural elements should enhance the event's vibe without needing

over-the-top decor. I love venues that offer seamless transitions—indoor to outdoor spaces or multi-level designs—to keep things interesting and encourage guests to explore."

Loni Peterson, MLS, of LP Creative Events (Denver, CO), says, "Make sure your venue capacity and space are appropriate for your guest count. You want there to be plenty of room for people to mix and mingle, space for either a food station(s) or servers passing apps, some cocktail tables, and some soft seating for guests if they want to take a load off."

There are other things to look for, too. Lisa Costantini, Director of Events & Catering at Eatertainment Events & Catering (Toronto), adds, "[Accessibility](#) is also key; the venue should be located near public transit with ample parking. A unique setting with a distinctive aesthetic adds to the ambiance, creating a backdrop that aligns with the event's theme or branding. Additionally, the venue should be equipped to support AV equipment for speeches or entertainment, as most corporate events include presentations or toasts."

Remember, event attendees are increasingly looking for unique experiences. Choosing a venue that's both interesting and functional guarantees a great start to the event.

Hit the right notes

Entertainment is a key factor in a good cocktail reception. Guests don't want to have to talk to each other the entire time—and besides, it's 2024; events big and small need to have an immersive, experiential element.

"For a high-energy event, go with live bands or DJs; for something more refined, acoustic music or jazz quartets are perfect," recommends Sanchez. "Adding interactive elements—think mixology stations, stilt walkers, or a photobooth with a branded backdrop—adds personality and gets guests engaged. It's all about the vibe you want to create."

Also, think about adding high-engagement elements into the mix. "Activities like trivia games or themed photo booths can engage attendees and encourage participation," says Costantini.

In fact, creative entertainment can be a way to set your cocktail receptions apart. "Thinking about entertainment or activations during cocktail hour is always fun! Is there a photo booth, a beer burro walking around serving drinks, watercolor artists, or custom poems?" Peterson muses. "Having simple things for your guests to engage with helps people get to know each other and makes it less awkward for those who struggle in networking situations."

Make sure you have the right vendors working alongside you. "Depending on the event's scale, you might need AV, lighting, or décor specialists," says Sanchez. "If entertainment is central, a DJ, live band, or event interactive element provider can elevate the event. Local artisans are great for unique touches that give the event a sense of place and originality."



FOOD FOR FÊTES

Snack it up

The focus of a cocktail reception may be the beverages, but there absolutely *must* be food, both for the guests' enjoyment and to help control alcohol consumption effects.

"I'd recommend six to eight hors d'oeuvres per guest for a two-hour event, with a mix of passed items and food stations," says Sanchez. "But let's be clear: food stations are where the magic happens. Get creative—think themed stations that encourage guests to explore and mingle. If you're going all out for a longer event, make sure guests don't go hungry. Offer more substantial options. The trick is to make food part of the experience, not just a necessity."

Pifferrer echoes this thinking. "We always suggest between eight to 10 passed bites for a cocktail party and plan for two of these each per person. This assumes that stationary offerings like cheese, fruit, and crudites will also be available."

Work with your caterer to offer a variety of food heaviness options, from lighter hors d'oeuvres to heavier [snacks](#).

Event planner Penny Haas (Penny Haas, LLC) says that food stations can improve guest engagement if done creatively. "[Action stations](#) and displays are great for cocktail hour receptions. Create fun arrangements, small plates, and setups. Incorporate a chef experience to add some conversations and flair to the food. Action stations can also help you use different areas of the room and break up any buffet lines."

Another exciting idea? Try using a [grazing table](#) to centralize food in a photo-worthy, art installation way!

One thing to keep in mind: "Too many passed options are only sometimes a good thing!" says Pifferrer. "We have found that eight to 10 is the magic number for passed bites. More than that can easily overwhelm the guests and unnecessarily complicate the process in the kitchen."

A toast to success

Clearly, the beverages are the main focus of a cocktail reception. There are several ways to approach this portion of the event.

Jim & Tonic suggests having multiple bar stations. "It will ensure that everyone has a place to get their drink and help avoid any bottlenecks at the bar."

Sanchez agrees. "I love incorporating multiple bar locations to keep guests moving and [also] adding roaming bar carts or tray-passed drinks to cut down on lines. A great bar experience is all about flow and making sure no one has to wait too long for a perfectly crafted drink."

"I always recommend at least two bars for every 100 guests," says Pifferrer.

[Pour Bar Services](#) encourages adding to the guest experience by offering a [welcome beverage](#). "Why not set out a welcome glass of ... champagne or fruity cocktail for a warm

day or hot cocoa or coffee for your winter [events]? It's a personalized touch that sets you apart and gets your event off to the perfect start."

It's also important to provide options for those who don't consume alcohol. A [Catersource article](#) published earlier this year highlighted the importance of offering non-alcoholic cocktails: "Inclusion is another major consideration that significantly intersects with the alcohol-free movement. Simply put, you should make sure that every attendee feels welcome at your events."

You can also make things fun by offering a signature cocktail. "Using seasonal ingredients or even incorporating local flavors is a great way to add a twist as well. Displaying the drink in a fun way, such as custom signage or a unique serving station, adds a memorable touch for guests," says Craig Peterman (Craig Peterman Photography).

Another idea: make a splash using [branded ice](#) that features your client's logo. In fact, the brand can be infused into every aspect of the event, not just the beverages. "It's all in the details. Branded napkins, glassware, or even lighting projections make the brand pop without feeling overdone," says Sanchez. "But let's go deeper—pull in elements of the client's history or culture or create custom maps guiding guests to different activations. It's these thoughtful touches that take an event from good to unforgettable. Trust me, people will remember that custom stir stick or the signature cocktail named after the brand's origin story."

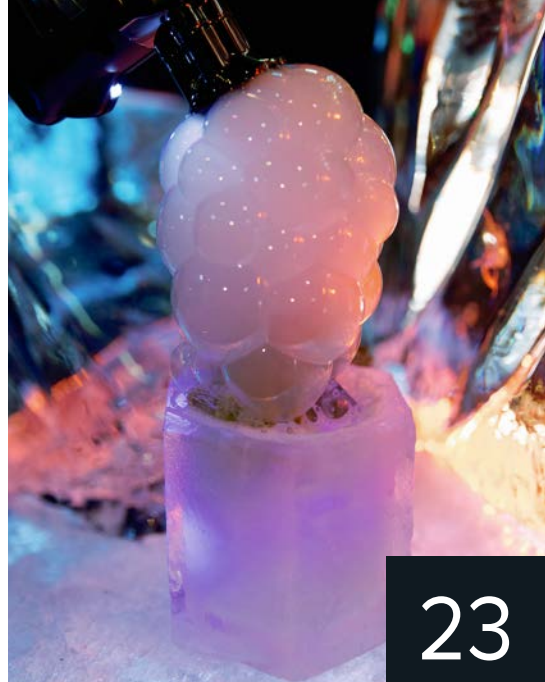
To sit or not to sit?

While most guests will probably stand, you'll want to provide seating options, both to offer a respite to guests and to ensure accessibility. "Limited seating is best—lounge-style for about 10–15% of guests. I love creating intimate seating clusters

Opposite page, top row from left: Stilt-walking dragons are great entertainment to spice up an event! Event by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Aerie Photography; Variety of food options is a must. Event by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy Ivory Door Studio; Salt Lake City Mayor Erin Mendenhall drinking from a custom branded "SLC" straw while hosting Sundance Institute in her backyard. Event by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull

Middle row: Roasted beetroot and pickled melon salad; Pomegranate spritzer with lime and pomegranate garnish, which guests topped with sparkling water; Compressed watermelon, alpine strawberries, golden raspberries, white wine crema. All photos: Events by LUX Catering & Events. Photos courtesy Billow & Mull

Bottom row: Mango Spritzer with lime, mint, and sparkling water by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Dee and Cory Productions; Bite-sized snacks are a good way to ensure guests keep eating while they imbibe! Event by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy Feiten Photography; Coconut Mojito presented with a smoke gun in ice glass (both delicious and entertaining!) by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull





FOOD FOR FÊTES

where people can take a break, chat, or just admire the space. The idea is to keep people moving, so seating should be more of a feature than the main attraction,” says Sanchez.

Pifferrer recommends “seating for approximately a third of the guests at various high and low tables and lounge seating. This can vary depending on the needs of the guests.” He warns, “Sometimes, a client will push for seating for everyone, which we do not recommend. It confuses the guests to be seated at what they assume are dinner tables when no dinner will be served. It also makes it more challenging and awkward for the server team to pass bites to an entirely seated crowd. It just doesn’t work.”

Sanchez encourages keeping the furniture casual. “High-top tables for 25–30% of guests are perfect for a cocktail reception. You want people mingling, not sitting down for a full meal. But make sure there are enough surfaces for guests to set down their drinks while they’re networking or heading to the next food station.”

Fun for everyone

Speaking of inclusivity, make sure to get dietary preferences and restrictions from guests ahead of time. “Inclusivity is everything,” says Sanchez. “Make sure your menu covers vegan, gluten-free, nut-free, etc., but don’t make those options an afterthought. Seamlessly integrate them into the menu, so no one feels left out. It’s a creative challenge, but when done right, it makes the event feel effortlessly luxurious and thoughtful.”

This can even be the first step in planning the event. “Our first goal is to determine the client’s expectations and needs,” says Pifferrer. “Is this a large meat-eating group? Are there many vegetarians? These factors will help us create a menu that meets the client’s various requirements.”

Balancing the budget

With so many factors, how should the budget be spread?

“Prioritize food and beverage, because let’s face it, that’s where the magic happens,” says Sanchez. “Some clients opt for drink tickets to control costs, while others go all out with an open bar. I think it depends on the occasion—if you’re celebrating your team, cover everything. For industry events, you could offer a couple of drinks on the house and let guests purchase more if they choose. The key is to balance indulgence with a clear goal of the event. Beyond F&B, ensure there’s enough for entertainment, décor, and those little branded touches that elevate the experience.”

Make sure that your clients’ expectations are realistic, too. “Corporate clients are sometimes under the impression that a cocktail party is a cheaper alternative to a dinner,” says Pifferrer. “This can be true, but it is only sometimes an even

“The logistics may be complex, but the payoff is worth it when you see guests delighted and the brand elevated to new heights.” —Chris Sanchez



At one event, LUX Catering & Events featured a customizable spritzer bar with beautiful glassware adorned with garnishes, playful ice spheres, and custom-branded acrylic stir sticks. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull



Combined soup and sandwich bites at an event by Your Jubilee Weddings. Photo courtesy Noa Griffel



With the right elements, a cocktail reception brings people together. Event by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy Feiten Photography

switch. I always point out that if it is dinner time, we need to anticipate that guests will be arriving with dinner appetites. Hosting a cocktail party is not necessarily cheaper. We have earned a reputation in our market for always having ‘enough.’ We always aim for guests to leave feeling full, whether we have prepared a cocktail or dinner menu.”

“Budget allocation should reflect the priorities of the event,” says Costantini. “Generally, around 40% of the budget should go toward food and beverages, including passed hors d’oeuvres, drink service, and food stations. Venue and décor typically account for about 25%, as they play a key role in setting the atmosphere. Entertainment, such as live music or photo booths, should take up around 15% of the budget. Service staff should account for 10%, ensuring the event runs smoothly. The final 10% can cover miscellaneous items like transportation, permits, branded elements, etc.”

The right numbers

A reception might seem casual, but you’ll still want to be well-staffed.

“Staffing is everything,” says Sanchez. “I usually recommend one server per 15–20 guests and one bartender for every 75. This ensures that service is seamless, and guests

catersource + **THE SPECIAL EVENT**
 FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
 FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

Catersource + The Special Event 2025 is excited to announce the addition of a new Beverage Garden to the Tradeshow Floor during this year’s conference. With the purchase of a special tasting ticket, attendees can take advantage of such experiences as:

- **Bitters Bar:** Attendees can step up and taste the differences between the same “types” of bitters between purveyors to understand how they can change the composition of a cocktail.
- **Garnish Goodness:** Sample your way through various garnishes including olives, cherries, and pickled products.
- **Liquid Loves:** Taste various Bloody Mary mixes & discover the differences.
- **Fort Lauderdale Fling:** Join our guest bartender, who will show you how to create the special CS+TSE show cocktail, the Fort Lauderdale Fling. The recipe will be shared for you to bring back to your kitchen.
- Plus, enjoy a wine tasting seminar on Wednesday or a non-alcoholic cocktail session on Thursday, among other activations.

[LEARN MORE](#)

FOOD FOR FÊTES



Interactive cocktails gets guests excited, like this added injection at an event by Your Jubilee Weddings. Photo courtesy Noa Giffel

feel taken care of.” He also recommends the event manager keep things moving smoothly. “There’s nothing worse than a slow line or a guest who can’t get a drink.”

Managing alcohol

One thing to be mindful of from the start is controlling alcohol consumption. Especially if there’s an open bar and smaller bites of food, it can be easy for guests to lose track of their drinking habits. Remember, overserving is a liability that can harm you and your business. You can get ahead of it by placing water stations around the room.

“If everyone’s driving, then yes, make sure to have ride-share partnership or taxi vouchers on hand,” suggests Sanchez. “I always say it’s better to over-prepare when it comes to guest safety.”

Hello, my name is...

There are other small touches you can add to make guests comfortable, especially if networking is the main object of the reception.

“Nametags can be fun and functional,” observes Sanchez. “Engraved or printed tags on stylish lanyards or pins can double as keepsakes, and if you’re feeling techy, digital nametags with wearable tech add a modern twist. It’s about making something mundane feel intentional and aligned with the event’s tone.”

You can take other actions to make guests feel comfortable if networking is the reason for the event: set up a check-in table, host an icebreaker portion of the event (or weave icebreakers into the fabric of the event), and work with the client to understand the guestlist ahead of time. “Consider incorporating QR codes that link to LinkedIn profiles for easy networking or nametags designed with fun facts about each

guest! For larger events, drink charms or lapel pins could serve as both name identifiers and conversation starters,” suggests Costantini.

Cheers to success

At the end of the day, your creativity and effectiveness will make even the smallest reception memorable.

“Details, details, details,” emphasizes Sanchez. “A successful corporate cocktail reception isn’t just about food and drinks; it’s about creating an unforgettable guest experience. Thoughtful touches, seamless flow, and well-planned branding will leave guests talking about the event long after it’s over.”

Pifferrer notes, “We saw a marked change (especially with corporate clients) during and after the pandemic. Cocktail parties were always popular but not seen as an alternative to a sit-down dinner. During the pandemic, the trend was to plan cocktail parties, as they allowed people to space out and avoid groups seated at tables for prolonged periods. Everyone got used to this, and it has become much more common.”

Cocktail receptions are no longer a preamble; they are main event material and deserve to be treated as such. Work with your caterer to cover all your ground and get creative with ways to make the reception impact every guest.

“Planners need to maintain a detailed run-of-show schedule to ensure everything runs on time, and a pre-event walkthrough with venue staff will help avoid last-minute surprises. After the event, gathering feedback from the client is a valuable way to improve future events,” says Costantini.

If we learned anything from the pandemic, it’s that we as humans long for connection, and one of the easiest ways to make that happen is over a well-crafted beverage in an inviting space. Get creative with your cocktail receptions, and connection will follow. Cheers! **SE**



LEADING CATERERS OF AMERICA

Leading Caterers of America (LCA) is comprised of the top caterers and event venues in the United States and Canada. When you need a caterer to make your next event exceptional, perfect and delicious, choose an LCA caterer.

Planning something special?

Let the best of the best in all things events be your guide.



Corporate

LCA specializes in corporate events of all types - marketing, celebratory, client related, employee morale, and others. Whether held in the host's facility, or in an off-premise location, LCA members are able to deliver a high value corporate event experience.

Photo courtesy Tim Tab Studios and Catering by Michaels



Weddings

At its collective portfolio of some of the most desirable wedding venues in the United States and Canada, the LCA caters many thousands of weddings annually.

Most LCA members have dedicated wedding specialists on staff to ensure this most important day is executed flawlessly, no matter the level of complexity.

Photo courtesy Tim Tab Studios and Catering by Michaels



Social

Bar and bat mitzvahs, First Communions, quinceañeras, retirements and graduations, and even funerals are all important life cycle events. Superb food and service are crucial to making these events special and memorable, and the LCA is a perfect resource for those products.

Photo courtesy Tim Tab Studios and Catering by Michaels



Nonprofits

Galas and fundraisers are key to the success of most charitable organizations. With a focus on achieving positive financial and membership goals, the LCA is highly attuned to the needs of charities. The LCA is a great resource for all of the necessary components to make nonprofit events successful.

Photo courtesy Blue Plate Chicago

Elite talent. Unbeatable service. Right where you need it.

Find an LCA caterer in your region!



MIDWEST

Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Wisconsin

Photo courtesy Zilli Hospitality Group



SOUTH

Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia

Photo courtesy District Events & Catering



WEST

Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington

Photo courtesy Mandee Rae Photography and DSquared Hospitality



EAST

Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania

Photo courtesy Kelsey Travis Photography LLC and Partyman Catering

SPECIAL EVENT

State OF THE

Budgets may be tight
but creativity is blossoming

By Amanda Nicklaus

Elevate in Concert at Dr. Phillips Center, produced by Hello! Destination Management, won the 2024 Gala Award for Best Event Produced for a Corporation or Association: Overall Budget Under \$500,000. Immersive entertainment has been trending as events become transformational experiences. Photo courtesy Hello! Destination Management

EVENTS

Industry

2024

t,
ning

Table of Contents

- Survey says...
- Tech remains top tier
- Social events navigate the times
- Corporate events get creative
- Events must be accessible to all
- Eco-friendly events
- Food & beverage: part of the event experience
- Wowing the crowd



BONUS: Read about the state of the rental industry on our website.

Survey says...

Earlier in the third quarter, *Special Events* released our annual State of the Industry survey to our readership. We had around 300 respondents who weighed in regarding how this year has looked for their companies and clients, as well as provide some industry predictions for 2025. Top concerns revolve around economics and budgets, while top characteristics of style lean toward personalization and spectacle.

Who responded to our survey?

20% of respondents reside in Alabama, 18% in California, and the rest are scattered across the U.S., with 4% living outside the U.S. The majority are production managers, event producers, or event designers (41%), with CEOs and Sales/Marketing pros making up the bulk of the rest. The industry is mostly comprised of people who have been establishing their place or are already established: 54% have been in the industry for five to nine years, and 25% have been at it for more than 20 years. This is a significant change from last year's results, where only 5% of respondents said they'd been in the industry for five to nine years, and 63% had been in it for more than 20 years.

Top concerns

The overarching concern we've been hearing from industry pros is the economy. While progress has been made since the pandemic four years ago, there are still effects plaguing event pros and looming large as we begin a new year. Our respondents ranked their top three concerns as an uncertain economy (38%); reduced client budgets (37%); and increased competition (29%). This past year, event pros worried about client budget constraints (34%); cost of goods and services (31%); and staffing live events appropriately in all areas (21%). These concerns have remained relatively the same in the past few years, demonstrating that while many pros have come up with creative solutions to recover from the pandemic, the economy is still a major factor in the obstacles of event pros.

There may be a sliver of hope: respondents said their staffing troubles may be on the mend, with 43% of event pros having increased their staffing by 1%–25% since this time last year, and 36% unchanged, while only 15% reported a decrease. Perhaps staffing shortages will be slightly less of a concern at this time next year.

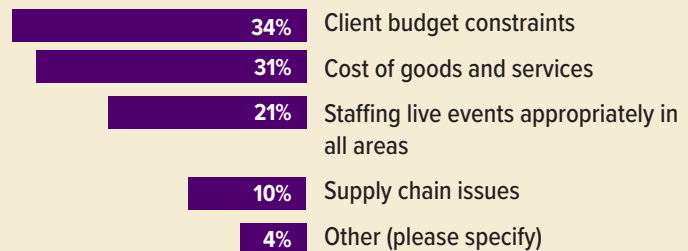


Spectacle has been a huge trend in 2024. We've seen many aerial performers/servers greet guests with dramatic flair. Photo courtesy Teneo Hospitality Group

What are the greatest professional challenges facing you in 2025?



What has been the most concerning for your company in 2024?



Above information courtesy *Special Events*' 2024 SOI survey.



VR goggles are one form of tech spicing up events, both for attendees and planners. Photo courtesy Adobe Stock

Tech remains top tier

You're probably tired of hearing about it, but this was undoubtedly the year of Artificial Intelligence. To wit, *Special Events* published an [AI for Event Pros 101](#) in our Fall Issue.

A report from event company [Huddle](#) shows that:

- 36% of respondents currently use AI for daily tasks such as compiling RFPs, handling customer inquiries, and generating marketing copy
- Only 22% consider their workforce to have a high understanding of AI usage
- Just 24% have a policy guiding the ethical use of AI

Time will tell how AI takes its foothold in the events industry, but there are other tech advancements that have been solidifying their place as well: virtual and augmented reality, drones, tech stacks, and data-driven everything have been on our minds all year.

A report from [Skift Meetings](#) indicates two major highlights from the past year, the first being shifting needs for virtual events. "Recent movements, such as Webex's decision to stop marketing products to planners, highlight the sector's

ongoing realignments," notes the report. Second, data privacy and ownership concerns are prevalent as ever.

As far as the tech event pros are investing in, [The State of Eventtech Report](#) from BW Events Tech shows that event tech expenditure is the same as last year for 50.3% of respondents (42.9% saw an increase and 6.8% saw a decrease). Top types of event tech were 38% registration software, 16.1% speakers/content management, and 15.1% marketing software.

BW also shared the top services their clients look for in event tech, with the top five being attendee and experience engagement (UX), data and reporting availability, customization, budget management, and reducing complexity.

Michael Nilsson, CEO and founder of AddEvent, predicts: "I see tools that make it easy for individuals to find and join the events they care about—like high-quality networking tools—coming to the forefront.... Individuals are being bombarded with emails, invitations, and meetings at every turn. They want to eliminate the noise and get only the most relevant, personalized messages and meetings to fill their time with."

Social events navigate the times

77% of our survey respondents stage social events, with 47% booking about 25 to 50 events over the course of 2024. In comparison, only 42% of last year's respondents reported staging social events.

The average number of attendees this year varied; 41% reported 50 to 99 attendees per event; 40% said 100 to 499 attendees; only 4% averaging less than 50 attendees per social event. Regardless of attendee numbers, one thing is clear: in-person events are back stronger than ever. [Bizzabo](#) reported “This resurgence in face-to-face interactions underscores the continued importance of personal connection in event experiences. While the number of virtual events remained

stable, declining slightly by 0.8%, it's clear that organizations are eager to bring people together physically.”

Weddings

With weddings, we know that intimate celebrations have been on the rise, with micro-weddings leading to a decrease in guest numbers. 42% of respondents average 100 to 499 guests per wedding; 29% average 50 to 99 guests; 19% average 500 to 999. These numbers are akin to last year's survey results.

Though a widespread trend across the globe, micro weddings were less common among our respondents: only 5% reported an average of 25 to 49 guests; only 1% reported an average of less than five guests per wedding.

Weddings have booked into 2025, with a few stretching into the end of the year: 36% have booked into Q1, while



A circus-themed Mitzvah by Chris Weinberg Events puts on a spectacular show. Photo courtesy Domino Arts Photography



Weddings are increasingly guest-experience focused, with themes and special activities. Shown here: a Bread Boulangerie + Cheese Shop Station at a Decadent Supper Club Inspired Wedding by Occasions Caterers. Photo courtesy Elisabetta Marzetti

just 13% have booked into Q4. Depending on geographical location, the length of planning time can vary, affecting how far out weddings book. According to the [2024 Global Wedding Report](#), “The average length of engagement can range from as short as five to six months in places like India to more than a year (15 to 16 months) for those living in the United States and UK.”

Wedding budgets mostly lie between \$25k and \$50K (56%).

“Social expectations and economic position are influencing these trends,” notes wedding pro Kelsey Strickland (Twickenham House and Hall). “The average cost of a wedding in 2024 is \$35,000. At that point, some brides start to think, ‘Go big or go home.’ With so many brides using Pinterest as inspiration, they also want that exact look, which can be expensive.”

As couples aim toward [memorable wedding days](#)—or weekends—the extravagance of weddings is dialing up, even with smaller guest lists.

“I think 2025 will be all about immersive experiences, such as interactive photo booths, live entertainment, and multi-sensory moments throughout the day,” says Craig Peterman (Craig Peterman Photography & Videography). “Couples are also moving toward unique venues, like museums or botanical gardens, that give their day a distinct feel. Unique and casual celebrations are taking center stage this coming year.”

For a deeper dive on wedding trends, turn to [page 10](#).



DJ Natty Rico performs at the Chandler Chamber Ostrich Festival 2023. Live music has been recovering steadily post-pandemic, exciting attendees at events of all kinds. Note: The Chandler Chamber Ostrich Festival 2022 was awarded the 2023 Gala Award for Best Multiple-Day Event Program for a Corporation or Association. Photo courtesy Adam K Studio

Corporate events get creative

Corporate events are in a new era, it seems.

88% of our survey respondents stage corporate events. The reported average number of attendees was mostly in the 100 to 499 range (42% of respondents).

Corporate events have certainly seen an increase in the past year, likely a result of remote workers seeking some in-person company connection. Teneo Hospitality Group President Mike Schugt told *Special Events*, "Corporate retreats and meetings are no longer short-term commitments. The demand is robust for 2025, driven by the need for thoughtful, well-orchestrated programs. We're noticing that clients are prioritizing early bookings to ensure they can execute on their strategic goals without compromising on location or service quality."

When asked about the number of corporate events staged this year compared to 2023, 53% of our survey respondents said they held more. This year's client budgets compared to 2023 seemed to either stay constant or grow slowly: 39% reported budgets increasing by 1% to 5%.

"There's been a surge in demand for more intricate, large-scale programs, and with almost half of current leads focused on 2025, it's evident that planners are embracing proactive, forward-thinking strategies to secure premium venues and experiences," says Schugt.

When looking ahead, 57% of respondents expect revenue from corporate events to increase in 2025, while 32% figure it will stay about the same.

"In 2025, corporate event planners will focus even more on enhancing the attendee experience by incorporating physical and mental wellness into event programming," predicts Schugt. "Sustainability will also take center stage, with planners prioritizing eco-friendly solutions. Leading the charge are brands like 1 Hotels, with their Certified Green Meetings initiative, and The Venetian, offering a green meeting concierge to help planners measure the carbon footprint of their events, making sustainability both actionable and transparent." (More on sustainability in a bit.)

Regarding business travel, the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) reported that as of July, the total U.S. domestic business travel expenditure was \$421.1 billion. They also reported the breakdown of average expenditures for business travel:

1. Food and beverage: \$41.1 billion
2. Entertainment/speakers/production: \$32.9 billion
3. Meeting administration: \$23.6 billion
4. Other meeting operations: \$19.4 billion
5. Meeting venue rental: \$12.1 billion
6. Meeting registration fees: \$11.5 billion
7. Transportation and staff travel: \$9 billion

Bleisure is still thriving; according to travel company Skyscanner:

- 83% of Americans turn their work trips into leisure at least sometimes
- 55% of Americans use PTO to extend their time away
- 59% of Americans are willing to spend more than \$1,000 on a bleisure trip

Event planners who work with corporate events have the opportunity to capitalize on bleisure, sustainability, and in-person trends, offering creative events and programming to the business sector.

Global DMC Partners unveiled their 2024 Global Destination Index, highlighting the most popular meeting and incentive destinations around the world, based on leads and RFPs received for programs happening in 2024 across GDP's worldwide DMC partners.

Here are their Top 10 MICE Destinations for 2024:

Top 10 U.S.

Chicago, IL
Washington, D.C.
New York, NY
Las Vegas, NV
Nashville, TN
Dallas, TX
Miami, FL
Orlando, FL
Austin, TX
San Diego, CA

Top 10 International

Paris, France
Barcelona, Spain
Amsterdam, Netherlands
London, England
Lisbon, Portugal
Athens, Greece
Madrid, Spain
Vienna, Austria
Rome, Italy
Berlin, Germany

Above information courtesy [Global DMC Partners](#)



2024 saw a revitalization of corporate events. Shown here: a showcase in Washington, DC by Teneo Hospitality Group. Photo courtesy Teneo Hospitality Group



An executive retreat dinner party with a 1920's Art Deco paradise theme at the historical Biltmore Hotel. Event by Chris Weinberg Events. Photo courtesy Angle Platform

Events must be accessible to all

In previous reports, we've highlighted sustainability through the lens of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), focusing on environmental longevity and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, particularly in racial and LGBTQIA+ realms. This year, a new sector of inclusion made its way into public consciousness: accessibility and disability inclusion. This means looking at ways to make events inclusive for all types of bodies and minds.

In his session *David Merrell & Susie Perelman Present: Current Trends in the Event Industry* at Catersource + The Special Event 2024, Creative Director of AOO Events David Merrell laid out what neuroinclusivity looks like:

“Basically, it’s the idea that everybody interacts and experiences the world around them in a different way, and there’s really no one right way or wrong way. So, a neurodivergent person would be someone who has ADHD, or OCD, or autism, or dyslexia—I would venture to say in this room, there are people that have certain variations or certain degrees of that.”

He emphasized that it’s time “to now start thinking about the fact that corporations are actually starting to pay attention to neurodiversity, and make sure that their content and what they do for everybody ... is available for everyone to sensory process in their own way.”

The [2024 Disability Equality Index® report](#) was released this July at the Disability:IN Global Conference & Expo, noting that this year, there were “higher year-over-year adoption rates for nearly all reported practices around disability inclusion while also showing the need for more progress in areas such as diversity reporting, supplier diversity spending and boardroom inclusion.” Other notable statistics included:

- 45% are publishing diversity reports that include disability data, up from 24% in 2023.
- 71% have a requirement to ensure digital products are accessible and usable by individuals with disabilities, up from 64% in 2023.
- 24% have company-wide disability-focused goals in place for supplier diversity and inclusion.

2025 will see increased conversation around accessibility and inclusivity, drawing on discussion from the past few years and seeking ways to practically apply better accessibility strategies.

Special Events published a guide to accessible events in the [2024 Fall Issue](#)— give it a look to check in on your own event accessibility practices.



Event producers have increasingly turned to partners that share similar values to ease the burden of creating sustainable events. Photo courtesy Destination Canada/Parléview/Johnson Studios

Eco-friendly events

According to the Huddle report, ESG considerations in the events industry are finally moving from conversation to action:

- 73% of organizations have a dedicated ESG strategy
- 60% conduct environmental audits
- 56% have a roadmap to achieve Net Zero by 2050
- 70% are on track to achieve 2030 Net Zero goals
- 81% have invested in energy efficiency, waste reduction, recycling, and carbon offsetting programs

Other strides toward progress include efforts by the Net Zero Carbon Events initiative, including a new AI sustainability tool.

Efforts to help attendees make better choices are helping to shift client demand as well—[climate labeling](#), which displays the carbon footprint of different foods, allow attendees to see the impact of the food they eat at events, shifting client demand slowly but surely.

Over the past couple years, event pros have gotten tired of talking the talk and have worked toward taking real, practical steps to walk the walk. Event goers have made it clear: events that prioritize environmental sustainability are the ones that will have the highest attendance as time progresses.



2024 could be deemed the "Year of the Espresso Martini." Shown here: the popular cocktail was served at a Chef's Table dinner by 24 Carrots Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Jackie Culmer Photography



Elaborate food stations are popular, like this confectionery table at the 2024 CS+TSE Closing Night Celebration. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions/SpotMyPhotos

Food & beverage: part of the event experience

Like many aspects of events, 2024 saw catering trends to be spectacular, immersive experiences. The [2024 Food & Beverage Trend Report](#) from SupHerb Farms noted some interesting patterns in palates this year: for starters, global flavors are still entering the main stage for new twists on old favorites. Oaxacan, Vietnamese, Nigerian, and North African cuisine have risen to the top (the report suggests *Ted Lasso* may have had something to do with the spike in interest in Nigerian fare). Japanese fusion food is having a moment, mood-focused wellness food is in demand, and edible packaging is making its way into the mainstream—in fact, sustainability has expanded in the catering sector, now encompassing “social justice, workers' rights, animal welfare, and community involvement as well as environmental-specific issues such as water, air, and soil quality and protection.”

Savory profiles, global sauces, nostalgia food, and swicy (sweet and spicy) flavors are still popular as ever, and mushrooms are still wowing crowds with their diversity and health benefits. This year, we also noticed the rise of [grazing tables](#), indicating the maximalist dining experience that attendees desire.

Back in January, *Catersource* predicted the year's [upcoming food trends](#), starting with cacao, macadamia, and plant-based everything, and we certainly saw our fair share of these items this year. The article also highlighted the rise of regenerative agriculture as a method of sustainable catering practices.

Then, in May, *Catersource* [rounded up the trends](#) spotted at *Catersource + The Special Event*, taking note of popular F&B items such as branded food (namely logoed ice cubes), caviar, candy stations and other confectionary delights, smoke-infused food and cocktails—and even robots entering the catering scene.

The SupHerb Farm report best sums up the importance of event pros latching onto the subtle demands that change each year: “Micro trends or food fads are offering both innovation opportunities and challenges for foodservice and retail.” As we'll highlight in the next section, unique and stunning experiences are here more than ever, and understanding the palates of attendees gives you the opportunity to increase engagement.

For more on catering stats, turn to [page 18](#) in the accompanying issue for the *Catersource* State of the Industry report. For more food and beverage trends, turn to [page 04](#).



Unique venues, like this cave at Clos Pegase Winery, are all the rage. Event by CSIDMC. Photo courtesy JBJ Pictures



Pyrotechnics are in high demand, adding spectacle and wowing attendees. Shown here: a gala comes to life with a fire performer from Cirque Berzerk Productions. Photo courtesy Ptaufiq Photography

“We have this crazy, upside-down world, and it’s such a heavy world, and people really want to escape from that world and enter into a dream.” –Susie Perelman

Wowing the crowd

We’ve seen the signs over the past few years—attendees want unique, experiential, luxurious events that swoop them out of their daily life and land them in another world for a while. This year solidified the rising trends of personalization, spectacle, and luxury.

“Incorporating personalized elements into events not only surprises and delights attendees—it can also significantly deepen their engagement,” says an article from [BizBash](#). These days, attendees want to be fully engaged in the event at hand, and personalization is the key to increased engagement.

Nilsson sees personalization continuing to grow in 2025. “In-person events will become more personalized, and we will see an increased focus on the event experience, like personalized networking and more data-driven event planning. Personalization will become critical not just in the promotion of the event itself but also in the programming. We are expecting to see AI giving personalized recommendations about which keynotes and breakout sessions are most relevant to you as an attendee.”

At Catersource + The Special Event this past February, attendees experienced plenty of personalized moments, including custom sugar cubes, caricature sketches, and tarot readings. In the session *David Merrell & Susie Perelman Present: Current Trends in the Event Industry*, Susie Perelman (Mosaic) discussed why attendees are seeking bigger and better everything. “We have this crazy, upside-down world, and it’s such a heavy world, and people really want to escape from that world and enter into a dream. More is more, big, big, bigger, and get away from the heaviness that we’re all experiencing.”

We’ve seen the rise of thorough tech and [big data](#) lead to an intricate understanding of event attendees, giving planners the advantage when it comes to catering every aspect of an event to the preferences of those in attendance. By offering options of all kinds, planners raise the chances of attendees being satisfied on a personal level.

This need to have a unique experience has played out in theatrics, as well—the more spectacle an event holds, the

more likely it will leave a lasting impression—and create returning clients.

Merrell weighed in during the CS+TSE session as well. “You need massive LED screens and pyrotechnics and lasers and everything to really satisfy the audience,” he noted. “It’s been something that we’ve seen building and building, and fortunately there’s a lot of tools in our industry to create spectacle.” Additionally, as technology improves, the cost of many of these tools has become more affordable.

Creative table shapes, hyper-specific themes, unique entertainment—there are endless ways to create customized, spectacular events.

Gamification is also playing an increasing role in attendee engagement. Brian Kellerman, CEO & Partner at GoGather, told *Special Events*, “The biggest way we’ve been incorporating this trend into our clients’ events is by developing overarching gamification that goes beyond just apps. There are competitions prior to the event to get attendees excited, then there are games woven throughout the event with leaderboards tracking scores to keep them engaged—which leads to the gamification culminating into one large competition and awards ceremony. This can even continue on past the event.”

It’s not just having unique, over-the-top, gamified experiences, though; it’s about accessing something exclusive, being part of events that not everyone can be part of. [Luxury](#) isn’t simply about designer clothing and cars anymore (though that is certainly part of it); it’s about cultivating upscale experiences that attendees can’t find anywhere else—and plenty of people are willing to pay the price.

This can play out in obscure venues, micro events within larger events, pyrotechnics and drone shows, elevated dress codes, designer favors, and exclusive VIP options. “Quiet luxury” has been on trend the past couple years—according to Constellation Culinary Group’s Culinary Director Meg Grasso, it is “driven by a demand for refined, upscale [moments] that emphasize quality over extravagance. This trend features elevated, interactive event elements such as caviar carts, roaming oyster shuckers, and table-side carved tomahawk steaks, providing guests with a sense of exclusivity and engagement.”

She adds that “Quiet luxury’s appeal lies in its subtle elegance, catering to discerning clientele who value craftsmanship and a more intimate, immersive [dining] experience.”

So be mindful of how you display opulence: sometimes, a subtle, minimalist approach is better than ostentatious showiness.

With the demand for so much customization and elevation, each event requires your utmost creativity and cleverness. As you enter 2025, check in with industry partners and make sure you’re surrounded by people who are capable of creating high-engagement events.

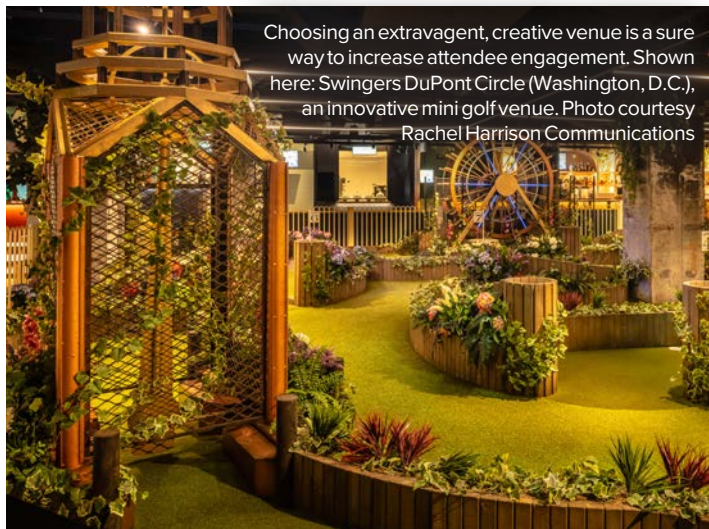
Looking ahead

When asked what key steps you are taking in 2025 to improve your business, our survey respondents replied that they will focus mainly on broadening their client base (43%) and marketing more aggressively (41%).

It isn’t just about adjusting business strategies, however. Any event pro worth their salt knows that continuous education is vital to staying ahead of competitors and on top of client expectations. Our respondents said the top five topics they’re interested in learning more about are business development, marketing/social media, event trends, professional development, and best business practices.

Don’t forget to [register](#) for Catersource + The Special Event 2025, to be held February 24–27 in Fort Lauderdale, FL. You’ll be surrounded by event professionals and educational opportunities to learn even more about the topics that interest you and the trends developing in 2025.

In a few days, we’ll celebrate the end of 2024 and welcome in 2025. There will be challenges, of course, but as we saw during the pandemic, the events industry is resilient, made of people who are passionate, creative, and willing to put in the work to create events that touch people’s lives. Attendees are showing up, looking to events to make deeply meaningful—and sometimes escapist—experiences. 2025 may bring challenges, but with it, a chance for planners to prove their innovation, resilience, and skill. **SE**



Choosing an extravagant, creative venue is a sure way to increase attendee engagement. Shown here: Swingers DuPont Circle (Washington, D.C.), an innovative mini golf venue. Photo courtesy Rachel Harrison Communications

What do readers want from *Special Events*?

State of the Industry survey respondents weighed in on the topics they want to see more of from us. Here are the results:



Above information courtesy *Special Events*’ 2024 SOI survey.

Where caterers
meet event planners

under one roof!

Catersource + The Special Event™

FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025

**BROWARD COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA**

Catersource + The Special Event is the only annual event of its kind. A show of unrivaled influence and inspiration, it's a spirited gathering of all the people, ideas, and trending innovations shaping the catering and events industry.

SECURE YOUR SPOT!

**EARLY BIRD RATES
END FEBRUARY 7, 2025**

CATERSOURCE-TSE.COM

CONFETTI

UNDER THE B ...AND THE STARS



BIG TOP



The parking lot was covered with turf and turned into a courtyard.

The Gala-nominated event “Night Circus” transformed a parking lot into a whimsical evening festival

By Amanda Nicklaus

*All photos courtesy
Harley Bonham Photography*

It's not an easy task to transform a parking lot into a magical event space. Especially not when the client is a repeat, and you have a history of wowing them with dramatic concepts. But the best event pros don't treat this task as an obstacle; they use it as a challenge to showcase their creativity.

That's exactly what Studio F Designs did when they found themselves in this scenario. With the goal of entertaining 1,200 guests, the team took their client's "audacious concept for a new event space" and got to work. With several tent structures, a large stage and dance floor, seating, bars, and more, the Studio F Designs team reworked the lot into what they needed, even removing some permanent fixtures.

An added challenge: there was no CAD (computer-aided design), so the team reconstructed the lot from scratch and made a to-scale diagram to work from. Talk about dedication!

The goal was to turn the parking lot into a "Night Circus," with a big top and myriad performers.

This was yet another pain point: the event space wouldn't allow for a massive tension tent to be installed. That didn't stop the team from creating a big top; switching it up, they created a big top out of a light canopy, with hundreds of feet of string lights rigged to a 30-foot-tall center truss.

CONFETTI



Guests were welcomed to the event through a custom 16-foot-tall clown mouth.



The best event pros don't treat this task as an obstacle; they use it as a challenge to showcase their creativity.

The team also created a custom fabricated entrance wall that spanned the entire width of the event, where guests entered through two oversized clown faces and were welcomed by glowing custom circus posters.

The structure alone emulated a circus, but the other wow-factor that gave the event an electric energy was the 65-plus various circus performers. From cirque aerialists to a Russian Bar troupe, to custom created still walkers, to motorcyclists in a globe cage and even a fire performer, guests could watch lively entertainment from nearly everywhere in the event space.



Guests were entertained by talented cirque acts, like this bold fire performer.



Over 65 talented cirque performers brought the circus to life.



One of the daring circus acts was a motorcyclist performance in the "Wheel of Death."

CONFETTI

Studio F Designs knew that the event's success was due to the "the unwavering passion and profound dedication that pulsates through [their] every endeavor." A small team, they brought their creativity and dedication to the client's happiness, and it shows: besides being nominated for the *Special Events* 2024 Gala award for Best Event Produced for a Corporation or Association, they provided the guests with a starlit spectacle. **SE**



Several circus-themed activity stations entertained guests, like this psychic lounge tent.



The Backstage Bar tent was crafted with an old timey traveling circus flair.



A sushi bar and oyster buffet offered guests with fresh bites throughout the night.



Atmosphere talent in peculiar custom costumes set the tone of the evening.



A custom-made elephant sculpture adorned the stage.



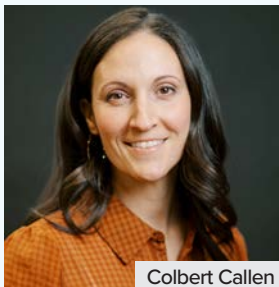
Positive Predictions



Amanda Lincoln



Chris Weinberg



Colbert Callen



Colja Dams



JC York

As we wind down 2024 and prepare ourselves for 2025, it's time for our annual Positive Predictions. This forecast checks in with select industry professionals to see what good things might be in store for the upcoming year. This tradition started in 2020, with event leaders seeking hope in difficult times. This year feels no different—with politics, economy, and staffing concerns, we are once again looking for a kernel of hope.

We asked several event pros what they think the new year holds. Here is a bit of what they predict—read the [full version](#) at [specialevents.com](#). **SE** — *Amanda Nicklaus*

1 **Amanda Lincoln, CMP, CSEP** *Senior Manager of Private Events, International Spy Museum*

Over the last few years, we've seen lead times drop drastically for many events, especially in the corporate market. What used to have a three-to-six-month lead time might now only have a three-to-four-week lead time. With this trend continuing into 2025, we should consider this the new industry standard and work with it.

2 **Chris Weinberg** *Lead Wedding & Event Producer/ Founder/Chief Experience Officer, Chris Weinberg Events*

In 2025, luxury events will center on deeply personalized experiences that tell each client's unique story, with design elements, entertainment, and interactive installations crafted to evoke emotion and meaning. Sustainability has become a necessity, with eco-conscious planning like local, seasonal catering and green certifications highly valued. Technology, including AI, AR, and VR, will further enhance guest interaction, adding sophistication when implemented thoughtfully.

3 **Colbert Callen** *Sales & Marketing Director, Footers Catering*

Many anticipate that economic uncertainty will lead to corporate and individual spending pullback over the next year. While this understandably sparks fear from a revenue perspective

in our small-business industry, it also quietly drives competition and ultimately, excellence.

4 **Colja Dams** *CEO, VOK DAMS*

2025 will be the best year for events. Studies show that corporate events budgets will rise. The reason? Only live experiences create unforgettable 'Wow-Moments' and real human connections. Live events deliver powerful, emotional experiences. As generic content floods the world, real-life interactions matter more. They bring authenticity and a sense of community. People want real, memorable connections.

5 **JC York** *President/Owner, Classic Entertainment/Wise Guys InterACTIVE*

The events industry has experienced a strong recovery in 2024, with positive signs continuing into 2025. Event bookings have surged, and there's been an uptick in early contracts, with many holiday events secured by mid-summer. This indicates growing confidence in the market. Another promising trend is the return of last-minute event requests, which, although challenging, suggest that clients are once again willing to invest in enhancing their events and making them more memorable. This shift shows that clients are eager to take their events to the next level, signaling renewed optimism and creativity in the industry.

Predictions for 2025

6 Jim Hooker

Executive Director of Academic Programs, The Special Event Company

In 2025, institutions will continue to experiment with AI in their academic events—integrating it in ways that enhance, but not overshadow, the human elements that make academic events so memorable and impactful. The key to enduring success in the coming year is to engage donors, students, faculty, staff, community, and alumni through personal, impactful, and transformational experiences that move and motivate attendees into action.

7 Julie Roth Novack

CEO & Co-Founder, PartySlate

In many areas of the country, the event industry has more than rebounded—it has boomed—and we're excited by all the innovation we are seeing... Personalization at events has grown immensely, with live experiences that create lasting memories. From live champagne and perfume [bottle] etching to personalized, on-the-spot leather travel tags, these touches bring a new level of meaning and luxury to celebrations.

8 Julie Sabatino

Founder, The Stylish Bride

Brides in 2025 are setting themselves apart from previous years. This generation is informed, well-researched, and passionate about discovering something truly original. We're noticing a strong trend toward "vintage" or nontraditional pieces, with brides seeking a deeper meaning in their choices—a "why" behind each selection that goes beyond simply finding "the one."

9 Katie Mast

Director of Community Engagement, Rock Paper Coin

As we look toward 2025, the wedding and event industry continues to shine as a beacon of creativity, community, and resilience. In regards to events, I predict a significant rise in hyper-personalized events as couples and clients are leaning into storytelling like never before. The guest experience will reflect deeper, more meaningful connections, making each event as unique as the individuals behind it. From a community standpoint, this focus on authenticity can help drive professionals to refine their offerings and collaborate with other pros in new ways to elevate creativity and create higher client satisfaction.

10 Sebastien Centner

Founder, Eatertainment Events & Catering/Lead Consultant, Assemble Advisors

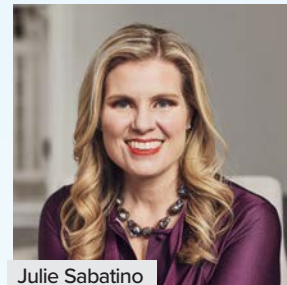
For me I see an amazing number of opportunities for our industry as we head into 2025, from trends that are exploding like immersive events and culinary curated events, to new technologies that are available like live attendee tracking or AI tools that are designed specifically for the event industry, but what excites most is how the past few years will shape our resilience and our determination going forward.



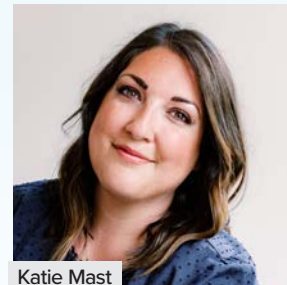
Jim Hooker



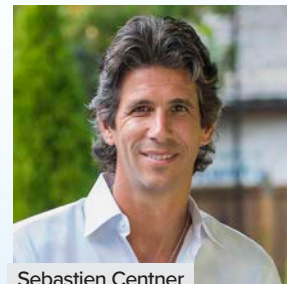
Julie Roth Novack



Julie Sabatino



Katie Mast



Sebastien Centner

[Read the Full Version Here](#)



Too often, as event pros, we suffer in silence....We push down our own emotional needs, and we “suck it up” and push through as best we can—but we aren't doing anyone any favors by not being fully ourselves in those moments.

A Word of Grace

By Brian Green

At the start of every year, I begin my journey differently than most. Most people make fantastic resolutions, but for many, they never last; heaven knows I was always one of those. So, for the last few years, I have shifted to picking one word to guide me for the year. This year, that word was “sonder.” By definition, it means “the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own.”

This word has been a critical factor in my year of giving grace to others and, more importantly, myself! We work in an incredible industry that creates magical moments for clients across the gamut. We are there to be a part of so many couples' love stories. We are present and purposeful in helping brands deliver their message, and we are there to do the good work of supporting charities to provide a message of hope and positivity. We are the cornerstone of every magical moment in people's lives, and we do it most every day with vigor and enthusiasm. However, some days, we are not at our best and are often exhausted. It is in those days that I lean into actively remembering my word of the year and giving people grace. Grace, by definition, is a noun; for me, it's a verb. Giving grace is an act—it is a purposeful decision to allow people just to be human and to have a human experience.

When my best friend of 25 years passed away unexpectedly, I found myself like a fish out of water—the person who was my one constant in my adult life was abruptly gone, and I genuinely could not think, feel, or function. It took everything out of me for months (and still does some days now). I was going through the actions but was nowhere near my best. My team knew it, my vendor partners knew it, and I am sure that some clients could feel it as well.

It was hard.... It still is hard.

Then, one day, I woke up and decided that instead of hiding it, I would share with everyone what was happening and ask for grace as I learned to navigate the world in a new way. Too often, as event pros, we suffer in silence, assuming that our own complex lives do not matter as much as someone else's or a client's needs. We push down our own emotional needs, and we “suck it up” and push through as best we can—but we aren't doing anyone any favors by not being fully ourselves in those moments.

By sharing my truth, my team was better prepared to help me when I needed it, my vendor partners knew how to support me, and even my clients were more understanding if a timeline was not met precisely as we had intended. By sharing the complexity of my life, I found grace in a community that is often moving at lightning speed with little time for errors and emotions for its industry pros.

All of us—without exception—are dealing with complex lives: heavy loads at work and home, and in 2024, a year that seemed to be mixed with super highs and dramatic lows for so many in our industry, the pressure was immense—but what I learned was that we have a community ready to support and give grace when you need it. Our community will help each other in tough times once they know what is happening and you share your truth. So often, we feel isolated in our issues, but I am here to tell you to share your truth, and your community will come to your side.

As I look forward to 2025 with the strength of my community behind me, my word will be “Meraki.” It describes “doing something with soul and creativity, pouring a part of oneself into the act, and making each experience purposeful and intentional.” That is the perfect word for us in the event world, and I will be leaning into it each and every moment of the year to come. **SE**