

ISN'T THAT SPECIAL

What puts the "special" in catering for special events? Southern California caterers share their tips and observations.

Remember when caterers were known for a certain dish or menu and that's all planners expected? Now caterers are constantly being challenged to not only come up with new culinary creations for special events, but new and different ways of delivering that cuisine as well. "Last time I checked what 'cater' meant, it was to prepare someone else's desires," notes Nathaniel Neubauer, owner/operator of Contemporary Catering in Los Angeles. ¶ Here's what Southern California caterers are (and aren't) cooking up for their clients, plus some tips for getting the most out of working with your caterer when planning your special event.

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What's out, what's in

Say good-bye to chocolate fountains and hello to champagne cocktails. "Champagne isn't just for a toast anymore," says Valerie Vollmer, CPCE, of Catering Celebrations by the Plug Nickel of Westlake Village. "Guests are enjoying it throughout the event." Mini cupcakes? "Everyone has had enough," says Neubauer.

Full seated dinner events are giving way to appetizer and small plate menus according to Lynn Rinek, event and design specialist with 24 carrots catering and events of Irvine. "This style of service allows clients to serve a menu while saving money on the food, labor and rentals that accompany a seated meal," she observes.

Rinek is also seeing traditional buffets with classical European dishes replaced with "lighter, more modern dishes with a high emphasis on creative presentation," she notes.

Indeed, how food is presented has become almost

as important as the food itself. "From serving food on hot rocks, to butler passing hors d'oeuvres from a lantern, guests love to interact," says Vollmer.

A monster and molecules

When it comes to pleasing attendees, there is perhaps no component of a special event with more possibilities than cuisine. The trends of comfort food and molecular gastronomy are a good example. The two could not seem more different, but the results are the same: a memorable and tasty experience.

Rachel Welland, owner and event coordinator at Bliss Events in San Diego, does pro bono work for the "really elaborate" annual black-tie gala benefiting Jewish Family Services of San Diego. This year attendees enjoyed a "cookie monster" dessert buffet created by the in-house pastry chef at the host venue—the Hyatt Regency La Jolla at Aventine—complete with 15 different kinds of cookies, dipping condiments,

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—by Casey Merkwon

ice cream and milkshakes. "I really applaud the (gala) committee for being innovative," says Welland. "You've got all these formally dressed adults and you're introducing this child-like element. It's such a fun idea, and they could take the cookies home."

This past January, 24 carrots donated their services for the Orange County Museum of Art's annual Art Auction. 24 carrots' Executive Chef J.T. Walker created a menu using molecular gastronomy. For the "Tomato Soup & Sandwich Bite," tasteless calcium lactate was added to tomato bisque soup and the mixture dropped in a bath of sodium alginate to create a clear skin around the soup, a process called reverse spherification. The encapsulated bisque was then placed on top of a single bit of grilled gruyere cheese and sourdough bread sandwich. A "Frozen Inside Out Cheesecake Bite" consisted of ground graham cracker submerged in the middle of creamed cheese cake and frozen in liquid nitrogen.

Service never goes out of style

Their interpretations might vary, but these caterers were on the same page about how to put the "special" in a special event: service. It can be as simple as introducing the chef to your client and guests. "Any time they make an appearance at the event and greet the host, it's huge," says Vollmer.

"Cooking food on-site ensures fresh, quality cuisine," notes Rinek. That's why 24 carrots treats each event like a restaurant would. "Instead of bringing food pre-cooked in the hot box, we plate our dishes straight from the oven," she says.

At Contemporary Catering, it's all about getting inside the client's head. "I know what a great event looks like in my head, we want to create what a great event looks like in your head," says Neubauer. "When someone comes to me and asks if I could include 'a little of this, or make it something like that,' and then gives us the creative freedom to create and design something inspired by, and for them, it is special."

TIPS FOR PLANNERS

WANT THE BEST POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH A CATERER FOR YOUR SPECIAL EVENT? TAKE NOTE OF THESE TIPS.

Timing is everything.

"We see a pattern of planners not allowing enough time between each activity during an event," says Rinek. Neubauer agrees. "Most planners simply don't take flow and timing into consideration as it relates to food, service and guest experience into the consideration," he notes. Have the confidence to say no to clients if a request disrupts the flow of the event.

Educate your staff.

"Too many times they are not familiar with the type of food, what is flammable décor and why it should not be set next to an open flame or sterno, etc.," Vollmer laments.

Communication rules.

"At the end of the day it is not about who is right or wrong," says Neubauer. "It is about how we can all come together to create the best possible experience for the client. I would rather be wrong and have the client be happy, than get to say that I was right."

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