

The insider's guide to selecting the right caterer

When comparing catering companies you have to see beyond the menu in order to determine the true cost. Menu items and services may all sound the same, but the bottom line price for your event may vary greatly.

First, let's assume you've done some basic homework. Each company you are considering should have a great track record and long lists of satisfied clients. Letting your fingers do the walking for a wedding caterer is not a risk most brides are not willing to take.

With a few key questions and a better understanding of how different companies price their events, you should be better qualified to make an informed decision. So, here's an insider's guide of terms to know and questions to ask that will hopefully help you to be able to better compare catering bids.

Menu Design No two caterers create identical dishes, even if they sound the same. To understand why pricing differs you need to ask the caterer how the food is prepared and what ingredients are used. Logically, the fresher, more exotic the ingredients, the more expensive the dish. Does the caterer actually create the food from scratch or purchase it frozen and just doctor it up at the last minute by adding their own sauce or something? How will it be presented at the event? One caterer might have their own staff while another may contract just for each event. Each detail affects the overall quality and the final price you will pay. Everything gets thrown into the pot to create the final price. But wait, there's more.

Corkage and Cake Cutting Fees Once upon a time, these fees were added to compensate a venue when they allowed you to bring in your own specialty items. Now they have become standard charges applied by some companies, even when you will be utilizing the in-house pastry chef or the house champagne. No one is sure why, but one thing is certain, to compare caterers, you will need to find out the charges for each caterer and add them to the final bottom line.

Parking While it might not be the first thing you think of to ask, parking can add a substantial cost your final bill. Each venue handles this charge differently. Be sure to find out if it is included in the price of the proposal or will be added on later. You might end up paying \$8 to \$10 per car for parking. Unless you have a separate budget for parking and valet, take this cost into consideration here since it will be included in the bill.

Creating a Kitchen An off-premise wedding reception usually requires a finish kitchen of some sort. Did the caterers you are interviewing include this in their proposal or did they just finish with the statement, "Plus Rentals?" Remember to ask each caterer how they plan to prepare the food on-site. For instance, will they be plating to order, which requires extra staff, or will they be plating ahead and holding the meals in transit cabinets (rubber chicken, anyone?). In the end, you will find that everything is a compromise. It's up to you to determine what is worth it and what you can do without.

Staffing Ask your caterer how they will staff your event. The ratio of server to guest varies dramatically depending on what style of food service you choose (such as sit-down, buffet, family style). In addition, pricing will go up or down depending on whether the caterers are using their own staff or bringing in temporary help for the event. A caterer whose standard for a sit-down meal service is one server per 10 guests is going to be providing a much higher level of service (and should be more expensive) than a service whose ratio is one server per every 25 guests. You need to understand the level of service provided in order to make a fair comparison. And if you are paying for service as a line item, do they also charge a gratuity or service charge?

Gratuities and Service Charges There is some confusion between these two terms and some caterers even have a mandatory charge for both. Here is a definition of the two that can help you ask the right questions and know what you are being charged.

A true gratuity is an optional amount of money given at your discretion to the service staff. A service fee (sometimes incorrectly referred to as a gratuity) is a predetermined percentage that is set by the contract and included on the final bill. The percentage is not standard but the current norm is between 18 and 22 percent and is calculated based on the total catering bill. What you need to know is that according to the California State Board of Equalization, regulation number 1603, any fee that is mandated, like the service fee, will be taxed. In other words, if it's contracted for, it will be taxed. By knowing this, you can avoid another surprise at the end of the party and be able to compare pricing with the knowledge of what everything will really cost.

While two menus might appear to be alike on the surface, there may be substantial differences between them in cost and quality. It is important to understand the real cost of your catering bid. Asking the right questions and making the right compromises will guarantee a perfect meal. Fresh ingredients plated to order and promptly served may cost more, but if you can afford it, you will notice the difference.

JIM WHARTON



The Happiest Day of Your Life.

Providing the perfect unity of an elegant, romantic environment combined with exquisite, custom cuisine, The Portofino Hotel and Yacht Club is your answer to happiness.

Call our Wedding Specialists today and let them guide you through every aspect of your ceremony and reception. Then you can rest easy knowing we will help to create the happiest day of your life.



(800) 468-4292
(310) 798-5874

260 Portofino Way
Redondo Beach, California
www.hotelportofino.com

NOBLE HOUSE
HOTELS & RESORTS