

Approaching the Table with New Eyes

A Creative Wedding Menu Sets the Tone for Your Wedding Day and Your Future

Sitting down at your wedding table with friends and family is an experience to be savored, in more ways than one. I've heard people say brides shouldn't worry about the menu. They are essentially saying that, for a wedding, food is food. Aunt Sally won't care if she has organic micro greens served with seasonal rock shrimp with aged sherry wine vinaigrette, or a bowl of romaine with Green Goddess.

To that sentiment, I heartily disagree not only as a caterer but as a person who realizes what sitting down to a well-thought-out and lovingly prepared meal can do on so many levels. Overall, it tells your guests that you regard them in high esteem. And for you personally, it is the first meal you have together as man and wife. In these two ways, the meal sets the tone not only for the party, but for your future.

If you have already planned your menu, or have something in mind, look at it again with new eyes. Does it feed only hunger, or does it feed the soul? Rejuvenating a menu, even the most traditional, doesn't have to mean a complete overhaul of what you want. Sometimes all it takes is a simple variation in style and presentation. Here are a few guidelines and ideas for ways to make your menu and its presentation reflect who you are, create the right atmosphere for your wedding reception and add one more incredible memory to an already very special day.

Consider ...

A buffet cocktail hour without a buffet. Instead of the traditional buffet, set up what could best be described as "kiosks." A kiosk is a simple table, either decorated to go with a theme, or simply adorned with exquisite linen. A server is there to create "small plates" for each guest of a perfectly presented item, such as a tuna tartare napoleon adorned with wasabi caviar and dots of soy sauce for décor and taste. Kiosks eliminate lines and waste and make messy presentations a thing of the past. Because each plate is perfectly presented, all guests need do it pick it up and go.

Appetizer stations. In addition to tray-passed hors d'oeuvres, consider adding a few themed appetizer stations. As just one example, a Chinese station is easily created with a table laid in red linen and accented with black lacquer serving pieces, exotic floral and bamboo screens. As a variation on the small plates serving style, Chinese take-out cartons contain one or two bites of an authentic Chinese dish. By adding a bit of theme or whimsy to the cocktail hour, you get the best of both worlds – the chance to add creativity to one part of the evening while still serving a traditional wedding meal at dinner.

Daring choices in first courses. Like the appetizer stations, allotting a small portion of the evening, or meal, to something really creative and different gives you the chance to have a little fun with the menu, while allowing the main attraction to remain more traditional.

Specialty drinks. Creating a drink named after you is always a great way to add life to the cocktail hour. Another way to add some fun to the evening is to present wines that are privately labeled with your name and the wedding date on the label (there are several companies who will custom-design labels for high-end wine). You can also place more of an emphasis on wines by creating a food and wine pairing menu for your meal, serving different wines with each course.

Cheese courses with a twist. The wine and food pairing leads us into selecting special foods to serve. Cheese courses are extremely popular now and the choices of cheese have never been better. When putting a cheese

course together, have some fun with it. Choose cheeses based on a region – select all French cheese, or California cheese. Or, arrange the plate based on type of cheese (goat, cow or sheep's milk). Traditionally, cheese courses are served with port, but, for something different, consider serving it with a special vintage champagne and make this the toasting course. Doing so will definitely rejuvenate any wedding menu and show off your personal style.

Serve family style. Serving styles are a huge element of a celebration and its atmosphere. While many guests get up and table-hop during a multi-course meal, the family style presentation encourages the spirit of cooperation among guests as they pass courses, discuss the dishes and the flavors. And, it's unexpected at a wedding.

Inject gourmet ingredients where they are least expected. Taking classic dishes and making them modern is as easy as upgrading an ingredient. For instance, the classic Coq Au Vin is updated with the addition of porcini mushrooms while a cheesecake can be made savory with cheeses and herbs and served as an appetizer. And, while we are on unexpected elements, tray-passed hors d'oeuvres can get a much-needed boost of excitement with edible spoons. Made with savory dough baked into the shape of a spoon and topped with any number of items, these are delicious and unique.

Add comfort food surprises. Smaller versions of traditional dishes – such as miniature chicken pot pies, or a one-bite version of something traditional can provide an element of surprise and refresh how we think about food. Comfort food can also be made elegant during dessert. A twist on cookies and milk can become individual chocolate molten cakes served with an almond-flavored milk shake. And on that note, Rice Krispies treats, snicker doodles and other childhood favorites are making their way onto dessert buffets. You can present it with an elegant twist by making the dessert table all white through the linen, floral and serving ware.

Go organic. Go local. In California, there is no shortage of interesting products and suppliers. "Farmer's market" menus are very hot right now and use only ingredients found locally and in season. A word of caution, organic products cost a little more, but the rewards are huge in terms of uniqueness and taste. This is a perfect idea for a smaller wedding or for the ecologically minded couple.

And one last bonus idea that addresses what your food sits on – the table. The tabletop is the perfect canvas for the imagination, no matter what your budget. Ideas are everywhere. To rejuvenate how you approach the table design, revisit a home store with new eyes. For instance, sheets of mosaic tiles can add so much to an overall look for so little. Or, use slabs of stone from the garden department as placemats with flowers "growing" between for an unusual head table. And even rethinking the centerpiece and perhaps rigging it from the ceiling like a wreath over the table can be the one small thing that turns everything you knew about entertaining on its head, literally.

These ideas add a fresh taste to your menu, as well as the planning process. Infuse your wedding day with creativity by looking at everything with new eyes. Start your life together by not just accepting what has been done before, but by reinventing it for yourselves. Let your style reflect not the individuals you were in the morning of your wedding, but the couple you are at the end of your wedding day. The table is waiting and is yours to set.

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