

TIPS FROM A PRO»

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Don't always assume hiring the caterer is the easiest part of planning your event.

BY SUSAN DUNKELMAN



WHETHER YOU ARE PLANNING A SMALL OR LARGE EVENT, food and beverages play a large role in the enjoyment of your guests. The mistake that most people make is that they hire a well-recommended caterer and then automatically assume that a great meal will be provided for their guests. Even if you are working with a large venue and their required catering vendor, there are still things you can do to ensure a successful and delicious presentation!

The first step is to request a formal tasting. This is a perfect opportunity to not only taste the food in advance, but to also meet the staff that you will be working with leading up to and during the event. The best thing you can do is entice the caterer with your vision and appeal to their creative side so that they get personally invested and motivated to make your event a success.

Working with a caterer requires a special balance between what they do best and the

menu that you envision for your theme and location. It's fine to ask if they can create unique dishes and most willingly do, but if you go too far out of their comfort zone it can end in a not so pleasurable dining experience for your guests. For example, a simple Philly cheesesteak could be turned into a more impressive presentation using filet mignon. Ask them what makes them stand out from their competitors and what items they think will work best for your goals.

Besides crafting your menu, a tasting is the perfect time to talk about the logistics of the event. Every detail must be addressed in advance, starting with where the caterer and his equipment will be located within the event venue. This can affect the timeliness of serving your guests, and the overall appearance of the food, especially if you have a large crowd. What looks delicious on a small plate at a tasting must be able to translate well into what is being served to the entire group of attendees. Your conversation must also cover the rental equipment that is being used. If you are doing a themed event, the last thing you want to have happen is the waitstaff coming out with dishes that contrast rather than complement your décor.

Another important discussion to have is about your staff-to-guest ratio. You may be serving your guests the best food in the world, but if it isn't presented in a timely manner, that will be the takeaway of your attendees. While it's tempting to skip on waitstaff, captains or even busboys if you have a limited budget, doing so will affect the successful outcome of your event. It's also a good idea to ask about any of their experiences when something went wrong and how they were able to remedy it on-site. This can provide a good window into how resourceful and well thought out the staff is that you will ultimately be working with.

Lastly, there are the usual questions to cover including the dietary needs of your guests; setup and breakdown time; waitstaff attire; and all of the other small yet crucial details to ensure a delightful and delicious event.



PRIOR TO FORMING THE CHARLES GROUP INC. IN 1987, **SUSAN DUNKELMAN** SERVED AS DIRECTOR OF CONFERENCES FOR THE RISK AND INSURANCE MANAGEMENT SOCIETY (RIMS), AN ASSOCIATION OF OVER 4,000-MEMBER CORPORATIONS, AND WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR MANAGING THE RIMS ANNUAL CONFERENCE WITH 12,000 PARTICIPANTS. SHE ALSO DIRECTED SIMILAR ACTIVITIES FOR RIMS IN EUROPE AND ASIA. SHE ALSO PARTICIPATES AS A MEMBER OF ILEA.

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