

# MEAT THE CHALLENGE

Alternative proteins such as plant-based, insects, algae, and organ meats are bringing innovation to menus



**T**he culinary world is in the midst of a protein revolution. As sustainability, health, and dietary diversity continue to be a focus, alternative proteins are no longer just for the health-conscious or eco-minded. From cricket flour to algae, organ meats to plant-based innovations, these protein sources are no longer niche—they're going mainstream.

"I've always been passionate about experimenting with new ingredients and flavors and I'm always intrigued by how we can challenge conventional norms in cooking," says Chef Christopher Matthews (Eatertainment Events & Catering). "As sustainability and health become bigger topics in the culinary world, alternative proteins present a fascinating way to innovate and address the growing demand for more sustainable dining options."

(Left) Mae Mae-Beet Sliders from Great Performances. Photo courtesy Cami Cicero; (Facing page) It's never easy recreating a classic and well-known dish like a Beef Wellington as a vegan dish, but Dish Food & Events did just that with the CATIE-winning dish *Carrot Wellingtons* (pump puree, urfa roasted rainbow carrots, chestnut cream, cremini and baby portobello duxelles, and dill oil), which not only allows guests to taste the freshness of the garden, but it also creates an appetizing visual, using a rainbow of colored carrots. Photo courtesy International Caterers Association/Dish Food & Events



## Health check

As global concerns about environmental sustainability, health, and ethical food production grow, alternative proteins present a viable solution.

The United Nations projects that by 2050, feeding the global population (which is expected to rise to 9.5 billion people) will require a 70% increase in food production.

Traditional protein sources, particularly red meat, come with hefty environmental costs, including high water usage and carbon emissions. By contrast, crickets,

for example, require a fraction of the water and land needed to raise livestock, while algae are one of the most sustainable food sources on Earth, thriving in conditions that require minimal resources.

"Food is one of those really significant climate issues," said Edwina Hughes (CoolFood, World Resources Institute) in a session during the Culinary Institute of America's *Menus of Change* conference "and it's a naughty issue."

In 2019, the *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)*, featuring food scientists and policy makers, released a global assessment that

named alternative proteins as the transformative solution.

Meanwhile, consumers are increasingly demanding sustainable, health-conscious menu options.

In fact, 72% of Americans feel eating more sustainably is urgent, said Hughes.

"[Focusing on mindful eating and whole ingredients] led me to explore alternative proteins as a way to create delicious, satisfying meals while aligning with my values of sustainability and health," says Chef Jeffrey Schlissel (The Bacon Cartel). "It then became a passion for pushing the bounds of what alternative protein foods are because I wanted to provide options for diverse dietary needs and demonstrate that plant-based and alternative proteins can be as craveable and satisfying as traditional proteins."

## The power of plants

We can't dive into the world of alternative proteins without first looking at *plant-based proteins*, since they have quickly become the darlings of the culinary world.

"They're healthier, more inclusive, more sustainable, and—most importantly—delicious," says Katie Cantrell (Greener by Default). "When plant-based dishes feature exciting flavors and are prepared well, they can be a delightful departure from the standard options that everyone expects, and even stand out as the star of the show."

Some examples of plant-based proteins that are finding star-making roles on menus include such options as *jackfruit*, lentils, tempeh, *soy*, chickpeas, and of course *mushrooms*.

"So often plant-based options are an afterthought, a box to be checked off so that there's something for vegetarians to eat while all of the

energy is channeled into the meat-based options,” says Cantrell. “As a result, many people have negative connotations of plant-based items as bland and insubstantial. Often the plant-based option is just roasted vegetables, which are lacking in calories and protein, leaving diners hungry 20 minutes later.

“When caterers use their creativity and skill to craft dishes containing plant-based proteins that feature popular flavors and ingredients, they can sell them as exciting new options that all guests can enjoy.”

While a Quinoa-Stuffed Bell Pepper might sound boring even to vegans, everyone’s mouths will water at the idea of Porcini Truffle Risotto with Cannellini Beans or Fresh Spring Rolls with Lemongrass Tofu and Peanut Sauce.

Plant-based proteins lend themselves quite well to a variety of cuisines, especially those with bold, rich flavors like Mexican, Floribbean, Mediterranean, and Asian. They can easily take on spices and sauces, making them versatile in many dishes.

It’s also important to emphasize the popularity and deliciousness of the plant-based options, rather than that they’re plant-based. Many studies have found that prominently labeling an option as plant-based/vegetarian/meatless dramatically lowers the chances that an omnivore will choose those options, says Cantrell.

“Often caterers market vegetarian options towards vegetarians, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; people who don’t identify as vegetarian will not go out of their way to select a vegetarian meal or settle for a hummus wrap when there are burgers available,” she says. “By placing the focus on flavor, we can avoid the identity triggers that come with emphasizing that foods are plant-based.”

## Under the sea

While we mostly think of seafood as being fish, crustacean, or bi-valve, sea vegetables are one protein category that is currently gaining traction.

The category of sea vegetables is incredibly broad and includes such ingredients as nori, duckweed, spirulina, sea moss, kelp, dulse, agar agar, and so many more. These exotic sounding delicacies have been a staple in Asian cuisine for centuries for good reason—each one is packed with fiber and nutrients like antioxidants, iodine, iron, protein, amino acids, folic acid, calcium, and more, making them superfoods. However, in Western civilizations they are only now just being added to menus. In fact, Whole Foods identified plant-based aquatic ingredients as one of its [top trends for 2025](#).

What’s more, since about 70% of the Earth is covered with water, sea vegetable aquaculture is viable in myriad locations on both the East and West coasts of the U.S.

For example, kelp farming requires no land, fresh water, or fertilizers and actually helps improve water quality by absorbing carbon dioxide and excess nutrients. As a result, seaweed and kelp have become favorites among eco-conscious chefs and diners alike, appearing in everything from kelp noodle salads to seaweed crisps, making it easy for consumers to enjoy a delicious, low-impact food source. Or consider featuring spirulina in smoothies, energy bars, or as a topping for vegan bowls. Use seaweed in sushi-inspired hors d’oeuvres or as a salty garnish for soups.

Algae and seaweed are also the main ingredients in many plant-based seafood alternatives, such as tuna, salmon, scallops, and [shrimp](#).

“We saw an opportunity to create unique and sustainable menu



Foie gras mousse and wine gelée on bruschetta with pomegranate seeds from Culinary Crafts. Photo courtesy Elisha Braitlwaite



Marinated Beef and Seaweed Salad. Photo courtesy Thomas Caterers of Distinction

## Organ meat

Organ meats are being touted as a superfood providing significant protein, vitamins, and minerals, leading diners to seek meat blends that combine traditional muscle meat like ground beef with organ meats, thus making it easier to enjoy the nutritional benefits without having to learn how to prepare liver, kidney, or heart.

Consider highlighting them in familiar dishes, such as [liver pâté](#), heart skewers, or bone marrow bruschetta.

## Insects

Though thought to be niche by some, insect protein is regularly consumed by more than two billion people in 80% of the countries in the world. However, insects have yet to make a dent in the palates of Americans.

“Here in the West, it is taboo to eat insects, but in many other countries, it is the norm,” says Schlissel.

However, the “taboo” nature of insects may be on its way out thanks to the emergence of insect powders and flours.

For example, cricket powder is made from crickets that are ground whole. The texture is like any kind of flour and the taste is rich—a little nutty, with a hint of earthy umami flavor and raw cocoa, which makes it very easy to slip into recipes.

“So many people go to the extreme when talking about eating something that they consider a pest,” said Joseph Yoon (Brooklyn Bugs) during a [webinar](#) on cooking with insects with the American Culinary Federation.

“There’s all these negative ideas that insects are the furthest thing from something you would actually want to put in your mouth, but we’re not talking about going into your backyard and catching some bugs—one of the fundamental things of cooking with insects is that it still has to taste good.”

Although there has been a learning

curve, insect protein alternatives are being used in a variety of ways. “Insects could cater to diverse dietary preferences and reduce the environmental impact of our operations,” says Charlie Schaffer (Schaffer LA). “Sustainable seafood alternatives, in particular, became a focus due to the alarming rates of [over-fishing and the need to preserve marine ecosystems](#). We were excited to challenge culinary norms and introduce our customers to new flavors and textures—our goal is to [create a menu](#) that is both innovative and environmentally responsible.”

## Thinking beyond the basics

Protein alternatives are not strictly reserved for plant-based options; there has been a rising interest in expanding the definition of “protein” to include a wide range of options.



recipe

## CRICKET HUMMUS

Recipe courtesy Kathleen Schaffer  
Photo courtesy Schaffer LA

ingredients

- 3 T roasted garlic
- 1 cup hempseed
- ½ cup sesame tahini
- ¼ cup fresh lemon juice
- ¼ cup extra virgin olive oil
- 4 T cricket powder (such as Akeita)
- 2 T sesame oil
- 1 cup water
- 3 T honey
- 1 tsp Sri Lankan roasted curry
- 1 tsp toasted cumin, ground
- 3 cups chickpeas

method

1. Hydrate the cricket powder with lemon juice in a food processor
2. Mix garlic, hempseed, tahini, extra virgin olive oil, and sesame oil in a robot coupe until a paste forms and the hempseed has been broken down to become smooth
3. Add remaining ingredients to robot coupe and mix until a smooth hummus forms
4. Chill to reserve



Root vegetable pavé with mushroom demi-glace. Photo courtesy Wolfgang Puck Catering/Lisette Gatliof

curve for Western consumers, creative branding and appealing products are helping normalize insect protein as a healthy and environmentally friendly choice.

Known for being high in protein, rich in essential nutrients, and highly sustainable, insects have become a popular choice for protein bars, pasta, muffins, cakes, crackers, and even chips. Or if you're feeling adventurous, incorporate whole roasted crickets as a garnish for salads or tacos, adding a crunchy element.

Not only do insects pack a protein punch; insect farming is also sustainable and a completely organic process. The world is looking at dwindling water supplies and insect cultivation can help with water conservation, especially when you consider it takes one gallon of water to make cricket protein and 2,000 gallons of water to make the same amount of beef protein.

Regarding greenhouse gases, crickets

***"I approach alternative proteins like any ingredient: layering flavors, enhancing texture through preparation techniques, and ensuring visual appeal with thoughtful plating."*** —Chef Jeffrey Schlissel

produce a mere 1% of what cows produce.

"Edible insects capture the interest and intrigue," says Yoon, "and insect agriculture connects us with a viable solution within global food systems."

### Beyond traditional beef

There have been several alternatives to traditional proteins that have emerged as of late (exotic meats such as wild boar, frog legs, ostrich, elk, and bison).

Consumer demand for new flavors and experiences coupled with the reality of rising costs for many

everyday proteins in some cases has elevated the introduction of less-common meats, poultry, and other animal-derived products.

We can expect more operators to go beyond standard beef, pork, poultry, and seafood to explore a wider variety of animal proteins, according to [Technomic](#).

### Blends and hybrids

Though still emerging, cultured meats and fermented proteins like mycoprotein (e.g., Quorn) add cutting-edge appeal.

Whereas blended products include

blends of plant-based meat and conventional meat, hybrid products are combinations of plant-based meat and cultivated meat. However, consumer acceptance of either type of product may be challenging; [surveys of consumer preferences](#) indicate that conventional meat products are perceived as tastier compared to alternative meats, including blended products.

"Within the industry, alternative proteins are niche, as many vegetarians or vegan diners don't want a protein that looks and acts like an animal protein and would rather have fresh local ingredients," says Drew Swanson (Wolfgang Puck Catering). "Sure, the interest in these alternative proteins comes from market demand, but I would encourage chefs to focus on vegetables and local, seasonal offerings."

Many of these hybrid products have

the potential to introduce cost-competitive versions of cultivated meat to the market while improving the taste of plant proteins.

"As these proteins become more mainstream, I see them being an integral part of our menu, providing more options for our customers while maintaining our culinary standards," says Matthews.

### Integrating into menus

The reality is that not every audience will embrace exotic meats, nor will they entirely welcome plants as a main or first course, so that's why menu development is such a crucial first step.

It starts with first understanding the protein's characteristics—its flavor profile, texture, mouth feel, etc.—then it's time to consider cooking

methods, versatility, and customer appeal.

"The key is in the preparation and pairing," says Matthews. "We've developed methods to cook alternative proteins in a way that enhances their natural flavor and texture, like marinating or adding specific seasonings."

Maybe you want to use these alternative proteins in a familiar classic, such as serving a cricket-flour brownie with vanilla ice cream which will feel approachable. Or maybe you want to give alternative proteins a starring role rather than hiding them. For instance, a lentil and beet "steak" can be plated beautifully to rival any traditional dish.

"I approach alternative proteins like any ingredient: layering flavors, enhancing texture through preparation techniques, and ensuring visual appeal with thoughtful plating," says Schlissel.

### Navigating costs

For most foodservice operations, protein is the ingredient with the highest food costs—and the most volatile pricing. Shortages and market fluctuations, whether seasonal or circumstantial, can make profitability and consistency challenging—especially when it's not possible to adjust menu prices. This is particularly true of premium proteins such as beef.

Alternative proteins can offer a solution to this challenge since they can help diversify the menu and reduce dependency on traditional meats, especially as sourcing conventional proteins becomes more expensive and supply chains fluctuate. They can provide a more consistent price point, reducing some of the uncertainty in the supply chain. Plus, alternative proteins often require less land and water to produce, making them more resilient to supply chain disruptions. However,

availability and sourcing could still pose challenges.

While some alternative proteins, like organ meats, are cost-effective, others, such as algae or lab-grown products, can strain budgets.

"We've found that while alternative proteins can sometimes be more expensive upfront, we can manage costs through careful portion control, creative menu design, and balancing them with more affordable ingredients," says Matthews.

Schaffer adds that he also helps manage costs by "integrating them into high-margin dishes and using them in creative ways."

## Breaking barriers

While cost may be prohibitive to integrating alternative proteins into menus, the real challenge is breaking through customer perceptions.

Convincing clients to embrace alternative proteins can be a challenge, as these foods often carry stereotypes of being unappetizing or overly niche.

"Resistance often comes from misconceptions about taste or nutrition," says Schlissel, "but most customers are curious and open-minded, especially when the focus is on creating delicious, approachable dishes."

Educate customers about the products by including brief descriptions about the alternative protein used in a dish or share the compelling backstories of these proteins. Highlight their cultural significance, sustainability, and health benefits. Clients often respond positively to foods with a purpose. Or offer samples of something to break through preconceived ideas of what a dish may taste like. Also, make sure to account for those customers who just aren't adventurous, offering alternative proteins alongside traditional options.



Aged Pekin duck wood-roasted on the bone, quandong, and dried liver from Brae. Photo courtesy Colin Page



This Braised Lentil & Vegetable Shepherd's Pie features russet mashed potatoes, carrots, celery, bourbon, green lentil du puy, portobello mushrooms, and peas. Photo courtesy Idaho Potato Commission

As awareness of alternative proteins grows, they are poised to become staples rather than novelties.

Alternative proteins represent more than a trend—they are a shift toward a more sustainable and inclusive food future.

"Our journey has been one of discovery and innovation," says Schaffer. "Incorporating alternative proteins has not only allowed us to create exciting new dishes but has

also deepened our commitment to sustainability and responsible dining."

So, whether it's a cricket-enriched canapé or an algae-infused smoothie, now is the time to embrace the protein revolution.

"Start with curiosity, experiment without bias, and focus on flavor first," says Schlissel. **CS**

STEAL THIS

Fresh ideas to use or adapt at your next event

# Pleasant Picnics

Picnics mark the intersection of artful outdoor dining and the elegance of catering. From charming garden setups to rustic countryside spreads, picnics offer a wonderful occasion for a memorable summer. Alongside the food, caterers frequently provide extras such as blankets, stylish table settings, and even decorative elements to enhance the ambiance. Whether it's a corporate event, a romantic celebration, or a casual gathering with friends, every picnic captures the blend of delicious food, thoughtful presentation, and the joy of dining under the open sky. Check out these perfectly presented picnics for inspiration for your next al fresco affair. **ES** —Amber Kispert



Andrea Correale with Elegant Affairs says packing the perfect picnic features traditional bites with a creative spin | Photo courtesy Elegant Affairs



(Left) Picnic style grazing board | Photo courtesy Aussie Beef & Lamb; (Below) Oasis Picnics specializes in creating picture-perfect, luxury pop-up picnics on the island of Oahu | Photo courtesy Greg Noir; (Bottom right) This Spring Party features Teacup Charcuterie, White Chocolate Cheese Pops, Gazpacho Shots, Butter Cups, Smörgåstårter (Swedish Sandwich Cake) and Frosted Cookie Cups | Photo courtesy California Milk Advisory Board



Crudites platter, pepperoni pizza, and raspberry cheesecake | Photo courtesy Entertainment Events & Catering



For 30+ years, Tasty Catering has been creating delicious custom picnic menus featuring a variety of delicious options including favorites like grilled-to-order burgers and their 18-hour smoked brisket | Photo courtesy Tasty Catering



Red Onion Tarts | Photo courtesy Kemp and Kemp Catering



Nothing beats an icy-cold popsicle when the summer sun is blazing during al-fresco events | Photo courtesy Culinary Crafts



ON TREND

A helium balloon performer lifts into the air at an event by M&A DMC. Photo courtesy Brian Dennehy.

# A New Era

## IN EVENT ENTERTAINMENT



SPECIAL EVENTS SPRING 2025

## Exciting new trends to incorporate into your events this year

By Amanda Nicklaus

If there's one word to sum up the way events changed after the pandemic, it's *immersive*. We've seen the ways that attendees crave exciting, interactive experiences that completely engulf them in another world for the duration of an event. Driving that immersive experience is event entertainment.

"Stand-alone live entertainment has become a bit passé," observes Sebastian Centner (Entertainment Events & Catering), "and it is now moving toward live entertainment that is more interactive or has more elements like integration of food items or immersive environments. Guests no longer want to be passive observers—they want to engage, and they want to feel transported." Today's events are wrapped in a variety of eye-catching, total-sensory features, giving attendees an experience that engages them from the second they step through the door to the moment they pack up their party favors. Here's how you can use the latest entertainment trends to delight your attendees.

### Musical endeavors

One of the most obvious forms of event entertainment is music, but if you're imagining a simple DJ set in the background, think again. Live music is back in a big way, and today's entertainers provide unique, interactive experiences—stepping off the stage to interact with guests, roaming through the venue with instrument in hand, even customizing the playlist to fit



An electric violinist hyped up the crowd that gathered for the Opening General Session at Catersource + The Special Event 2025. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions/SpotMyPhotos

the guests' specific taste—which sometimes means adjusting the music on the fly. "Customization is a big deal," says Craig Peterman (Craig Peterman Photography & Videography). "Couples want live bands to reflect their personalities, so you'll see a band transition from playing a classic Sinatra tune during cocktail

hour to a high-energy Bruno Mars dance set at the reception. The ability to adapt to the crowd has become a key selling point." Many event planners even provide surprise and delight by bringing in top-tier headliners that remain secret until their performance begins. As far as the performers themselves? "I'm seeing an increase

SPECIAL EVENTS SPRING 2025



## ON TREND

in large bands with 10 to 15 members," says Nicole Chan (Nicole Chan Photo & Video). Larger bands make a statement and increase the energy.

So do unexpected musical pairings. "Think electric violinists performing with house DJs or saxophonists adding a live element to a club-style atmosphere," says Centner.

Classic music is also back in style. Vijay Goel (440 Elm) notes, "We are seeing more of a throwback to music that would have been played in the clubs in the 20s-50s—jazz, singers, bands—more acoustic and more of a focus on elegance and classics."

It's not just throwbacks, however; cultural fusion is also on the rise, combining musical styles from around the world. Finally, weddings commonly see officiants doing double duty as emcees, guiding the event from one portion of the night to the next.

As far as visual performances, aerial balloon dancers, who perform suspended in the sky lifted by helium balloons, are also on the rise (no pun intended).

Interactive music and stunning visual performances can bring the event to life and increase engagement with guests.

## Captivating food & beverage

One aspect of events that has grown increasingly entertaining is food and beverage. Much of the general population identifies as a "foodie," a term that these days largely has to do with being a "food hobbyist," as an article from *Tasting Table* puts it. What this translates to in the world of events is attendees who expect to be **wowed at every turn**, presented

with highly creative or even obscure food offerings, proffered in the most interactive ways.

Indeed, **immersive dining** is on every caterer's mind, engaging all five senses of the diner. Menus are tied into larger event themes, catering staff costumed and playing the part. "We're seeing more creative passed apps and station experiences, including smoke, dry ice, sparklers, and **sensory elements**," says Goel.

"Dining is no longer just about eating—it's about experiencing," says Centner. "Guests want meals to be an extension of the event theme, and interactive food stations, tableside presentations, and chef-led culinary experiences are taking center stage.

"At **Eaterertainment**, we often incorporate performance elements into dining, whether it's a chef smoking mushrooms in front of guests or a cocktail mixologist creating personalized drinks with molecular elements. People love food that engages their senses beyond taste alone."



Roaming food stations and **theatrical action stations** incorporate F&B throughout the entirety of the event. "I photograph many multicultural Asian weddings, and I've seen bubble tea bars becoming increasingly popular," notes Chan. "Guests love the experience of making their own bubble tea and adding custom toppings like lychee jelly, coconut jelly, and black sesame boba. Custom fortune cookies have also been a fun and personal touch at these weddings."

(Clockwise starting at top left) A saxophone brought style to an 8-piece band at the 2025 Opening Night Party. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc/SpotMyPhotos; In their session *Pop Culture's Influence on the Industry*, Miro Diamanté, DMCP and Kate Patay noted the up-and-coming popularity of synchronized swimmers as event entertainment. In this photo: swimmers at an event by Cirque Berzerk. Photo courtesy Ptaufiq Photography; Glow-in-the-dark popcorn wowed attendees at the Opening Night Party. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc/SpotMyPhotos; A wine trike by Cirque Mechanics served attendees with dramatic flair at this year's Closing Night Celebration. Photo courtesy Ivan Piedra Photography/AGNYC Productions Inc/SpotMyPhotos



## ON TREND

### The cost of being entertained

Going all-out with entertainment is one thing, but your client's budget might be another. How much can you justify incorporating the latest and greatest entertainment? Turns out, a lot. Instead of viewing top-tier entertainment as a cost, it can be beneficial to view it as an investment into both the event and your brand.

"The return is in engagement. The right entertainment can make an event unforgettable, increase brand impact, and enhance guest satisfaction," Centner says. "The key is prioritizing entertainment that aligns with the event's goals and delivers the best value for the experience. These types of additional costs are sometimes offset by savings too."

For most planners, the benefits are worth the cost, and in today's climate, where clients want their event to be more memorable and photo-worthy than their neighbors', it's easy to see the ways that paying a little more has exponential impact on the event's outcome.

"Ultimately, these trends can be worth the extra cost if they align with the event's goals and the client's vision, enhancing the overall experience and leaving a lasting impression on attendees," says York. "However, it's important to plan and budget carefully to ensure the investment delivers the desired impact."

If, however, the budget really doesn't allow for the latest wow-factors, there are workarounds. "Not everything needs to be over-the-top or come with a high price tag," says York. "While the latest tech trends are exciting, there's also a resurgence of budget-friendly



Tianyu Arts & Culture is known for their installations of intricate lantern sculptures, which tell a story and engage event goers. Photo courtesy Melissa Blackall.

options that are just as impactful. A single themed character, a talented DJ, or interactive activities like trivia can make a big difference without breaking the budget."

### Do your research

Before you go and hire a 15-piece band, there are a few things to consider when incorporating these entertainment trends into your events.

First, make sure your audience will resonate with the trends. "Understand the event's goals and the client's expectations," says York. "Communicate this clearly to the performers or entertainment team to ensure everyone is on the same page."

**"The future of event entertainment is all about engagement, personalization, and storytelling."**

—Sebastien Centner



A show projected onto PG&E Substation J, a historic San Francisco landmark. Event by and photo courtesy A3 Visual.

He also encourages asking plenty of questions when working with entertainment you're not totally familiar with. "It's important to gather as much information as possible to understand the entertainment thoroughly." This means identifying limitations early in the process. "Be sure to discuss any venue limitations, restrictions, or other factors that could affect the performance. Information is key to ensuring everything runs smoothly."

(Side note: **unique venues** are on the rise and can offer a form of entertainment in themselves.)

You don't have to do everything yourself, though. When adding in high-tech or unique entertainment, it's beneficial to bring in the experts.

"It's important to work with professionals who understand their craft and can guide you through the process," encourages Peterman. "If a live band is new territory, ask for a live demo or attend one of their public gigs to get a feel for their energy."

York agrees. "Whether it's performers, tech specialists, or

vendors—get the most accurate and relevant information. Their expertise can help you make informed decisions."

When bringing in extra vendors, you're going to need heightened transparency and communication. You'll also likely need to work together to run extra rehearsals. "The more elaborate the entertainment the more important the preparation, rehearsing, and testing. You'll only get one chance once the performance starts," reminds Centner. This means making sure that the entertainment "aligns with the overall event flow; it should feel seamless, not forced."

Finally, stick to the **event theme**. "We would generally suggest picking things that work into a major theme rather than trying to put together a grab bag of things," recommends Goel. "The most interesting entertainment we saw this past year was a wedding we did at the Hollywood Palladium, where the officiant was a magician and was paired with an event producer to create a production around the wedding vows. Vows

were lit on fire; vows triggered thunder and lightning; vows flew into the sky on a wire...it was really something that turned speeches into a performative experience that showed some fun interactions of the couple and shared their story in a dramatic experience. It was really next-level and authentic while being over the top!"

### Keep it novel

Today's attendees want to be surprised, delighted, and wowed—meaning novelty and experimentation can go a long way in your events this year.

"Entertainment is becoming more experimental, mixing various art forms and performance styles in ways that surprise and engage," says York. "These performances often push boundaries and challenge expectations."

Gone are the days of one or two standard performances. In 2025, events offer a chance for attendees to experience culture, artforms, and technology they wouldn't otherwise experience. Events should leave them with more than memories; they should inspire conversation and critical thinking.

"Event entertainment is no longer just an add-on—it's a key component of the guest experience," says Centner. "Whether through live performances, immersive tech, or interactive food and beverage experiences, entertainment should create emotional connections."

"The most successful events are the ones where entertainment feels like an organic part of the experience, rather than just a scheduled segment. The future of event entertainment is all about engagement, personalization, and storytelling." **SE**

# THE TOUGH SUBJECT OF TASTINGS

A look at the sticky points of this necessary but controversial event factor

By Amanda Nicklaus

There are plenty of event aspects that bring people together, but no topic is as divisive as **tastings**. Tastings are controversial—industry pros have strong feelings about how they should be done, akin to how opinionated Southerners are about **the right way to barbecue**. Rather than let the walls stay up on this topic, it's important to understand the complexities and mixed feelings of this necessary part of event success. Behold, the hot topic of tastings.

## Who wants them

An opportunity for clients to taste a caterer's menu offerings before an event, tastings play a huge role in weddings, but they're not limited to this one type of affair.

"All events can benefit from a tasting experience, from weddings and social events to non-profit galas to conferences and expos," says Jamie Chang (Mango Muse Events).

Mango Muse Events' Southeast Asian fusion family-style meal. Photo courtesy Mango Muse Events

Event planner Penny Haas (Penny Haas, LLC) agrees. "I've sat in on tastings for holiday parties, nonprofit events with committees, and black-tie awards functions. At a certain level of experience and price point, a tasting is a great idea to understand style, presentation, and flavor."

Tastings allow the planner and caterer to lock in details of the event and sell the client on various offerings, giving both parties the chance to upsell services and minimize mistakes.

Indeed, the more intense the event, the more consequential a tasting will be. "It's often important for high-stakes corporate events that the items and presentation are a good fit with the other elements of the event," says Vijay Goel (Bite Catering Couture). "We tend to see them for branded experiential events, brand sampling, Michelin-level plated events for brand launches or VIPs, and sales/partner events for high-level producers."

## The plus sides

No matter the event type, tastings can offer benefits that increase the event's success. They prepare the caterer for menu modifications, let the client in on the sustainability and service approaches, and give the planner a feel for the caterer's process. It's essentially a test run of the event's F&B portion, helping the client better visualize the details so they can make more certain decisions.

"As tastings usually take a few hours, it's also a great chance to speak with the catering team and discuss the goals of the event to see if or make sure you're on the same page," says Chang.

"Another great thing to do at the tasting is request that a beverage director or sommelier is available," adds Juls Sharpley (Juls Sharpley Events). "If the caterer does not have an in-house sommelier, then bringing in a sommelier advisor is strongly encouraged, especially for clients with sophisticated wine knowledge and discerning palates. This is a great opportunity to discuss the specific foods and any great pairings, as well as curate custom cocktails."

Tastings let event pros flesh out the event's F&B to a T, brainstorming and strategizing every option early on for better success later. Whether you're an event planner or a caterer, tastings are a way to improve your chances of achieving event goals.

## The conflict: Planner POV

The benefits of tastings are easy to see—so what's the problem? There are a few factors that event pros

disagree on, and these disagreements often seem to pit planner against caterer. It's an intricate dance, and toes can easily get stepped on when caterers' and planners' perspectives clash.

Talk to any planner: they'll swap stories and share common frustrations about the way a caterer has handled a tasting in the past.

"Some common frustrations when discussing tastings will be if the chef changes, the menu changes, or special requests are not noted," says Haas. "I've worked with caterers who helped with this experience by adding notes to event orders, honoring the previous menu depending on the booking window, and helping by taking pictures from the tasting in case there is any update to the culinary team."

Another common occurrence: excluding the planner from the tasting. "I think one of the most frustrating parts of tastings (sometimes) is if they don't include feeding the planner," says Loni Peterson, MLS (LP Creative Events). "We are here to help guide, make suggestions, and use our years of experience to weigh in on food quality, taste, and event day large-scale execution. It is really hard for us to do that if we aren't also enjoying the meal."

This is especially true for luxury clients, who become extremely close with their planner during the planning process. During her keynote session *The Ol' Razzle Dazzle* at Catersource + The Special Event 2023, Marcy Blum (Marcy Blum Associates) discussed the reality of the luxury client-planner relationship, explaining how the client is often attached at the hip of the planner, sharing their goals and personality and trusting the planner to make the right decisions with that information. "Impress the planner first and foremost, we are the gatekeepers. Sorry, that's how it's going."

Other frustrations include when caterers don't provide printed menu offerings for the client to look at, don't check in with the client and planner at each course, or can't communicate well about customizing menus. "Some chefs are shy and uncomfortable chatting it up with clients," says Sharpley, "so when it comes to conversing about what they liked and what they might want to change, or what other ideas they could explore, if the chef isn't great at handling that, then we really like it when there is someone on their team who can be present to be the hype person and help communicate with the chef."

Planners know their client well, and they are the ultimate orchestrator of the event, so being out of the loop in any aspect of the tasting makes it difficult to work well.

"Planners often experience frustration when caterers are inflexible or unprepared, or when tastings run off track due to unclear goals," says Lisa Costantini, the Director



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of Events & Catering at [Eatertainment](#) Events & Catering. “A structured approach with a clear agenda, alignment on guest preferences, and open communication ensures everyone is on the same page and the tasting is efficient and productive.”

### The conflict: Caterer POV

Likewise, caterers experience equal frustration with how some planners operate within tastings. From withholding important client information to placing unrealistic expectations upon the caterer, there can be major hesitation on the caterer’s side when it comes to working with a planner during a tasting.

“I am fortunate enough to have played both parts in a tasting, so I feel I have learned the dos and don’ts from both sides!” says Costantini. “Caterers can sometimes find planners overly involved in minor details or attempting to dictate the culinary process. While this is solely meant to help, it can actually hinder creativity and slow down the process.”

At [Catersource + The Special Event 2024](#), Robin Selden (Marcia Selden Catering & Events\*; Naked Fig Catering) shared a horror story of a high-profile luxury wedding she was doing a tasting for where the planner had withheld information about the couple’s dietary restrictions—leading to an alarming moment involving an EpiPen, and ultimately a lost deal. She insists that caterers need to have direct communication with clients, even if there are NDAs involved. Planners can act as a connector and advocate for both the client and the caterer, making sure the caterer is receiving all imperative information, and the client can ask all the questions and give all the input they need to set the caterer—and ultimately the entire event—up for success.

It’s not just micromanagement that irks caterers; often, planners don’t have a clear grasp of the logistics.

“Planners should know that tastings are substantially more resource-intensive than they look,” emphasizes Goel. “The preparation for a tasting of four people may not be too different from what would be required for a 30-person event due to the number of items on the menu, special techniques involved, and order minimums for specific items. Believing the work scales on a per-person basis can create unreasonable expectations.

“Planners should also make sure they refresh themselves on design limitations that have been incorporated. Sometimes, the requirements of the site or the guests will change the way the item is prepared or presented in a way that is less familiar to what they’re used to. Planners can make sure they check in with the caterer ahead of time, review the plan, make sure it makes



Group tastings are becoming increasingly popular among caterers (including The JDC Group). Photo courtesy Philter Photography

**“When planners and caterers collaborate, it creates a seamless experience for the client.”**

—Lisa Costantini, [Eatertainment](#) Events & Catering



*Sip, Savor, and Slice: Crafting Unforgettable Tastings for Wedding Catering* session from [Catersource + The Special Event 2024](#)



Black & White theme station at a winter tasting event by [Chowgirls Catering](#). Photo courtesy Lucas Betz

sense given any other changes to the event, and help communicate with the caterer what they need to do to win the event, so expectations are aligned.”

Any good relationship relies on trust, and with tastings, it’s best for planners to step back and trust the caterer with the process, positioning themselves as moderators between the caterer and client.

This doesn’t necessarily mean that the planner should be passive. In fact, Jeffrey Selden (Marcia Selden Catering) said in the same CS+TSE 2024 session *Sip, Savor, and Slice: Crafting Unforgettable Tastings for Wedding Catering*, “A lot of planners, I don’t know how you feel about this, but I feel like there’s a right client for the right vendor... the best planners are the ones that can convince their clients of, ‘Hey you really need to be with this vendor, caterer, cake baker, if you decide that they’re the right match for you.’” Having no opinion as a planner and just shopping around with the client is not helpful. “Please, please be a planner with an opinion.”

### Us vs. the problem, not me vs. you

From an objective perspective, what these frustrations boil down to is a lack of communication between planners and caterers regarding tastings.

Most planners and caterers do agree that it is more than beneficial to work together. The issue isn’t a lack of desire to collaborate as much as it is a problem of miscommunication.

“Transparency is probably the most important for good communication between the caterer and the planner,” says Chang. “Being honest about the goals, expectations, and challenges/concerns and discussing those between parties leads to better solutions and means no one is caught off guard.”

Costantini agrees. “Planners can foster success by facilitating clear communication between clients and caterers, managing expectations, and allowing the chef to present their expertise while ensuring the client’s vision is honored.” She adds, “Collaboration can include pre-tasting meetings to discuss goals and providing consolidated feedback afterward to avoid conflicting messages.”

When it comes to tastings, there is no such thing as overcommunication. “Both caterer and planner should take and compare detailed menu notes and photos,” says Haas. “Proper organization and communication will set each party up for success. Good communication with the client could include any special menu requests in advance, an idea of food allergies, and honest conversations about menu profiles, what you like/dislike, and what your favorite food items are.”



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Blum recommends having pre-tastings, where planners can bring in the clients' ideas ahead of time, working together with caterers before a tasting to get on the same page, so it will be exciting and seamless.

If you're working in luxury, planners should include client branding (such as monogrammed linens) for the tasting, along with floral arrangements, coasters, live music—everything you can do to make it feel like the event itself with a glimpse into the main event on the horizon. Blum encourages treating tastings not just as a selling event, but as selling a long-term relationship. Planners and caterers can even work together to create elegant, fun take-home gifts and thank you notes for the client, making them even more excited to be working with you.

Planners should also prep clients ahead of the tasting, making sure they know what to expect and how to behave. Goel says, "We would treat the tasting as an event with goals and a few priorities to ensure success. The planner needs to ensure that the client is committed to showing up on time so they can appropriately evaluate the event as planned."

Put everything in writing, share goals and expectations, and update each other constantly to ensure that both caterer and planner are on the same page and that nobody is left in the dark.

### A sticky point—complimentary or charged?

A huge point of contention is **whether to charge for tastings**. Many planners feel it should be a complimentary service, with the caveat that this depends on what stage of planning the client is at.

"It's hard to say as a planner, but a complimentary tasting is a service and an exciting part of the planning process for a couple," says Haas. "Catering is a big part of the budget, so couples and clients want to make sure they are satisfied with what they are eating. I do think if a complimentary tasting were offered, it should definitely be after a client books the caterer."

Most caterers feel that tastings are a service with a cost and should therefore be charged. "Generally, a tasting for a client-specific menu should be charged (potentially with a credit card on booking)," says Goel. "A free tasting often sets the wrong expectation; you're asking the caterer to put together a special event so that you can evaluate their capabilities, product, and service. It's not a casual night out."

It's a bit of a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma; do you offer a complimentary tasting to win over a client, or do you only

offer a complimentary tasting once the client has chosen the caterer and are therefore guaranteed money down the line? Most planners seem to agree that no caterer should be asked to provide a completely free service, footing the bill themselves, but that a complimentary tasting should only be considered once the client has signed on with the caterer.

If you do go the complimentary route, then it is necessary to place strong restrictions on what is provided, easing the burden on the caterer. Chang says, "There can be parameters around that (number of people, number of dishes, etc.) and anything requested outside of those parameters comes with an extra cost. But once again, if charging a reasonable price for a tasting is necessary for business reasons, I think that's fair."

Plus—who's to say that a complimentary tasting can't be made up to the caterer down the line? Sharpley offers a compromise: "This is totally up to the caterer .... But the caterer, if not 'charging' specifically for a tasting, should have a way that it is bundled into their pricing."

Blum is of the mindset that tasting on spec is necessary. "You have to spend money to make money." Even then, some caterers still insist that charging on spec is necessary.

Whatever route you take, make sure you, the caterer, and the client are all in agreement right away.

"At **Eatertainment** we like to include tastings as a complimentary service for our clients; but speaking industry standard—it depends on the event size and client relationship," shares Costantini. "For large-scale weddings or corporate contracts, tastings are often complimentary or absorbed into the overall budget. For smaller or custom events, a tasting fee is reasonable. Transparency upfront is key to avoiding misunderstandings."

Opposite page, top row from left to right: Pancetta-wrapped sea bass on polenta Margo Muse Events. Photo courtesy Sabine Scherer Photography; A tasting plate from Daniel et Daniel. Photo courtesy Karen O'Connor; A sample menu from a group tasting. Photo courtesy The JDK Group

Middle row: Best Indian Weddings impresses with a peeled tomato stuffed with Italian burrata, served on a base of gazpacho, extra virgin olive oil, and fresh bitter herbs. Photo courtesy Francesco Garuffi of Best Indian Weddings Italy; Winter Break and Cranberry Sauced cocktails by Chowgirls Catering. Photo courtesy Luca Botz; A dessert by Best Indian Weddings made of coffee cream, eggnog, and crumbled biscuits. Photo courtesy Francesco Garuffi of Best Indian Weddings Italy

Bottom row: Sweet Bite Tasting. Photo courtesy Elue Plate Catering; Watermelon salad with feta cheese, blackberries, and a balsamic reduction from Daniel et Daniel. Photo courtesy Karen O'Connor; A locally sourced Idaho farm-to-table summer salad by Margo Muse Events. Photo courtesy Christine Maria Photo

