

# GOOD TO KNOW

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## MENU

## PLANNING

Strategies to elevate your culinary game

by Dick Snyder

**Everyone's a foodie these days.** And that means the success of a corporate or business event can very well come down to what's on the table, or bar. A thoughtfully designed menu is about more than just feeding people, it's about crafting a memorable and impactful experience. Sounds daunting? It's not. But it takes time and, more importantly, a collaborative partnership with open communication between planner and caterer. We asked some experts about their recipes for meal-planning success.

### BE STRATEGIC

"There are a lot of things that are going to happen at the event, but one thing people will definitely remember, especially if it's really good or not good, is the food," says Sebastien Centner, whose 30-year-old Toronto-based company, Eatertainment, executes 1,800 events a year. Strategic menu planning should work in lockstep with the event's objectives, guest preferences and desired ambiance. Consider the following essential elements:

**Choice:** Menus must cater to diverse tastes and dietary needs, which might include vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, halal, kosher and allergy-conscious options. Centner notes that up to 50% of his menus are vegan, with options for gluten-free and other highly specific needs.

**Seasonal and local:** Especially for destination events, guests expect seasonal dishes that celebrate local ingredients, says Merina Chandra, special events director at the Fairmont Pacific Rim hotel in Vancouver. "Being on the West Coast, we see so much beautiful shellfish and wild salmon so we can play off of those features that you don't get anywhere else in the world."

**Creativity:** Reflecting food trends and offering creative presentations is essential. "Twenty years ago you could get away with spring rolls, chicken skewers with peanut sauce and bruschetta," Centner says. Not anymore. "I remember one of the first items I came up with—a smoked salmon lollipop—and people lost their mind," he says. →

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### BUDGET WISELY

Establishing a realistic budget is crucial. This requires an honest discussion around costs. Start with a per-guest rate that you are comfortable with—you can always go up or down. “Give your caterer a budget,” says Centner. “I guarantee they’re not going to look at that budget and be like, ‘We could have come in for less.’ What they’re going to do is make sure they give you as much value as they can for what you can afford.” But he warns: “It’s easy to estimate low and then bill extra.” This is why it’s imperative that you ask questions and push back if something is not clear. If you don’t feel comfortable with what you are hearing, find another partner.

### VIBE WITH THE EVENT’S GOALS

The event’s style must align with the menu. Considerations include speeches, awards, performers, special guest appearances—and all of these must work logically with the food and beverage service. With this information, your caterer can design the ideal serving style, be it cocktail reception with passed canapés and food stations, or a sit-down dinner. Cultural considerations might include specific activities, as well. The more the caterer understands the intent of the event, the closer they can get to delivering an ideal experience.

### GET YOUR QUANTITIES RIGHT

Accurately estimating how much food and drink is needed hinges on a precise guest count, guest demographics, timing of the event and even seasonality. Underestimating the head count is a recipe for disaster. Expect to deliver final

numbers at least a week ahead of the event. “We can always go up,” Centner says, “but we can’t go down.” Flexibility is key: You want a caterer that can quickly execute additional dishes if extra food is needed. Nobody likes to see empty food stations; on the other hand, food lying around sends a bad message. Many caterers work with charities to ensure leftovers go to those in need.

### TALK IT OUT

Clear discussions about timelines, event flow, guest count, budget and venue are crucial. At the Fairmont Pacific Rim, Chandra and her team spend considerable time upfront talking with clients to understand every aspect of the event so they can build a realistic flow. “It’s so important to build a really good rapport and relationship with the client,” she says, “so that they trust you implicitly.” 🍷