



Choosing a caterer for your really special event

How do you choose a caterer for a momentous private party or major corporate event? Julian Saipe, managing director of London top-end party caterer Zafferano, offers some pithy practical advice.

So you've made your decision: you're planning a private party or a major corporate event that you want to be really special, full of excitement, spectacle and fun, with great food and drinks; a truly unforgettable occasion. You're probably going to be spending anything from £50-£200 per person and inviting at least a hundred people.

In fact, many flamboyant private parties and lavish corporate receptions or dinners will have far more guests than this. But once you cross the £50/100 guest threshold, you're moving into territory where it's likely to make sense for you to consider using a top-end

caterer to provide the food and drink.

But not just the food and drink. There's an increasingly strong argument for using the caterer to organise the event for you, too.

Why? Simply because there's so much to plan, organise and get right. Sir Rocco Forte says that a luxury hotel is basically 'an accident waiting to happen' because so many things can potentially go wrong. The same is also true of throwing a special party.

A really good caterer can take all that worry and concern off your shoulders. They'll provide eternally memorable food and drink, or should do. They'll organise



everything else: elegant and charming staff, sparkling glassware, exquisite flowers and they'll furnish the event with everything you need to wow your guests. They'll also help you plan the entire theme or experience of the occasion, and will give you input from their experts who have the know-how, energy and contacts to turn your dream into a wonderful reality.

In practice, most people planning an important event or party do choose to work with a caterer who has experience of catering for and organising a really special event. But how exactly do you go about choosing this caterer for your really special, even once-in-a-lifetime occasion?

After all, the last thing you want is for anything to go wrong. No amount of apology or even compensation is ever going to make up for a shattered dream. So getting the choice of caterer right is essential.

Here are my suggestions for getting the choice of caterer absolutely right.

Firstly, make the food and drink the starting point. After all, the quality of what your guests will be eating and drinking, and the inspiration behind the menu and drink choices, will be at the core of the experience you provide for your guests. If ever there was ever a case where the proof of the pudding (or the canapé) is in the eating, it's now.

So, vital tip: make sure you actually get the opportunity to taste examples of the caterer's work – it has to be delicious and beautifully presented! Very often, a caterer will be more than happy to arrange a tasting for you, but make sure they can replicate the same quality at the event itself. You are probably better off actually sampling food and drink at an event the caterer is organising. It's usually possible to attend an event and have the opportunity to sample some fabulous (hopefully!) canapés and cocktails.

And if top quality is what you're looking for - you'll want food and drink ideas and realisations that will combine inventiveness with exquisite presentation, and also be enthused with integrity and common sense. For example, you don't want canapés that are so fussy and unusual your guests are going to feel guilty about biting into them - or wonder what's going to happen if they do.

You also need a caterer who has a truly practical knowledge of how substantial the food should be. If, for example, you're asking your caterer to cater for a two-hour early-evening book-

launch party for a celebrity author, canapés will very likely be fine. But if your guests will be spending three or four hours of the evening at a special reception, they're going to need the equivalent of a meal: so bowl food, mini suppers, or food stalls should be complementing the canapés.

Again, the secret is to expect your caterer to be completely familiar with all the options and to explain not only what they're recommending for you, but also why they're making those recommendations.

Secondly, you need to assess the caterer's reputation. You can often gain extremely valuable information about a particular caterer's performance by talking to friends, acquaintances or business contacts who have experience of using top-end caterers. But you need to make sure you investigate your candidate caterer's reputation yourself.

How do you do this? Basically by assessing them from the very first moment you make contact. Even an apparently minor detail such as if they let the phone ring many times before they actually answer isn't going to be a good sign; will the phone be answered any more speedily if you appoint them to organise your party? Even more important, is their speed in this respect going to be an indication of how rapidly and efficiently the staff they supply for your event will move to refill guests' glasses?

Also, trust your gut instincts. This is an area of life where your emotional response to a candidate is as important

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as your logical response, if not even more so. Do you feel in the way they're talking to you that they a) really have a feeling for what you want? b) really care about making your party or corporate event a huge success? c) sound or seem like the kind of people to whom you're confident to entrust your dreams?

Which brings me to the third point: assessing a caterer's creativity.

Organising a really amazing party or corporate event is anything but a pedestrian task. It requires – apart from anything else – a real love of throwing a party.

How do you assess the quality of a caterer's creativity? My advice is to tell them what you're looking for and see what ideas they come up with. There's nothing unethical about this. It's perfectly reasonable to have an exploratory conversation with them to find out what ideas they have and to see whether their ideas really hit you where it matters: in your heart.

If you're going to ask the caterer to prepare a detailed proposal for your event, that's another matter and it's really only fair to ask them to do that if you're pretty serious about working with them. But feel free to sample the buzz of their creativity just as you're going to want to sample the taste of their food and drink.

Fourthly, find out as much as you can about the staff they'll be supplying to your special event. You need to choose a caterer who's able to supply you with plenty of quality staff to make your party all it should be.



I don't recommend you try to economise on staff numbers, either. Nothing's worse than a party where debris isn't cleared away promptly, or where guests are standing around with glasses that need re-filling. It really mustn't be like that.

Throwing parties is a kind of showbusiness, and a great party is like a really good show. I used to be an opera singer; one reason I chose to move into the catering industry is that I found myself enjoying the business of organising opera performances even more than singing at them.

You can't have a good show without a large and talented cast. Don't even economise on cloak room staff: you don't want your delightful party to begin with your guests having to queue up for ages to offload their coats at an inadequately-staffed cloakroom. And you also need enough taxi marshals at the end to prevent your party finishing with a queue of taxi-hungry guests.

Nor is it just a question of finding a caterer who can supply you with numbers of staff; your caterer needs to have access to experienced and dedicated staff who are expert at all the functions they'll be carrying out on the evening.

The staff the caterer supplies are in effect like actors: they need to look the part and they need to be there for your guests' convenience and pleasure. Too many caterers employ casual staff who don't have much real interest in what they are doing and are very possibly having a brief pit stop while backpacking around Europe.

The fifth tip is to choose a caterer who shows a real awareness of the logistical challenges attached to your planned event. If you're going to be holding your occasion at a leading London venue, say a Historic Royal Palace or a top art gallery, then ideally

your caterer will be familiar with catering for that venue and will know all the particular challenges relating to it.

Be suspicious of caterers who promise too much. The simple fact is that most of the best venues in London do have quite significant conditions attached to the catering in terms of how and where the cooking takes place, how late the event can go on for and even what kind of catering is permitted. It's essential that your caterer is familiar with all these points.

Even if you're going to be hosting the event at your home or at corporate premises, you should still expect your caterer to make a site visit and to give you the confidence that they understand both the limitations and potential of the venue. They need to be familiar with health and safety considerations too, and aware of any particular risks or challenges attached to a particular venue. For example, you probably aren't going to be able to bring a 10-foot high ice sculpture into an art gallery where there's a danger of the sharp points of the sculpture slicing through priceless art masterpieces as it's wheeled in.

Yes, some of this is common sense, but a lot of it is only the kind of knowledge that can be gained from real experience.

So, if you are invited to an event organised by your prospective caterer, don't just use it as a chance to sample the food and drink. Try to carry out an evaluation of everything the caterer's doing. How slickly is the event being run? Was your coat taken efficiently and politely to start with, without you having to queue for a long time? How polished does the organisation of the event seem? And make sure you take the opportunity to look at the (another show business term) back of house, too. Check out where the staff are waiting before going into the party areas. Are

JULIAN'S SIX-POINT PLAN FOR CHOOSING YOUR PERFECT CATERER

1. Check out the quality of their food and drink
2. Investigate their reputation
3. Assess their creativity
4. Find out about the staff they'll be supplying
5. Assess the caterer's experience of logistical factors
6. Expect cost issues to be transparent, but don't expect your dream event to cost you peanuts.

Julian Saipe is a former opera singer and managing director of party caterer Zafferano.
(Mobile) 07958 671373

they behaving professionally? Are they the kind of people you want at your event? These are the kinds of questions you should be asking.

Finally, the sixth point, cost. Best to be frank here. If your entire objective is to get the budget for your special party or major corporate event as low as possible, you might need to ask yourself just how special or major this occasion really is to you. Choosing a caterer for your really memorable event shouldn't be a question of trying to cut costs wherever you can. It really is true here, as in many other areas of life, that you get what you pay for.

That said, you're certainly entitled to expect that the costs you're presented with are genuinely transparent, particularly as a fair amount of them will inevitably be disbursements to suppliers your caterer will be paying directly. There will often be more of these suppliers than you might imagine: not only staff, but also people involved with sound, lighting, floristry, entertainment, and some provision will even need to be made for rubbish clearance at the end. Look for value for money; inevitably your special occasion is going to be expensive, but you're more than entitled to find out where the money's going to be spent and what you're going to get for it.

Overall, you want to find a caterer who conveys to you that they have real practical intelligence in what they do as well as a real love of throwing a party and a sincere devotion to making it special.

I'm not saying the selection process is easy; it isn't; but the beauty of the process is that once you have selected a caterer in whom you have complete confidence, you can let them get on with the business of organising the event while you get on with the business of looking forward to it.

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