



Misty's View: 7 Ways to Avoid Unscrupulous Caterers

To cook or get it catered, that is the question. Even the most adept foodies can wonder when to let someone else work the pans and when to tie on the apron and do it themselves. Here are some factors to consider when making the choice.

The nature of the occasion:

- ◆ Are your guests coming primarily to see you?
- ◆ Do you have other responsibilities during the event, such as child care or senior care?

The timing of the occasion:

- ◆ Are you working on the day of the event?
- ◆ Do you have to clean the house yourself before the party?
- ◆ Will you be racing the clock with other family-related jobs to do before food is even on your radar?

If you answered in the affirmative for most of these questions, you should begin the hunt for help now! But beware; the more desperate you are, the more vulnerable you can be.

1. Finding a good caterer can be difficult so **try to avoid letting your immediate need become an unscrupulous caterer's gain.** Some caterers will add a last-minute extra charge, as some other services do. I remember a sign I saw at a printer's desk that stated "Your lack of planning does not constitute an emergency for us." I paid for my lack of wisdom that day.

2. It is clearly better for all concerned to **have a game plan ahead of time.** Know your limitations, know your requirements and know what you can do for yourself; these are three key items to share with your potential chef for hire.

When I think of the people who come to my husband and me for catering, I always consider why they need our help and what we can do to help them. As a caterer, I cannot move forward until I know the answers to these simple questions.

How can I propose a menu of suggestions without knowing what my potential client needs and for what reasons? A sensitive family reunion, for example, with discordant culinary tastes or a multi-generational gathering that seeks to offer food to meet all palates cannot be handled with the faxing of a blanket catering menu.

3. **People really need catering menus to be customized.** Otherwise, they are getting in es-

sence, a large take-out job from a restaurant. Take-out can be great, but it is not always what one might want when facilitating a unique event, and from my experience all at-home events require a custom approach.

The word "custom" should not send visions of dollar signs through your mind. If you negotiate with your catering company, you should be able to move beyond their list of published menu items for no additional cost.

4. But first, get to know your caterer to determine whether they are only what they print in a menu or whether they are actually excellent chefs/food service facilitators; so **do your homework.** Often the best way to find someone credible is by word of mouth.

5. **Being able to think outside of the box should be the abiding norm for a catering chef.** Anybody you hire should have absolutely no problem making changes to the menu they presented to you. If they presented a rigid menu and are not willing to make any changes, then you might want to look elsewhere.

6. **Good chefs can always be flexible** because good chefs use fresh ingredients and make all of their products from scratch. The only food that cannot be altered is food that was pre-prepared, sourced from a supplier, or purchased from another source already made! You will want to steer clear of caterers who attempt to sell you food that someone else made since they are misrepresenting themselves and are actually just being middle men with a fee.

One of my biggest pet peeves is when a caterer claims to have a pastry chef on staff and then sells fancy desserts that they merely defrosted from a wholesale supplier. Or when supermarket lasagna with bottled dressing, store-bought croutons and the lowest quality Parmesan cheese, made from grating the rinds, is peddled as authentic Italian food that Mamma made! It happens all the time, so watch out.

7. **Above all, ask your caterer if everyone on staff has a Safe Food-handler's Certificate.**

Mishandled, improperly stored or reheated food can be lethal. You should think more about the safety of the food arriving at your door than whatever magical fare you ordered off a glitzy brochure. Fortunately, if you have certified chefs preparing the food they should be able to answer all of your important questions about the food they will be bringing to your home. Watch for imposters, do your homework, and make sure your caterers cook it right.

Misty Ingraham and Bill Sharpe of Ancaster own the catering business The Portable Feast at Home.