

Questions to Ask the Caterer



1. How will you handle last-minute requests?

It happens to the most careful couples: A whole family who didn't RSVP on time shows up anyway. Or the opposite: A handful of guests are MIA. Is your caterer prepared to adjust the food and the table setup accordingly?

2. Will you be there?

You want the point person you've dealt with to be present from start to finish.

3. What's your waitstaff-to-table ratio?

The most elegant service is one or more servers per table. The fewer you have, the more erratic or slow the food service will be. Find out how many staff members are included in the per-person cost and how much extra staff might cost.

4. What's included in your per-person price?

Is it just the food and beverages, with things like linens, wait-staff, and coat-room attendants separate?

5. What's the difference between a gratuity and a service charge?

Many catering facilities tack on a service charge of 20 percent, and couples think that this covers the staff tips, but it doesn't. It is often used to cover things like fuel costs, overhead, and wear and tear. You'll probably have to bring a stash of cash to tip the staff. Most brides tip 15 to 20 percent of the total bill and give that amount, in cash, to the maître d' or the wedding planner, who will then distribute it.

6. What happens to leftover food?

Health-department rules vary, but most on-site caterers cannot allow food to be taken off the premises. If this is allowed, arrange for the food to be donated to a local soup kitchen or charity.

7. How often do you renovate your facility?

You may fall in love with the decor of the room you book a year in advance. Are they at all likely to change the carpet? Replace the chandeliers you admired? Ask the venue to put it in writing that the decor won't change.

8. How often do you clean your facility?

The venue should be cleaned every three to six months (otherwise the carpets will start to smell).

9. Can we tour the kitchen?

A facility might look gorgeous enough to win you over, but any cracks in the organization or the cleanliness of a place will show in the kitchen.

10. Have you worked at our location before?

If you're having the reception off-site, you'll want to know how familiar your caterer is with the venue—and what he needs to know if he's never been there. (How big is the kitchen? When can deliveries be dropped off?) Once you've settled on a caterer, put him or her in touch with the site's manager so they can work out the details without using you as a middleman.

11. How does your staff dress?

Find out if they will dress in a specific way if you ask them to—say, in Hawaiian shirts for a luau wedding.

12. Can we see the banquet event order?

This is a list of all the information the caterer has gone over with you about your party. It's given to the person who orders the food; the chef who'll cook the food; the person responsible for setting up the room at the venue; and the director of the waitstaff. Review the details carefully so you know that, say, your request to have a separate table for two is on the list.