



GOT CHEF'S HAT? GOURMET CATERING FOR THE NOVICE RD

By Ruth Lahmayer Chipps, MS, RD, CD

When was the last time a friend or colleague asked you to host an event or provide healthy foods for a large get-together? It can be a daunting task, especially if you have little experience in catering or food production. But your friends may assume that because you're a dietitian, you can whip up incredible food for 50 people. Well, next time they ask, you'll be ready to cook up a storm.

As an RD, I've had a good amount of experience working with restaurants and foodservice operations. But when my husband and I were recently asked to host a fund-raising event at our home for our federal congressman, I had to put on my thinking cap—and my chef's hat (and request some culinary tutoring from my chef friend, Thomas Sacksteder, CEC).

The outdoor summer event was a success, with more than 150 attendees and, amazingly for August in Minnesota, perfect weather. In this article, I'll share some secrets behind our event's success, along with simple planning strategies and reference

books that can help you wow your guests at any event. Whether you're an occasional entertainer or have aspirations for launching a full-service catering operation, these methods are standard practice.

Formula for a Five-Star Event

1. Establish a goal: Keep it simple and know your limits.
2. Make your plan; work your plan.
3. Consider the details:
 - Date/location: If it is an outdoor event, have a backup plan prepared in case of rain.
 - Theme: What will be appealing to everyone? Keep it fun and seasonal.
 - Style: Buffet vs. seated.
 - Beverage station: Nonalcoholic, open bar, or theme cocktail; volunteer bar/beverage tender; coffee/tea station (10 guests equals about 15 cups of coffee).
 - Entertainment: Be sure it enhances the ambiance and doesn't distract from the focus.
 - Menu: Seasonal items with a balance of colors, textures, and flavors; consider the time of day—appetizers only, full-course items; remember variety.
 - Helpers: Paid helpers, volunteers, valet parking, and crowd control; consider experienced food prep helpers and servers.
 - Table/design: Plants and flowers are attractive; linens arranged in layers/at angles; interesting serving dishes and bountiful baskets.
 - Invitations/attendees/lists: Will you ask for RSVPs? It's important to get an approximate head count.
 - Shopping lists: Include details for food and paper products.

KEYS TO CULINARY CATERING SUCCESS

- Develop a plan and then put it into action.
- Prepare in advance with work lists: three weeks before, two weeks before, one week before, two days before, one day before, and the day of the event.
- One half-hour before your guests arrive, remember to relax and rest before the excitement begins.
- If you're hosting the event, be sure to socialize and delegate to your helpers so you can enjoy the experience.
- Develop a specialty dish, perfect it, and present it.
- Remember the instant-read thermometer for cooking to proper temperatures and to separate cutting boards for raw meat/poultry and produce.

- For service: Serving platters for tables and trays for circulating servers, warming trays, serving utensils, small dishes for toothpicks.
- Rental items: Chairs, tables, tents, trash bins (labeled for recycling, etc).

— Ruth Lahmayer Chipps, MS, RD, CD, is a media spokesperson who has dabbled in culinary preparations and events along with her husband in La Crescent, Minn.

Resources

- The Backyard Bartender: 55 Cool Summer Cocktails* by Nicole Aloni
- Cooking for Company* by Nicole Aloni
- Introduction to Catering: Ingredients for Success* by Stephen B. Shiring, R. William Jardine, and Richard J. Mills (textbook)
- Secrets from a Caterer's Kitchen: The Indispensable Guide for Planning a Party* by Nicole Aloni
- Successful Catering: Managing the Catering Operation for Maximum Profit* by Sony Bode

A CATERING CASE STUDY

The following are some of the details from the event my husband and I hosted:

- Date/location: August in our garden with views of the wetlands.
- Theme: Fresh local garden goods—focus on beautiful wetlands.
 - Menu: Gourmet chef-designed appetizers with a Mediterranean twist, plus hearty picnic food for big appetites featuring local organic garden goods.
- Entertainment: Bagpipers; three to five members of the pipe and drum group will promenade and play music in the gardens.
- Helpers: Two hired culinary assistants will help with preparation, serving,

stocking, and cleanup.

- Volunteer greeters/crowd controllers will be assigned near podium for sign-ins; basket for checks/donations.
- Food costs: Keep expenses low. This is a political fundraiser and budget is limited.
- Food stations: Two 6-foot tables; find large roaster for hearty brats.
- Beverage station at existing outdoor bar; backup bar inside adjacent cottage.

Menu Plan:

1. Fresh sourdough baguette slices with gorgonzola spread and a honey drizzle with vanilla bean
2. Dates filled with goat cheese topped with toasted tamari almonds and fresh mint sprig
3. Three-cheese bruschetta with mozzarella, yellow

TAKING IT TO THE FULL COURSE

Your friends may tell you that you're so skilled, you should go into the catering business. Before you jump into a permanent business venture, consider the following points:

- Check with your local health department regarding regulations for catering businesses. Most states require licenses and will consider your business a foodservice establishment. Insurance and other business expenses can sometimes be a barrier to running a catering business with a goal of low overhead.
- Home-based catering operations can be a challenge, but there may also be commercial kitchens available for rent in your community so that you can meet health codes and prepare foods with ease. For excellent details on catering, take a look at the books in the resources list.

heirloom tomatoes, and local organic pesto

4. Pita points with ajvar eggplant spread and fresh oregano/chives
5. Hummus and homemade organic grain pitas
6. Baba ghanoush eggplant dip prepared from local organic roasted eggplant
7. Fresh organic salsa with blue and white corn chips (one version with black beans and corn)
8. Taco layered dip from a volunteer
9. Heirloom tomato salad (sliced on platter with balsamic drizzle, Palestinian olive oil, kalamata olives, and fresh basil), sprinkled with feta and served with tongs
10. Fresh garden melon wedges (finger food, eaten off rind)

11. Prosciutto-wrapped cantaloupe, secured with toothpicks
12. Herb frittata with julienned zucchini, served at room temperature
13. Dessert: Lemon and rhubarb bars

Hot and Hearty:

1. Minnesota Brats 'n Kraut
 - a. Side units of buns and condiments
2. Potato Ratatouille (in crock pot)

Beverage Station:

1. Beverages (one station at bar)
2. Bottled water, local beer in recycled bottles, two choices of soft drinks, white and red wine