

# Caterer Guide



## Set Up Your Business

**Create a plan** for the type of catering business you will open. [businessportal.sfgov.org/start/create-a-plan](https://businessportal.sfgov.org/start/create-a-plan)

**Obtain a business address.** Even though you will be offering your service at various locations, you will need a physical address (no PO boxes) in order to register your business.

**Choose a business structure.** LLCs, Corporations, and Limited Partnerships must register their structure with CA Secretary of State before registering locally. [businessportal.sfgov.org/start/choose-a-structure](https://businessportal.sfgov.org/start/choose-a-structure)

**Apply for an Employer Identification Number (EIN),** also known as a Federal Tax ID Number from the IRS. This is used to identify your business and allows you to hire employees. If you are a sole proprietor without employees, you may choose to use your Social Security Number instead.

**Register your business** with the City through the Office of the Treasurer and Tax Collector (TTX) and the Office of the Assessor-Recorder. [businessportal.sfgov.org/start/register-your-business](https://businessportal.sfgov.org/start/register-your-business)

**Choose and file a business name.** File a Fictitious Business Name (FBN) Statement at the SF Office of the County Clerk if you will be using a name other than your given name, the names of your partners, or the officially registered name of your LLC or corporation. Research the name's availability in your county before filing. [businessportal.sfgov.org/start/choose-a-name](https://businessportal.sfgov.org/start/choose-a-name)

**Apply for a Seller's Permit** from the CA State Board of Equalization. Every location must have this permit to sell taxable goods.

**Obtain workers' compensation insurance.** You will need this in order to obtain the Department of Public Health (DPH) Permit to Operate.



## Prepare Your Commissary

**Find a place to prepare your food.** All Caterers must operate in conjunction with a food facility, also known as a commissary, such as a licensed commercial kitchen. Thus, you will need to rent a commercial space for preparing food, and storing your inventory.

**NOTE** Be sure to obtain or create a floor plan of your commissary indicating all equipment, sinks, and storage spaces. You will need this to obtain a food permit.

**NOTE** Do not serve food prepared or stored at home at a catered function. This is prohibited.

**Visit the SF Planning Department's Planning Information Counter** at 1650 Mission St. to understand zoning. These requirements will determine where you can operate. [sf-planning.org](https://sf-planning.org)

**NOTE** You must have sufficient equipment to maintain required temperatures (below 41°F or above 135°F) for all perishable food at a catering site. These may include steam tables, chafing dishes, refrigerators, coolers, etc.



## Food & Alcohol

**Obtain a Manager's Food Safety Certification** for yourself and/or a designated employee. This person is responsible for teaching other employees proper food handling.

**Ensure all employees have a Food Handler Card.** SF DPH offers a few options for obtaining this card.

**Create a menu of all foods to be served** with information on how, when and where each food item is prepared and cooked. You will need this menu to obtain a food permit.

**Apply for your Caterer Permit** from the SF Department of Public Health (DPH). Your application will include a Commissary Verification, Commissary floor plan, Proof of Worker's Compensation Insurance, Proof of Food Safety Certification, Written Operational Procedures, Operating Schedule, Business Registration Certificate, and Seller's Permit. [sfdph.org](https://sfdph.org)

**Don't serve any foods containing trans fats,** per California State law. SFDPH enforces the trans fat compliance program to ensure that no food containing artificial trans fat is stored, distributed, served, or used in the preparation of any food. [sfdph.org](https://sfdph.org)

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## Serve Your Guests

**Keep a calibrated metal stem/probe type thermometer nearby** at all times. The thermometer must have a temperature range of 0 - 220 degrees F, accurate to +/-2 degrees F, and be available to monitor temperatures of food prior to transport, upon arrival, and at the time of serving.

**Store foods, beverages, utensils and related equipment** at least 6 inches off of the floor at any event.

**Bring a copy of the approved prepared Food Safety Certificate** to all events. You must be able to provide this when asked. [sfdph.org](http://sfdph.org)

**Use containers that are compostable or recyclable** if you serve takeout or allow customers to take food home. The SF Mandatory Recycling and Composting Ordinance prohibits certain food service ware, like Styrofoam containers. [sfenvironment.org/zero-waste](http://sfenvironment.org/zero-waste)

**Provide adequate hand washing facilities** adjacent to service area.

**Ensure that restrooms with adequate hand washing facilities are available** and located within 200 feet of service area.

## What If...

**If you plan to hire employees**, be sure to follow all wage and employment guidelines. [businessportal.sfgov.org/start/hire-employees](http://businessportal.sfgov.org/start/hire-employees)

**If you make any changes to your Written Operational Procedures, menu or equipment** you will need DPH approval. [sfdph.org](http://sfdph.org)

**If transport time exceeds one hour**, mechanical refrigeration and mechanical hot holding equipment must be provided. [sfdph.org](http://sfdph.org)

**If you would like to temporarily provide outdoor heaters**, you must obtain a LP-Gas Storage and Use Permit and a fire watch (overtime), and follow all SF Fire guidelines for use of LP-Gas Mushroom-Type Heaters. [sf-fire.org](http://sf-fire.org)

**NOTE** If you plan to use an outdoor heater permanently, you must obtain a building permit from the SF Department of Building Inspection.

**If you will be serving at an outdoor food or street fair**, be sure to follow all of the SF Fire Department safety requirements, including refraining from cooking inside tents, keeping cooking equipment away from exits, and maintaining a visible fire extinguisher in each cooking area. [sf-fire.org](http://sf-fire.org)

## After Opening

**Solicit work.** There are a number of ways to seek out work, including using the web, word-of-mouth, advertising, partnerships, etc.

**Negotiate compensation & payment plan** prior to signing a contract. Consider taking a class or seeking other advice on contracts.

**Mark your calendar.** Schedule equipment maintenance and set reminders to renew your permits and licenses as needed.

**Prepare and pay your local, state, and federal taxes.** Learn more from these departments:  
[sftreasurer.org](http://sftreasurer.org)  
[sfassessor.org](http://sfassessor.org)  
[ftb.ca.gov](http://ftb.ca.gov)  
[irs.gov](http://irs.gov)



To speak with a business counselor  
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