

How to start a catering business

If you host dinner parties for your family and friends every chance you get, you're up on food trends and you have an entrepreneurial spirit, consider starting a catering business. You have the advantage of starting small with relatively low overhead and building your business as you gain more clients. Read on for information on how to find your niche, launch your business and spread the word.

Part 1

Finding Your Catering Niche

1

Think about what food you love to make. Catering, like any other business, should be rooted in a genuine interest and passion. Consider the following types of food you could focus on as you develop your catering business:[\[1\]](#)

- Lunch or brunch-style food. If you enjoy making sandwiches, quiches, tarts, salads, and other food that is generally served during the day, you might want to model your business around lunchtime service. You could cater business luncheons, daytime awards ceremonies, school functions, and so on.
- Wedding reception or special event meals. Wedding caterers typically offer a variety of appetizers and finger foods along with several hearty entrees and a few desserts.
- Desserts only. If you love baking and have a flair for making cookies and cakes, consider desserts-only catering. This may limit the types of clients who hire you, but you'll also have less equipment to buy.
- Appetizers and cocktails. Clients are increasingly hiring caterers to create a trendy, festive atmosphere by serving only

appetizers, sometimes accompanied by caterer-prepared specialty cocktails.

2

Create a menu. By doing this first, you can figure out how much kitchen space you'll need, what appliances you should install and how much you can expect to bring in financially.^[2]

- Try to have a variety of items to suit different tastes. Even if you specialize in one cuisine or type of meal, make sure your menu appeals to a lot of tastes. For example, if you want to offer a lot of spicy food, have non-spicy options as well.
- Consider offering vegetarian and vegan options for clients who don't eat meat and other animal products.
- Keep your menu to a manageable size, with food you're comfortable cooking made with ingredients you know you can source.

3

Test your dishes. Once you've settled on a menu, have a party to test out your dishes on family and friends. Ask them for honest feedback about the entire experience - both the food and the service.

- Tweak your dishes until you're convinced they're delicious and crowd friendly.
- Practice makes perfect. Make sure you've got the techniques, cooking times, and presentation down before you launch your business.

Part 2

Securing Your Space and Supplies

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1

Find a space to rent. Even if your starting small, most local laws prohibit people from operating catering businesses from a home kitchen. Look into your jurisdiction's health codes to find out what type of space you'll need to rent.^[3]

- Consider operating from a commercial kitchen. Some kitchens allow people to rent the space for a day or a few hours at a time. This situation could be the right one for you if you cater only on the weekends or a few times a month.
- If catering is going to be your full-time business, you'll probably need a more permanent storage and cooking facility. Find a place with adequate plumbing so you'll be able to set up your cooking and catering equipment. Check with your landlord and your local zoning office to make sure you can install the proper equipment like ventilation hoods and grease traps.
- If you plan to host tastings or sell food directly from your kitchen, look for a place with a storefront that's separate from the kitchen, and provide tables and seating for customers.

2

Set up your kitchen. Catering work requires industrial equipment that is usually more expensive than equipment you would use in your home kitchen. Create a budget and figure out exactly what you'll need to run your business efficiently.^[4]

- Base your equipment purchases on your menu. For example, if many of your items are baked, install at least two ovens. If you have a lot of fried foods, opting for more than one fryer might be a good idea.
- You may want to install multiple sinks to make your prep work more efficient, especially if you plan on hiring people.
- Plan ahead for food storage, too. Multiple refrigerators and a walk-in freezer might be necessary to store dishes you prepare ahead of time. Heated and non-heated holding areas are important for holding temperature and storing prepared items.
- Obtain all the pots, pans, and other kitchen equipment you need to make the items on your menu.

- If you are starting a business, you should understand a fixed cost and a variable cost.
- Fixed costs do not change every month. For example, the rent, utilities, and payroll.
- Variable costs vary monthly, such as marketing expenses.

3

Purchase the catering equipment that you will use on-site. The equipment you choose will depend on the type of service you want to provide, but at minimum you will need serving platters and serving utensils.[\[5\]](#)

- Many catering businesses provide plates, silverware, glassware, or disposable plates and utensils.
- You may want to offer special display trays and tiered food platters to help make the catered event more festive.
- Make sure you have the proper equipment to keep the food either cold or hot, such as chafing dishes with liquid fuel burners.
- Consider buying linens, napkins, table decorations and centerpieces. Some catering businesses also offer tent canopies for outdoor events.

Part 3

Setting Up Your Business

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1

Get applicable permits and licenses. Research the laws in your area regarding distribution of food or alcohol at catering sites. Make sure you have the permits and licenses you need before you get started.[\[6\]](#)

2

Set your prices. Make sure you have paperwork in order for when you do consultations, tastings, and cater events. Either hire an accountant or do your own bookkeeping to keep track of your expenses, invoices and income.

3

Buy a van and other equipment for transporting food. Make sure the van has plenty of space for storage of food, linens, tableware, and any other equipment you might need to bring to your clients' sites. One vehicle should be sufficient to start. You may decide to buy more if your business expands.

4

Hire staff. Decide what staff you will need to help you with food preparation, delivery, and service.

- Instead of hiring staff right off the bat, you could also use a temp agency for your cooks and servers, at least until you build up your business.
- Consider what type of uniforms you want your serving staff to wear.
- Train your employees to provide the type of service you want to offer your clients.

5

Apply for an account with food suppliers. When you're just starting out you may be able to use a local wholesale club to buy your food, but if you get busy enough, you will find it easier to do business with a larger supply company.

- Produce can be acquired locally from farmers.
- The makers of alcohol will sometimes give you a special deal on their brand if you display their logo at events.

6

Market your business. Pass out fliers and menus, post on Facebook, and take out ads in local newspapers a few weeks before you plan to open. You can start taking orders ahead of time and do mobile tasting events to get the word out.

- Submit your business information to wedding sites and ask for banquet halls and popular local wedding venues to refer potential clients to you.
- Word of mouth is one of the best ways to get new catering business. Do your best to make the first few events go smoothly, and soon you'll have your hands full with new clients.