Choosing your Caterer - Best Practices

Quick answer
Choosing a wedding caterer starts with a shortlist that fits your venue, guest count and service style (plated, buffet or stations). Schedule tastings, ask what is included in the proposal, confirm dietary accommodations, and verify licensing and insurance before you sign. Use a local directory to compare caterers near your ceremony and reception cities, then confirm every detail in writing.

Why Your Caterer Matters as Much as Your Venue

Food and hospitality shape how guests remember your wedding day. The right caterer understands your venue's kitchen limits, keeps dietary needs safe and clear, and times service so the reception stays on schedule. The wrong fit can mean long buffet lines, cold plates or last-minute surprises about rentals and cake cutting.

This guide covers tastings, service styles, proposals, red flags and using a local directory to find caterers in West and Eastern Michigan. It is general advice—not prices, capacities or reviews. Confirm every detail with the caterer and your venue.

▶ Browse wedding caterers by city
West Michigan: Grand Rapids caterers · Holland & Zeeland · Kalamazoo · Traverse City
Eastern Michigan: Detroit & Metro Detroit caterers · Ann Arbor & Ypsilanti · Lansing & East Lansing

Start With Venue Rules and a Realistic Guest Count

Before you call caterers, ask your venue which companies are preferred or exclusive, whether outside caterers are allowed, and what the kitchen or prep area includes (warming ovens, refrigeration, sinks, power). Some barns and historic sites require licensed caterers only; hotels and banquet halls may have an in-house team.

Also set a working guest count range. Caterers price and staff differently for 75 guests than for 200. A range helps them propose realistic menus without locking you into a final headcount months early. Update the count as RSVPs come in according to the caterer's deadline.

Service Style: Plated, Buffet or Stations

Plated service sends composed courses to seated guests. It often feels formal and can reduce waiting in line, but it needs clear timing between courses and enough servers for the room.

Buffet service lets guests choose portions and dishes. It can feel relaxed and flexible for mixed tastes. Ask how many buffet lines you will have, how dishes are replenished and how the room flow avoids a single bottleneck.

Stations (or action stations) place themed dishes around the space—carving, pasta, salad or dessert. Guests circulate, which can encourage mingling. Confirm staffing at each station and how leftover food is managed.

Ask which styles your venue allows and which the caterer recommends for your guest count and timeline. There is no single "best" style—only the one that fits your day.

Tasting Timeline and How to Prepare

Treat the tasting like a working meeting, not only a meal. Ideal timing is after the venue is booked and once you have narrowed to two or three caterers. Ask each company:

- **How far ahead** tastings are scheduled and whether weekend slots fill quickly.
- **Who attends** (couple only, or parents and wedding party) and whether extra guests have a fee.
- **Whether tasting fees** apply toward the final invoice if you book.
- **Which dishes** you will sample—signature packages, custom options or seasonal specials.
- **How the tasting menu** relates to what guests will actually receive on the wedding day.

Bring notes: venue kitchen constraints, must-have dishes, hard "no" ingredients, and a list of dietary needs. Taste for flavor first, then ask how each dish scales for a full reception.

Menu Customization and Dietary Needs

Share allergies and lifestyle preferences early. Common requests include vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, dairy-free, nut-free, kosher-style and halal options. Ask how the kitchen avoids cross-contact for severe allergies, how plates are labeled for servers, and whether kids' meals or vendor meals are available.

If cultural or family dishes matter to you, ask whether the caterer can adapt family recipes or collaborate with a specialty baker or second vendor. Get substitutions in writing on the final menu.

Staffing: Ask for a Plan, Not Guesswork

Ask the caterer how they staff for your guest count and service style. Useful questions include: How many servers and captains will be on site? Will there be a kitchen lead? Who manages the timeline with your planner or venue coordinator? How is overtime billed if speeches or dancing run long?

Treat staffing as a planning conversation. Ratios and crew size should come from the caterer's written proposal for your event—not from a generic rule of thumb you found online.

What Is Included: Rentals, Cake Cutting and Leftovers

Proposals differ widely on what "full service" means. Clarify:

- **China, glassware, flatware and linens** — provided by the caterer, the venue or a rental company?

- **Cake cutting and dessert plating** — included, or a separate fee? Who supplies dessert plates and forks?
- **Coffee, tea and nonalcoholic beverages** — included with dinner or billed separately?
- **Bar service** — does the caterer provide bartenders, alcohol or both? Who holds the liquor license?
- **Leftover policy** — can leftovers be packed for you, donated or discarded under local health rules?
- **Setup and breakdown** — who handles tableside clearing, trash and recycling?

Write each answer into your comparison sheet so you are not surprised by rental invoices later.

Licensing, Insurance and Venue Requirements

Ask every shortlisted caterer:

1. Do you hold current **food-service licensing** appropriate for Michigan events?
2. Do you carry **general liability insurance**, and can you provide a certificate naming our venue if required?
3. If you serve alcohol, do you have the proper **liquor licensing** or certified bartenders, and who is responsible for permits?
4. Are you familiar with **our venue's kitchen rules**, load-in times and insurance requirements?

Your venue may refuse caterers who cannot meet these requirements. Confirm early so you do not lose a deposit.

Budget Questions to Ask Without Guessing Prices

Avoid comparing caterers on a single "per person" number until you know what it includes. Instead ask:

- What is included in the per-guest or package price, and what is always extra?
- How are taxes, service charges and gratuities shown on the invoice?
- What is the payment schedule and cancellation policy?
- How do guest-count reductions or increases change the total?
- Are tasting fees, cake cutting, bartenders or late-night snacks separate line items?

Request itemized proposals from each finalist and compare apples to apples. Do not rely on overheard prices from other weddings—menus and staffing differ.

Tasting and Proposal Red Flags

- **Vague written proposals** that omit staffing, rentals or leftover policy.
- **Pressure to sign** before you tour the venue kitchen or confirm insurance.
- **Unwillingness to discuss dietary needs** or allergy protocols.
- **No clear tasting connection** between sample dishes and the wedding menu.
- **Refusal to provide licensing or insurance** documents the venue requires.
- **Last-minute menu changes** without a change-order process.

Trust your notes. If two caterers communicate clearly and one does not, factor that into your decision—service on the wedding day depends on communication.

How a Local Directory Helps You Compare Caterers

A regional wedding directory groups caterers by city hub—Grand Rapids, Metro Detroit, Ann Arbor, Lansing and other Lower Peninsula cities—so local businesses are easier to compare than in a broad web search.

On The Wedding Planner, open the Caterers category for your ceremony or reception city, shortlist a few names, then visit each official website and request tastings. The directory is a starting point for discovery—not a substitute for tasting, contracts and insurance checks.

▶ Compare caterers in your region
West Michigan caterers – Grand Rapids · Eastern Michigan caterers – Metro Detroit · Ann Arbor & Ypsilanti caterers

Caterer Selection Checklist

- ☐ Confirm venue catering rules, kitchen access and preferred-vendor list
- ☐ Set a guest-count range and service-style preference (plated / buffet / stations)
- ☐ Shortlist caterers in your hubs: West – Grand Rapids · East – Metro Detroit · Ann Arbor
- ☐ Schedule tastings; bring dietary list and venue notes
- ☐ Request itemized proposals (menu, staffing, rentals, cake, leftovers, taxes/fees)
- ☐ Verify licensing, liability insurance and alcohol service plan
- ☐ Compare red flags and communication quality
- ☐ Track vendors and payments in the free Wedding Planner (West) or Wedding Planner (East)

Frequently Asked Questions

When should we schedule a wedding caterer tasting?

Book a tasting once you have a shortlist of two or three caterers and a rough guest count. Many couples taste after the venue is booked so the caterer can speak to the kitchen, power and serving style that venue allows. Ask each company how far ahead tastings fill and whether tasting fees apply toward the final invoice.

What is the difference between plated, buffet and stations service?

Plated means servers bring plated courses to seated guests. Buffet lets guests choose from dishes on a long line. Stations (or food stations) place themed dishes around the room so guests circulate. Ask which styles your venue allows, how each affects staffing and timing, and which feels right for your guest list.

How do we handle dietary needs with a wedding caterer?

Share allergies, vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free and religious needs early—ideally before the tasting. Ask how substitutions are labeled for servers and guests, whether a separate kitchen area is used for severe allergies, and how late RSVP changes are handled.

What should be included in a wedding catering proposal?

Ask for a written proposal that lists menu items, service style, guest count ranges, staffing, rentals (china, glassware, flatware, linens if provided), cake-cutting or dessert service, bar or beverage service if offered, taxes, service charge or gratuity, leftover policy, overtime and tasting details. Compare proposals side by side.

What licensing and insurance questions should we ask a caterer?

Ask whether they hold current food-service licensing for Michigan, liability insurance and liquor licensing or certified bartenders if they serve alcohol. Request certificates of insurance naming your venue if the venue requires it, and confirm who is responsible for alcohol service permits.

How does a wedding directory help us choose a caterer?

A local directory collects caterers by city hub so you can compare businesses that already serve your area. Browse Grand Rapids, Metro Detroit, Ann Arbor and other hubs on The Wedding Planner, shortlist a few, then confirm menus, tastings and insurance directly with each company.

Ready to Shortlist Your Caterer?

▶ **Start comparing today**
Browse Grand Rapids caterers · Browse Metro Detroit caterers · Browse Ann Arbor caterers
Start your free Planner (West) · Start your free Planner (East)

▶ **Are you a wedding caterer?**
Reach couples planning Lower Peninsula weddings: Advertise in West Michigan · Advertise in Eastern Michigan

This article offers general planning advice for The Wedding Planner (westmiweddingplanner.com and easternmiweddingplanner.com). It does not quote prices, guest capacities or reviews. Confirm menus, licensing, insurance and contracts directly with each caterer and venue. Directory links were checked as live caterer category pages on November 5, 2026.