

University of California, Irvine

Catering Guidelines

Understand Your Audience and Event

The first step to selecting catering is knowing your event and audience. Ask questions to determine what type of catering is appropriate. What time of day is the event taking place? Will it be a cocktail reception or will a meal be served – plated or buffet? If a conference is taking place for many hours, one or more breaks with snacks may be necessary. How many guests will attend? Are there cultural or religious considerations that should be noted? Knowing your event and audience will help you plan service levels, meal and drink options, and how much food and beverage to order.

Contract and Below-the-Line Costs

In addition to always scrutinizing the banquet event order (BEO) for accuracy and thoroughness, it is important to understand the below-the-line costs on your contract, beyond the basic charges.

Administrative Fees “++”

Determine if your catering quote is “plus plus (or ++), which represents a mandatory service fee and sales tax. These figures are not typically calculated in the quoted price per person and can add substantially to your overall cost. Service fees typically range between 20-24%. Sales tax will differ depending on the city of the caterer.

Gratuities

A gratuity can refer to a tip or a mandatory percentage of the basic charges. It is important to check the contract to see if the service charge includes this. Some do, some don't. Check with your accounting office on the policy for adding gratuity to the bill. A rule of thumb for event gratuity payments is 1.5-2% of the total event bill.

University Policy on Maximum Meal Rates

Be aware of the university policy on the maximum authorized per person rate for meals and refreshments. It is important to note that the per person rate must include the cost of food, beverage, service, tax, and catering staff. Even if the alcohol is provided by a different vendor, the cost must still be accounted for in the calculation. Catering equipment and rentals can be excluded from the total. Reference [UCI Policy Sec. 701-20A](#) for more information.

Menu Planning

As mentioned above, understanding the event and audience is key to menu planning. Be mindful of the time of day and guest expectations on what setup, options and quantity of food will be provided.

Guarantees

Caterers will require that you provide a guarantee at least 48 to 72 business hours prior to the event. For larger, plated events, a guarantee may be expected up to a week in advance. The guarantee is the number of meals you order and will be charged for – consumed or not. Be moderate when providing the catering guarantee. Judge the past history of the event or similar ones to determine the average attrition rate – often in the range of 10%. Most caterers provide an

average (often between 3-5%) of meals. The industry average is 3%. This means that when confirming for 100 meals, the caterer will have between 3-5 extra meals on hand.

How Much to Order

Ordering the right amount of food and beverage is always a challenge. The guidelines below are a good starting point, but getting to know your audience is key.

Coffee Service

For coffee service, 70% of guests will consume regular coffee, 20% will drink decaf coffee, and 10% will drink tea. Depending on the size of the cup, there are approximately 16-20 cups of coffee in a gallon.

Alcohol

Generally allow 2.5 glasses of wine per person at a cocktail reception. On average, a bottle of wine will yield about 5 glasses. For a seated dinner, two bottles of red wine and one bottle of white wine per table is a good estimate. Ask for a bottle count to double check quantity at the end of the event. The amount of wine consumed will depend on the audience and type of event. For example, more consumption can be expected at a holiday party than at a reception preceding or following a lecture with a distinguished speaker.

Hors D'oeuvres

The quantity of hors d'oeuvres depends on the length of the cocktail reception and whether or not it will be followed by a meal. For pre-meal cocktail hours, 4-6 hors d'oeuvres per person per hour is usually adequate. For standalone cocktail receptions, plan on 5-7 pieces per person per hour, plus 1-2 stationary displays. Tray passing hors d'oeuvres is a good way to monitor and control the amount of food distributed to guests throughout the reception. You can instruct the caterer to space out passing or reserve the heaviest passing for when the majority of guests have arrived.

Make sure that hors d'oeuvres can be eaten in one or two bites easily. Provide eating utensils, when appropriate, as some guests prefer using them with hors d'oeuvres.

What to Order

The menu will also depend on the type of event and the audience. Be mindful of cultural or religious considerations. Always provide a variety of foods, including vegetarian and vegan selections. To support UCI's commitment to sustainability, inquire about the caterer's "green" practices. Know where food products are coming from and avoid endangered species of fish.

When alcohol is served, offer both red and white wine, unless the venue guidelines specify that red is not allowed. As a general rule, more white wine is consumed in the Spring/Summer and during outdoor events with warm weather while red wine is popular in the Fall/Winter during the colder months. Always serve food and provide water when alcohol is served.

Discuss with your caterer the options for staff and/or entertainer meals, which may include different food or be served in a different location.

Setup and Service

Setup

When bringing an outside caterer onsite, you will need to determine their kitchen, power, and water needs to ensure that the appropriate accommodations are made. Some venues, especially on campus, may not have an accessible kitchen. The menu and type/scale of the event will determine how much cooking and prep needs to take place onsite. Make sure to clarify with the caterer the equipment they will provide versus items that need to be rented. When building a kitchen onsite, a fire marshal from UCI Environmental Health & Safety (EH&S) must be consulted to make sure the appropriate measures are taken to ensure fire safety.

Service

For a plated meal, one server for every 15 people is recommended. If quicker service is required, suggest one server for every 10 people (which is the same as one server per table). For buffet service, one double-sided buffet line is needed for every 75 to 100 people. When serving alcohol, there should be one bartender/bar for every 75 to 100 people. When

It is recommended to have beverage service ready 30 minutes prior to the start of an event, with food ready 15 minutes prior, to avoid quality deterioration. If possible, avoid catering service during the program. The wait staff can leave carafes of coffee or beverages on tables when appropriate.