

How to Cater Your Own Wedding

Tips for Catering a Spectacular Event on a Tight Budget

In today's difficult economic climate, more and more Michigan couples are choosing to cater their own weddings. From backyards to parks to banquet rooms with built-in kitchenettes, the focus is on preparing excellent meals for the least amount of money possible. Here are some tips for preparing gourmet style banquets on a tight budget.

- 1.) Hire a culinary arts student to prepare a large banquet style meal in your kitchen (or the rented kitchenette at a local recreation center hall). To find the perfect candidate, visit a cooking class at your local community college and ask the teacher to recommend a talented young protégé. Supply your student with all the fresh wholesale ingredients necessary to make a beautiful gourmet meal. You'll probably pay about \$10 an hour for this distinguished service, and your young friend will emerge from the experience with a professional catering job to list on his resume.
- 2.) Divide tasks among different friends or relatives who are not tied to the wedding party. For example, Aunt Betty can be responsible for the potatoes while Uncle Floyd prepares the chicken or roast beef. To reward Uncle Floyd and Aunt Betty for their hard work, offer to clean out their garage or mow their lawn for the summer.
- 3.) Don't exclude young nieces, nephews or cousins who can tackle mundane tasks such as peeling potatoes, washing dishes, distributing plastic silverware or arranging centerpieces. Make a chart to delegate specific tasks to specific children and reward them with a nice outing at the beach when the wedding is over.
- 4.) There's no law against serving Stouffer's lasagna or frozen ravioli at weddings. In fact, many banquet halls serve frozen creations from wholesale food outlets. If oven space at your wedding location is tied up making other foods, instruct four different friends or relatives to bring a cooked lasagna to the event. Send a mass email to find friends who are willing to contribute one large frozen entree. Entrees might include lasagna, Italian meatballs, beef stroganoff or macaroni and cheese. As the email replies roll in, you may even find some friends who offer to skip the frozen food aisle and make their own fresh creations.
- 5.) Offer a Mexican style fajita buffet! At certain local butcher shops near Mexicantown in Detroit, you can purchase enough beef fajita meat to feed 100 people on a shoestring budget. For variety, set up meat stations where guests can load their tortillas with steak, chicken, shrimp or roasted vegetables. Serve corn chips, salsa and Spanish rice on the side. For a delicious bean dip, mix canned chilli with cream cheese and chopped green onion.
- 6.) Instead of using canned cream soups in scalloped potato recipes, try Alfredo sauce in a jar. (Bertolli is an excellent brand.) Add chopped onion and parsley for a gourmet treat that's sure to have guests wondering if you hired a catering company. Top with grated Parmesan cheese and bake until golden brown. For potatoes au gratin, use a five cheese Alfredo sauce and top with shredded cheddar.
- 7.) Avoid using dehydrated or reconstituted potato slices in casserole dishes. It's a classic sign of a substandard banquet. If convenience is important to you, purchase large bags of precooked potato chunks from restaurant supply stores such as Gordon's Food Service. Cover the potato chunks with sauce and bake until golden brown.
- 8.) When preparing oven fried chicken in large batches, it's much easier to apply bread crumbs with a large salt shaker than to roll each piece in seasoned flour by hand. For easy cleanup, line baking sheets with nonstick aluminum foil.
- 9.) If you plan to serve boneless breasts instead of mixed chicken parts, a good marinade is a better option than breading. For truly professional results, lightly sear each breast to lock in the juices. Cover with a generous amount of marinade and bake at 350 degrees for 45 minutes.

- 10.) Remember that Kentucky Fried Chicken has catering services. You can order 100 pieces of chicken for around \$120 and supply your own side dishes. For extra large orders, you must schedule the event in advance.
- 11.) Premium roast beef is a staple at fancy weddings, but if you can't afford it, consider serving succulent and well-prepared sheets of meatloaf. The internet is a rich source for interesting meatloaf recipes that incorporate ingredients like pureed vegetables or cracker crumbs in the batter. The more tasty the cracker, the better the meatloaf! (Try white cheddar Cheese-It crackers or Town House garlic and herb crackers.) Experiment to find the perfect recipe before your big day. A nice brown gravy sauce is standard at banquets, but there's no law against variety. Some folks like a sweet barbeque style sauce made of tomato paste and brown sugar, while others prefer Italian style meatloaf with marinara sauce and mozzarella cheese. You could even offer two types of meatloaf to appeal to a variety of tastes.
- 12.) If you're going to spring for premium cuts of real roast beef, steer clear of your local grocery store. Retail stores use clever names like "standing rib roast" and "sirloin tip roast" to jack up the price on standard primal cuts. Visit a butcher shop or restaurant supply outlet when purchasing beef in bulk.
- 13.) If you're hell bent on fresh pasta dishes, cook them the night before and reheat them on the big day. Be sure to cover refrigerated pasta dishes with a double layer of plastic wrap so they don't dry out. Keep a few extra jars of sauce on hand to moisten mostaccioli dishes before serving, and don't skimp on the meat. Dry, flavorless mostaccioli is the benchmark of a cheap wedding buffet.
- 14.) Turn cheap wholesale spaghetti sauce into a gourmet delight by adding a little brown sugar to cut the acidity of the tomatoes. The goal is to take an edge off the tartness without leaving the sauce too sweet. Details matter! Add fresh mushrooms, garlic salt, oregano and loads of chopped onion.
- 15.) If you can't afford a professional set of stainless steel food warmers, try wire chafing stands with aluminum pans warmed by Sterno fuel. For an even cheaper alternative, see how many electric skillets you can borrow from friends. Nothing keeps buffet foods hot like a row of large electric skillets or crock pots plugged into a power strip.
- 16.) Add an elegant lettuce free salad made of grape sized tomatoes, black olives, sliced cucumbers and feta cheese. Toss with Greek dressing for a tasty treat that doesn't wilt as easily as a salad made with lettuce leaves. Best of all, a lettuce free salad can marinate in the fridge overnight while you focus on preparing other foods. If you prefer a more American flavor, use ranch in place of Greek dressing and shredded cheddar in place of feta. Put extras such as croutons or sunflower seeds on the side.
- 17.) Nix the canned green beans, no matter how informal the event. Nothing says "I don't care," like a spoonful of soggy veggies.
- 18.) Instead of buying big bags of frozen mixed vegetables, buy individual bags of your favorite vegetables and mix them yourself. You'll save money while designing a custom mix that can't be found in stores. Creativity is the mark of a top notch buffet! For gourmet flair, consider zucchini, asparagus tips, baby corn, crinkle cut carrots, broccoli tops and water chestnuts.
- 19.) Boil ribs or chicken parts in large stock pots before placing them on the grill. You'll cut the cook time in half and be assured that each morsel is extra tender and evenly cooked.
- 20.) Instead of preparing several small pieces of chicken, try a traditional Thanksgiving turkey. One 20 pound turkey can serve up to 20 guests. If turkey isn't the only meat on the menu, one large bird will stretch even further. If oven space at your venue is too limited to cook more than one turkey, instruct a few relatives to arrive with a fully cooked bird. (Remember Aunt Floyd and Uncle Betty?)
- 21.) When preparing a large ham, take the time to slice it into sections without cutting all the way down to

the bottom. (At some wholesale meat outlets, you can purchase a ham that's already sectioned this way or ask the butcher to do the carving.) Make a marinade of brown sugar, pineapple juice and honey to pour over the slices. Baste frequently to maintain the flow of juices through and through.

22.) If you can't afford a custom wedding cake, consider purchasing sheet cakes in descending sizes from your local bakery. Stack the cakes yourself and decorate them with fresh fruit and real flowers.

23.) Hire a culinary arts student to bake your cake and save a bundle.

24.) Fancy multilevel cakes are great for pictures, but the truth is that large quantities of cake are often left behind at weddings. Many adults simply don't like the super sweet frosting. Ask your student baker to create icing from cream cheese instead of butter or shortening. Cut the standard amount of added sugar by one quarter or one eighth.

25.) Instead of serving cake, set up a desert table with a variety of treats that appeal to different tastes and sensibilities. Homemade brownies, cheesecake squares and chocolate chip cookies will disappear like hotcakes. Round out the selection with plain doughnuts and crisp biscotti for guests who like their treats less sweet. If you're pressed for time, there's nothing wrong with visiting a bakery, doughnut shop or grocery store.

26.) Don't skimp on the coffee or cream. Guests who don't drink alcohol will appreciate a sophisticated after dinner beverage. Put a relative in charge of keeping coffee pots filled to the brim, and set out bottles of cream in a variety of flavors such as vanilla, almond and mocha.

27.) Substitute sparkling wine for champagne. Few people will know the difference, and you'll save a bundle.

28.) Consider eliminating the champagne toast altogether. Half your guests won't touch it, and many will take a sip just because it's there. You'll end up paying for a ton of alcohol that people don't drink.

29.) If you're supplying alcohol, spring for a keg of beer or large bowls of punch spiked with rum or vodka. Guests who prefer a wide variety of cocktail options can bring their own bottles of liquor to share.

30.) Instead of a traditional meal, offer an elegant sandwich bar with a variety of cold cuts and fresh bakery breads. Add pasta salad, mixed greens and vegetable cuts with ranch dip. Round out the display with large crock pots filled with fresh soup. For a quick fix, start with large wholesale cans of soup and add chunks of fresh meat and vegetables.

31.) Organize a pig roast! Hire a catering truck to roast the meat on site and prepare your own simple side dishes such as potato salad and baked beans loaded with bacon and brown sugar. Aim for dishes that can be prepared the night before the wedding and served cold the next day.

32.) Throw a pot luck! Ask your close relatives and friends to bring just one dish or dessert to share with the masses.