

How to create a real stir

Even a small house party can afford a catering team these days, with just a little planning

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LIFE WRITER

After Mississauga residents James Campbell and his wife Navdeep volunteered to host a family dinner for 20 at Christmas, they considered doing something they'd never really thought about before: hiring a caterer.

Like most couples, they'd used a caterer for their wedding a year before, but having dinner catered at home would be a first. In fact, hosting the family holiday dinner would be a first.

"Try and do that for 20 people in a condo," says Campbell, 27, admitting that it was his idea.

"Every year, we have to drive up north," he says, "so I just mentioned casually, 'Hey, why don't we have something in the city?'"

Once the invitation was extended, with all the scramble, squeeze and pressure of other holiday shopping and preparations, having it catered seemed like a smart move.

But, the couple wondered, how do you find a good caterer? What do you need to know before hiring a caterer? How much does it cost? And is it too late to arrange catering for a small home event over the holidays?

Finding a caterer is not a challenge. There are an estimated 80,000 caterers in North America, reports the Washington-based International Catering Association (icacater.org). Among its 1,000 members are 80 Canadian companies.

However, association affiliation is not the most important thing to ascertain.

"The first question to ask," advises association executive director and former Torontonian Christine Emerson, "is: 'Are you licensed and insured?'"

"You want someone to sue if they poison your guests," she says, not so facetiously, "and there are a lot of illegal caterers, people catering out of their homes."

Next, she suggests finding a caterer who's "a kindred spirit — once you have that affinity, the whole process is better."

Finally, she counsels, "Have the caterer do everything possible. Don't think, 'Oh, I'll get the shrimp myself at Costco.' Hand over the reins."

This includes having staff so you can relax and enjoy. "The best money ever spent is having staff," insists Emerson.

Expect to spend about \$25 per hour for a minimum of four hours, plus tip, to have someone pass hors d'oeuvres, bring food to buffet tables, clear away plates and clean up. Triple that if you opt for a bartender plus an extra person to meet people at the door and whisk away winter outerwear.

Also figure on about \$100 per person for food, says Emerson. That figure, however, generally applies to high-profile downtown caterers.

The Campbells, using a caterer in the 905 area, could probably host a full dinner buffet for about \$40 or \$45 per person.

Catering by Gregory's in Brampton (gregorys.ca) can provide just that.

"We send a chef and servers and from 7 to 9:30, we serve stuffed mushroom caps, barbecue meat balls, shrimp rolls and mini quiches followed by a buffet dinner with turkey, roast beef and ham carved by the staff," explains owner Mosh Chug,

The dinner, including staff, dishes, taxes, and gratuities totals about \$33 per person, with an additional \$8 to \$10 for the hors d'oeuvres.

Chug will also do a Christmas menu "drop-off" for a minimum of 25 people, ranging from \$8.95 per person for assorted roast beef, turkey and ham sandwiches, fresh vegetable tray, cheese and crackers and Christmas cookies and pastries. The prices rise to \$14.95 or \$16.95 per person for complete Christmas dinners with a main course of roast turkey and dressing, baked ham and roast baron of beef. Christmas dinners can be delivered on the 24th but not on the 25th.

Although Chug already has about 50 events booked for December, he's accepting more.

But while \$15 to \$45 dinners are the meat and potatoes of 905 home catering, it's not just glitzy downtown caterers who get upscale glamour jobs.

"I've done a function that was \$150 per guest," recalls Chris Groenendyk of Brampton's Orange Tree Fine Catering (orangetreefinecatering.com). "There were 28 people and the entrée selection included filet mignon, stuffed lamb or two small lobster tails."

He says a prime rib and seafood medley would cost \$60 per person while a chicken, roast beef or turkey entrée — "the chicken is never frozen, the beef is aged, everything is as fresh as possible" — would cost about \$30. A basic "drop-off" hot meal of chicken and pasta, with salad and dessert squares can cost as little as \$15.

And even though he can usually accept last-minute bookings, Groenendyk advises ordering as early as possible for the best price and most choice and, if possible, arranging for a tasting.

It's likely to get harder and harder to find a caterer at the last minute because everybody, it seems, is ordering in.

"The trend is growing," says Chug. "Especially in a commuter town with working couples. They don't have time to do parties themselves."

Besides, he says, because of the fast-paced life, people don't know how to cook. "Even something as simple as roast beef, they may not know how to cook it at home. Also, it's challenging to cook for 20 or 25 people."

It's no wonder that, according to the International Catering Association, catering is the fastest growing segment of the food industry.

Or that James and Navdeep Campbell want the first family Christmas dinner at their own home to be as perfect as professionals can deliver.



Desire to connect with people and the variety of challenges presented daily in the food service industry lured Mr. Chug, a graduate from McMaster University, away from corporate job into the world of culinary arts. Mr. Chug, currently heads the Catering By Gregory's operations. He can be reached by at 905.454.8738 or by email at mosh@gregorys.ca

