

departments \* from the chef

## **Wedding Cuisine**

A chef's perspective

By Jerry Edwards

What makes a perfect wedding? This is like asking someone, "What makes a perfect home?" Both cause a great deal of stress. Both create excitement and trepidation during the planning process. And both can end up giving you much pleasure when all the plans are completed and the work is done.

For a wedding, there are many decisions along the way that are personal and different from person to person. As wedding professionals, our job is to guide our brides, and sometimes grooms, through the potential pitfalls and turbulent waters in a way that personalizes the wedding for them in a unique manner.

As a chef, it is imperative to listen to the couple. As you listen, guide them toward a dinner that will not only satisfy the guests' hunger, but transform the wedding meal into a meaningful representation of the combined vision and personality of the bride, groom and their families. This may sound like a lofty goal since some couples may not seem as interested in the menu as they are in the décor. However, if you take the time and show interest in the couple by making the effort to talk to them, you will be able to develop a more memorable dining experience for them and their guests.

A few years ago, Charlie Trotter, a chef who I revere as a culinary genius, sat on a bar stool on an empty stage in front of the *catersource* Conference audience. He proceeded to tell the audience that he cooks only for himself; he does not ask or care what the customer wants. This way of thinking may work in a restaurant setting where guests have the choice to eat the chef's food or dine elsewhere, but in a catering setting we have the responsibility to be more flexible. Given the opportunity to be more creative, we need to represent the honored couple on their special day.

### **Making the Meal Memorable**

The first step is to get out of the kitchen or your office when a bride and groom visit your catering facility. Put on that special clean and crisply pressed jacket and meet the couple. Spend some time with them and then ask these four simple questions:

1. How important is the cuisine to you?
2. What are your favorite things to eat?
3. Have you thought about creating a dining experience for your guests that represents the two of you?
4. What part of the food is most important to you, the hors d'oeuvres or the dinner?

These simple questions, when asked by the chef, have greater substance than when asked by a salesperson. If you take the time to meet with the bride and groom, it immediately separates you from the competition. And when you ask poignant questions that seem to direct the menu toward a more customized approach, you set up a perfect situation for the salesperson to finalize the menu, and that gives the couple a special sense of value.

### **Creating Personalized Menu**

If the bride and groom come from varied ethnic backgrounds, create an appetizer or dessert that signifies the cuisine of either or both families. If the wedding is stations style, one of the stations can be a fusion of the two cultures. For example, I once catered a wedding where a young man from Boston was marrying a young lady from Mexico City. One of the stations served a lobster burrito made from chunks of lobster and sautéed cremini mushrooms in a cognac cream sauce wrapped in a homemade flour tortilla. It was the most popular station of the night and the guests completely understood the concept of blending two very different cultures into one marriage on a plate.

If you have a groom that is very much a bar-food type person (with a tolerant bride), you can create a separate bar area where bar-type foods are served in a seated bar atmosphere during the cocktail hour. (This may need to be a separate area away from the more elegant and traditional cocktail space.) Design a bar with bar stools set in front of tables that are raised to 45 inches high and have a chef and bartender behind the bar offering different types of bar food, like potato skins and nachos. On the bar, set up dishes of salted nuts and even serve his favorite draft beer.

If the bride and groom are on their way to a very special honeymoon, create a dessert that reflects the honeymoon location. We once did an entire wedding cake themed after the island of Jamaica since the groom had proposed there and the couple were planning to honeymoon there. The cake was placed on a brown-sugar beach and adorned with white and pink chocolate seashells and handmade sugar lobsters. The band serenaded the happy couple with Bob Marley as they cut the cake.

The most important thing to remember is that you as the chef play a very important role in the planning of weddings. Being involved in the planning stages and the creative process will inevitably make the bride and groom excited about your menu and it will also bring you closer to them, making your part more enjoyable.