



Image: Chester Boyd – London Zoo

Even for the most experienced of teams, event catering can be a tricky proposition. Take your team out of its comfort zone, place them in an environment that often wasn't necessarily purpose built for large scale cooking and dining, and provide them with a supporting cast of disinterested temps, and it can throw up some, how shall we say, 'unique' challenges. On the other hand, events provide a steep learning curve for staff in a unique environment, and are immensely rewarding professionally, not to mention financially, when they go well.

So how do the professionals survive in this sink or swim world? Preparation. This is, of course, vitally important in any area of catering, but particularly so with regard to events. A cramped kitchen, surrounded by inexperienced staff, with baying punters and fraying tempers is, after all, not exactly the best place for improvisation.

"There are many factors that need to be taken into consideration when planning," says Gary Devereaux, executive event chef for Chester Boyd, the highly regarded event caterers whose clients include Virgin Media and Allen & Overy. "Prior to each event the venue has to be assessed to see what the kitchen facilities

are like. We then work closely with the client to design a menu to fit the occasion.

"Access to the venue also has to be considered as this can be a major part of the planning process. Finally, timing and attention to detail are both essential to ensuring that the event runs smoothly."

David Gadd, meanwhile, is director of Crown Catering, a smaller Gloucestershire-based operation which specialises in weddings, festivals and corporate events. "Organisation is the key," he says. "I don't think people realise the amount of work that goes into serving 500 or 1,000 people in a marquee. It takes us several weeks to plan; apart from the food, everything is done beforehand."

Hot meals and hurricanes

Even with the best preparation in the world, with events a great deal of the organisation is simply out of your control, so Creed recommends planning for the unforeseeable – a lesson she appears to have learnt the hard way. "On one occasion we had to evacuate a site on the last day of set up due to it being hit by the tail end of a hurricane!" she says. "Fortunately we had built sufficient slack into our build schedule for it not to affect us too significantly."

This is, of course, an extreme case – far

more often you will be fighting the battle that catering teams encounter in all walks of life: delivering a hot meal to a large number of people simultaneously. Devereaux readily acknowledges this, saying: "My primary consideration is always that the food is served at the right temperature."

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Gadd, meanwhile, has observed a particular focal point for stress during the serving process. "The critical moment for any caterer is when the main course goes out," he says. "Everybody seems to be relaxed about starters and desserts, but the main course can be trying."

Sally Whelan, director of The Mystery Dining Company, has experienced this problem from the other end. Although best known for secretly critiquing restaurants, the organisation also runs a 'professional visitor' service designed specifically for the contract catering sector, and thus Whelan is uniquely placed to comment →



Image: Chester Boyd

from the customer's perspective.

"The challenges faced by a caterer will depend on the size of the event and the venue where it is being held," she says. "There are clearly fewer logistical elements to worry about when operating from a fixed or static venue; however, even then menu choice can make or break a service.

"Food quality and service capability are what create a lasting impression and are directly tied in with reputation. When it comes to designing a suitable menu for events, you do need to consider the facilities that you will have access to. Menus should not just be scaleable in production, the kitchen team will need to be able to serve food that is to a consistent standard, regardless of guest numbers."

Keeping afloat

Like the swimmer who appears to glide from above the surface but is actually thrashing around just to stay above the water, the trick is to keep any stresses hidden well away from view, presenting an image of grace and serenity. The key, according to Devereaux, is to work with the space you have and to set up in a way that will work most efficiently and effectively for the team. "Timing is crucial, along with deciding on what order to cook

which dishes," he advises.

Creed, meanwhile, recommends establishing a full understanding of the event and how the caterer, as a company, fits into the bigger picture. "Delivery windows can often be quite tight, so it is vital to understand these and work within them," she says. "Quite often we are providing services in a temporary location, and due to the layout of the site we can have restricted storage space. It is vital to ensure that this is maximised in order to overcome any difficulties which may arise due to the many challenges that occur during the event."

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One of the primary difficulties is, of course, ensuring that hygiene is maintained to your usual high standards, especially when working at warm outdoor summer events. Again, in this regard, planning is essential. "We always work closely with the local authority's environmental health

department in the early stages to keep them abreast of our plans for the operation," says Creed. "Sodexo has its own in-house environmental health department, and we involve them in the planning of the event. They conduct an audit both before we go live and during the operation, to ensure that we are operating to the required standard."

As well as delivering the food safely, increasingly customers are demanding that it's also done responsibly. "In the last five years, environmental issues and sustainability have rightly become much more important in the planning of an event," notes Creed. "As part of our corporate citizenship strategy, we have become more conscious about how we deliver our services, what happens to our waste when it leaves site, the packaging it arrives in and where we source our supplies from."

Cheques and checks

An even bigger issue, of course, is the economy. Large events are surely the kind of extravagance that have been reined in since the recession began. Devereaux concedes that clients are being more cautious when booking events and are having to work with tighter budgets, though Creed thinks that things are finally beginning to return to normal.