

Frugal Feast



How to trim your food and drink costs while still keeping your guests well satisfied

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Feeding your guests will be one of the most expensive things you do at your wedding. After all, you want to make sure your food and libations reflect your generosity rather than your budget consciousness. But there's no reason you can't satisfy both wishes at the same time, according to Vancouver caterers. Keeping to your budget while still providing a memorable feast is all a matter of careful planning. A few tricks of the trade don't hurt, either. Here's the scoop.

Style of Service

Though you might have imagined a sit-down, plated dinner, be warned: this and family-style service come with high price tags. The reason? "A plated dinner requires more service staff, china and cutlery because the logistics are so complicated," says Donna Wadsworth, head honcho at Savoury City Caterers.

Plated dinners usually come with three entrée options. Add bread to the equation and between the cost of the bread, bread plates and butter knives, you might be adding as much as \$5 per head.

Wadsworth suggests a buffet or cocktail party as a significantly less costly choice. "In a buffet you can offer abundant food, but you require far fewer serving staff, china and cutlery," she says. "In this context, offering one option for an entrée, plus a vegetarian offering, is enough."

A cocktail party is another more affordable reception choice, where guests can be offered hors

d'oeuvres and miniature-size entrées served at food stations. This saves on staffing, as well as on rental fees for china, glassware, tables and chairs. Also, creating a restaurant-style meal in a catering setting is extremely challenging and requires an enormous amount of set-up, say the experts. So, if you can reduce the workload, your budget won't suffer as much.

Talking Timing

Keeping your timeline tight can save precious dollars in fees for service staff, a factor many couples don't consider as their guests mingle for hours while they are off on their photo session. "Sometimes we have a 16-hour timeline for a wedding, and all the service and culinary staff have to be paid for that time," Wadsworth says.

Debra Lykkemark, CEO of Culinary Capers, agrees: "A shorter wedding is also a favour to your guests. If you start your wedding early, their whole day is gone and it's a long time for guests to be tied up."

You could also pick a Sunday rather than a Saturday, Wadsworth suggests, as Sunday weddings involve shorter timelines and guests tend to drink less than on a Saturday. And choose your wedding date carefully.

"Avoid the big dates," she adds. "August is fully booked a year ahead, so consider an October or January wedding and your caterer might be willing to offer a discount."

Food, Glorious Food

If you've set your heart on prawns, lobster or beef tenderloin, but your budget won't permit such pricey entrées, consider incorporating them into hors d'oeuvres instead. "You still get the taste and the luxury this way, but you get to keep it in small portions," Lykkemark says.

Avoiding super-expensive items and selecting lower-cost substitutes is another good way to trim your budget. Beef short rib could stand in for tenderloin, or arctic char for sablefish. And for dessert? You might want to rethink that lavish wedding cake. Many couples are now choosing mason-jar desserts, a popular boho-chic trend, notes Lykkemark. No need to completely forfeit the cake, though. "A pretty, small, six-inch cake is a good substitute and can be dramatic, still giving you a cake to cut for the photographs."

And instead of paying for staff to serve coffee at each table, have a coffee and tea station set up so guests can help themselves.

Bar Talk

"You can save a lot of money at the bar if you keep it simple," says Lykkemark. "As soon as you have a full bar you'll have a lot of liquor that's opened but not completely used, and a lot of different styles of glassware that have to be rented."

Take, for example, the traditional champagne toast, a time during which guests often forget about the drink they were consuming before the bubbly emerged. Lykkemark suggests serving only wine, beer and perhaps a signature cocktail. Other ways to keep bar expenses down are by implementing a cash bar, or giving guests four drink tickets and the option of a cash bar when those tickets are used up. "Cash bars help control alcohol consumption," she explains.

Venue Smarts

Choosing a venue that includes some equipment can reduce the dollars you might otherwise have to spend on rentals. Says Wadsworth: "Community centres are incredible value, especially in Vancouver. They're a little more relaxed and often have parking, kitchens, tables and chairs in place. We love catering at the community centres at Coal Harbour, the Roundhouse, False Creek and West Point Grey."

And if your venue permits you to bring your own liquor, you can also eliminate the considerable (often 200 per cent) markup on alcoholic beverages charged by hotels and restaurants. We'll drink to that! ☐