



Reception dinner service styles

By Stephen Kovachevich and Whitney Ackermann

Your wedding day should reflect the style and personality of you and your fiancé. Your reception should shine and set the tone for this exciting life journey. While there are many types of receptions, we will focus on three main ones. These are sit-down dinners, buffet dinners and hors d'oeuvres buffets. They differ in formality, style of service and variety of options.

The most formal and traditional style is a sit-down dinner. Within this category there are also different styles. You can have each course served to each guest, you can have the food delivered family-style on platters, or you can do a combination of both.

The multi course meal served to each guest is the most formal and requires the most labor expense. For this style, you can either serve all of the guests the same menu or offer choices, usually for the entrée only. Giving your guests choices requires a bit more work because the caterer needs to know how many of each entrée have been ordered before the wedding. This means you must get the choices to your guests, compile the totals and communicate that to the caterer. Subsequently, you must also have a system of letting the caterer know which guest ordered which entrée. This can be done with a symbol on the place card of the guest or in a variety of ways, but they must be on the table for the waiter to see. The best way is assigned seating with the place card on the table; however, this is also very time-consuming. One option is to serve a pair of smaller entrees to each guest. You can get a count of the vegetarians and communicate that to the caterer, leaving the rest of the guests to get the pre-selected entrée.

A family-style dinner consists of platters of food being served to the table with the guests serving themselves and passing the platter. This allows the guests to take what that they want and as much as they want. This is great to accommodate everyone's needs, but you must have a table big enough to accommodate the platters, and you need more food than you think each table will eat or you will run out of items. You can pass a vegetarian entrée with the other food, but you must have enough for everybody. This requires a smaller staff than the sit-down dinner, but you will still need plenty to take empty platters, or to refill.

A buffet dinner gives guests more options to choose from. This may be a great option if you do not have time to gather all the entrée choices or if you have a significant number of dietary restrictions. To get your guests through the line in a timely manner, you need to dismiss tables and make sure that you have enough buffets. A general rule of thumb is a double-sided buffet for 100 guests, and you will want to think about adding another buffet at 175. With this option, more so than the other two, you will need to plan out the speech timing so that people are not still in line when speeches are happening.

The hors d'oeuvres buffet can have many names, and many choices within the category as well. If it is a wedding in the mid afternoon, then you may choose to do light hors d'oeuvres. If it is over a meal period, however, you should do what we would call a strolling dinner, or heavy hors d'oeuvres buffet. These will normally have interesting action stations that reflect the bride's and groom's personal preferences, such as a mashed potato martini bar, or perhaps a carving



station where a uniformed waiter is carving beef or pork tenderloin. This option provides enough food if they would like to make it dinner, with many choices. For this style there are no seating restrictions, and your guests are actively engaged in the food and conversation. Your challenge for this style is to make sure that you open the food stations as soon as the guests arrive to avoid lines. This gives your guests another thing to do while you finish pictures, and means they will have already had something to eat so you can start speeches. With this style, make sure you have excellent communication with your DJ, so they can announce what is happening to the whole crowd.

To help decide which style to choose, first consider the mobility of your guests. If there are many with mobility considerations, you may want to lean towards the plated, or the family style. The second question will need to be, is there a large number of dietary considerations? The hors d'oeuvres buffet and the dinner buffet give your guests more food options. And last, what "feel" for your reception do you want? More mingling and free flowing? Then the hors d'oeuvres buffet would be the best. If you long for a fancy head table and a fairy-tale formal look, then the sit-down dinner with served courses might be where you would like to go. Whatever your choices are, it will be a day that reflects you and your spouse-to-be.

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