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FOOD FOR FÊTES



Call for custom: Customized wedding menus are popular with clients of McCalls Catering, from a starter trio of quinoa salad, beet salad and red snapper ceviche (below) to mini Golden Gate Bridge desserts. Photo here by Irja Elisa Photography, below by Villa Visuals.

Marriage-Minded Menus

It's the mix that makes the magic in wedding reception menus today.
By Susan Cuadrado

ALL IN THE FAMILY

“Weddings are a mix of cultures and styles, and a great way to customize them and make them unique is to play off of family traditions,” says Anna Williams, partner and catering manager of San Francisco-based McCalls Catering and Events. “Couples are asking for very specific menu items, and going so far as to provide a grandmother’s recipe for this or a father’s recipe for that.” Specialty drinks and desserts are popular contenders in this realm, she says, adding that many clients will go the extra step to make their own takeaway treats for guests, such as homemade jams, limoncello, olive oil and wine.

Customizing passed hors d’oeuvre during the cocktail hour, Williams says, is a delicious and cost-effective way to incorporate family and/or restaurant favorites into the menu. “This is less expensive than having two or three stations, and provides the same



amount of variety. We can get very creative with small bites from each restaurant or culture.” Mini signs on passing platters ensure guests know the source of inspiration behind each bite.

A recent family favorites-inspired menu included tray-passed goat cheese arancini with Parmesan dipping sauce, blini with caviar and crème fraîche, fried zucchini with jalapeño sauce, a plated salad of roasted tomatoes with burrata, delicate squash and wild mushrooms, table-poured cream of celery bisque, and two entree selections: braised short ribs with sweet potato

mash and heirloom vegetables, and grilled eggplant, zucchini and mozzarella manicotti. Grass-fed lamb pistachio sliders and French fry cones rounded out the array of late-night menu treats.

MIDEAST FEAST As far as ethnic cuisine goes, Middle Eastern flavors and fare continue to top wedding menus. “Middle Eastern cuisine reigns supreme,” says Nancy Goodman-Thevoz, president of Arlington, Va.-based Main Event Caterers. “We’re seeing more and more requests for flavors from this region.”



Cooking with color: A brilliant carrot salad with arugula pesto from Marcia Selden Caterers brightens wedding menus. Photo courtesy Main Event Caterers.

Pretty presentation: Presentation is growing in importance for wedding menus, says the team at Marcia Selden Catering, shown here with golden eggs stuffed with truffled mashed potato and caviar (below), and stylish sushi (bottom). Photo below by Hechler Photography, at bottom by Michael Jurick.

To that end, the kitchen keeps plenty of harissa, turmeric and za'atar in the larder for dishes such as harissa-roasted baby carrots dressed with lemon yogurt sauce; fava-bean falafel with lemon and tahini; Indian-spiced fried chicken sliders with tamarind aioli and pickled red onions; saffron-scented quinoa pilaf with Moroccan-spiced tofu; honey-roasted vegetables with harissa aioli and toasted hazelnuts; and red wine-painted herb-crusted rack of lamb topped with chopped pistachios.

"Purple food is also trending, so that gives us an opportunity to make beet hummus and purple potato bisque," she says. A nod to Pantone's color of the year—Ultra Violet—perhaps?

STEAKHOUSE REDUX White tablecloths, formal wait staff, a prime cut of beef—couples are adding old school charm and glamor to their wedding menus. "We've seen a return to formality, with traditional sit-down, multi-course dinners," says Robin Selden, managing partner and executive chef of Stamford, Conn.-based Marcia Selden Catering and Events. "Couples put a lot of time and attention into their menus, which tend to be very elegant and sophisticated, with clean presentations."

One menu in particular fills the bill to a T, or should we say, T-bone. "We just cannot get away from the classic Peter Luger Steak House menu," Selden says. Indeed, one of the caterer's most popular menus features steakhouse staples with a twist. "Our latest craze and embellishment is our thick-cut crispy 'Jenga'-stacked bacon," Selden



says, which accompanies jumbo-thick-cut sirloin steaks served with horseradish cream, red wine demi-glace and Peter Luger's steak sauce, sides of sautéed herbed mushrooms, caramelized onions, sautéed garlic spinach, grilled asparagus with lemon vinaigrette, and sweet potato and truffle mash. Fresh-baked pretzel rolls and Caesar salad



Customization is key: D'Amico Catering serves as 'food designer' in creating custom presentations for shrimp and grits, curried chicken samosas, and 'Juicy Lucy' sliders (clockwise from top left). Photo at top left by Studio Laguna Photography, right by Noah Wolf, bottom left by A.M. Photography.



topped with grilled chicken, herbed shrimp or char-grilled calamari round out the meal.

CROSS-CULTURAL COUPLINGS Combining cuisines to match the cultural or ethnic backgrounds of bridal couples is nothing new. However, presenting such dishes in a cohesive way that avoids a mishmash approach is key. "Our clients are not only looking for delicious food, but also a variety of visually inspiring food, so we have to be food designers," says Rachel Bruzek, senior creative event and trend specialist at Minneapolis-based D'Amico Catering. "We personalize the event to each couple based on their vision, ethnicity or family traditions. Presentation is part of the experience they are expecting from us, so we are constantly resourcing

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Get comfortable: Proof of the Pudding turns traditional brunch dishes—such as chicken and waffles—into appetizers (top left), along with vegging out with vegan poke (above). Desserts get a twist, such as a matcha strawberry roll cake (at right). Photos top left and above by Patrick Williams Photography; photo at right by POP.



different companies for wares to accommodate the growing number of custom menus.”

On the hors d'oeuvre and after-party fronts, Bruzek says many dishes comprise what she calls a combination of “Lowcountry and cheffy-casual fare,” citing favorites such as lobster mac and cheese, duck confit tacos and sliders, deviled quail or beet-cured eggs topped with bacon, and mini New England-style lobster rolls.

Additionally, blends of Persian, Indian, Asian and Mediterranean are popular menu mergers, testament to today’s well-traveled and food-savvy couples, Bruzek says. A recent mixed menu paired Middle Eastern dishes—sliced za’atar-rubbed lamb loin, freekah with chickpeas, and braised artichokes with smoked eggplant cream, and dukkah-seared salmon with preserved lemon yogurt, pomegran-

ates, pea shoots and crisp lamb belly—with Chinese sliced char siu pork steamed buns with stir-fried vegetables and black bean sauce, Japanese hamachi crudo with yuzu-edamame puree and shiso salad, and Singapore pan-fried noodles.

RAISING THE BAR “The cocktail hour is the typically the first impression of the wedding reception, the first thing guests experience and taste,” Selden says. “So offering a wide variety of small bites at an interactive food station is a great way to kick things off.” Goodman agrees: “Interactive appetizer stations during cocktail hour are becoming more and more popular in the DC market, so we’ve created several new options, such as our ramen, bruschetta and savory waffle bars,” she says. Another favorite is the Canadian-style poutine bar, where guests top mini

trays of warm French fries with brown gravy and cheese curds.

Speaking of spuds, New York-based Indiana Market and Catering has found great success with its roasted potato bars, which feature a variety of potatoes served with a trio of sauces: roasted tomato aioli, aji pepper sauce, and truffled mayonnaise. Build-your-own ceviche and made-to-order risotto bowls are also a hit with bridal couples, says owner David Turk. Traveling oyster shuckers add yet another interactive layer to the event. “They look great and keep the conversation going,” Turk says. “And it’s much cleaner and simpler than a traditional raw bar.”

At Atlanta-based Proof of the Pudding, traditional brunch items—eggs Benedict, buttermilk biscuits, house-made doughnuts, and chicken and waffles—make for great interactive appetizer and



Play with your food: S'mores are even more fun when they are served as s'mores pops by Proof of the Pudding. Photo by Patrick Williams Photography.

dessert stations. Comfort foods, such as made-to-order mini grilled cheese sandwiches on artisan bread with assorted cheeses and tomato soup sips, are other reception must-haves.

VEGGING OUT Vegetarian and vegan menus are becoming more common at weddings—either in addition to or replacements for traditional meat-based menus. “It’s vegan everything,” says Dina Biondo-Iglesias, director of sales and marketing at Proof of the

Pudding, who says the company has created several all-vegan and -vegetarian menus for 2018, which include peach barbecue marinated tofu with grilled sweet corn and wilted Swiss chard, crispy tofu and bourbon-poached yam steaks with English pea barley risotto and hemp seed gremolata, quinoa pilaf-stuffed heirloom tomatoes with charred broccolini and oven-roasted tomato sauce, and vegan arepas with refried beans, guacamole salad and house-pickled crunchy slaw. ●

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