

SUMMER 2023

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## Orlando Gerves Up the Trends




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EDUCATION, NEWS, PRODUCTS & IDEAS FOR PROFESSIONAL CATERERS

# THE LIFE OF LUXURY



Working with luxury clients is “moonshot thinking”

BY AMBER KISPERT

**For many, luxury is aspirational: being able to travel to luxurious places, dine at the finest restaurants, and generally have your needs and wants met in every scenario.**

For event planners and caterers, luxury is about exclusivity, out-of-the-box thinking, and glamour.

“It’s moonshot thinking—aiming to achieve something that is generally believed to be impossible,” said Robin Selden (Marcia Selden Catering & Events) during *Luxury is a State of Mind* (presented during Catersource + The Special Event 2022).

Attracting luxury clients (i.e., Fortune 500 companies, celebrities, tech executives, and politicians) is also aspirational to many in the events industry.

“Entering the luxury market is an excellent way to elevate your brand reputation and increase your revenue,” according to an [article from Nora Sheils for NACE](#).

But it’s not so much about “who” your client is.

“I could spin your head right now if I told you who my clients were, but I’m not going to,” Selden said, “because it’s not important to me, it’s important that those clients are telling their friends.”

If you’re hoping to break into the luxury market, it’s important to go in with your eyes open, since “high-end clients have high-end needs,” said Sheils.

(Left) Luxury means aspirational and exclusivity. Shown: An event by David Beahm. Photo courtesy Jose Villa

## What is luxury?

Essentially, luxury clients are those who are willing to spend between \$100,000 and \$500,000 on an event (basic luxury) and those clients who will spend over \$500,000 on any given event (ultra luxury). Don't be mistaken though: there isn't a one-size-fits-all for luxury clients; some are flashy, while others like to fly under the radar.

"You have to do a little forensic work to figure out who they are, who's paying, and what type of luxury client they are," said Marcy Blum of Marcy Blum Associates during her Opening General Session at Catersource + The Special Event 2023.

When discussing luxury events, you should look at them through the lens of exclusivity. "They have what you can't," said David Beahm (David Beahm Experiences) during *Luxury is a State of Mind*. "Show them that you can give them something that they can't have anywhere else. A flower is a flower until you can say, 'I know the grower who lives in Holland. His name is Steve and has worked for 20



This 50th birthday from Marcia Selden Catering & Events featured a ceiling floral installation with custom lighting, as well as other custom details such as placecards custom painted for each guest and an over-the-top floral tablescapes with custom monogrammed napkins. Photo courtesy Marcia Selden Catering & Events

years to get this flower this color and I'm going to put it in your bridal bouquet."

"These are people that go to a lot of fancy events, and they see a lot of things," said Sarah Hall (Joel's Catering), continuing on the topic of exclusivity, during *How to Break into the Luxury Wedding Market* (presented during Catersource + The Special Event 2023). "They want something that is unique to them and memorable for them. They want to create an experience for their friends. They absolutely want to show off their level of success, but they have a harder time admitting it."

"If their friend had that at their party last week or last year, it better not show up at their party," Selden said. "That's not luxurious for their guests to have seen it already."

At the end of the day, luxury comes down to the level of service that is provided.

"They want high end, top professionals," Blum said.

## Speaking their language

When working with luxury clients, it's important to illustrate that you understand their world (where they travel, where they eat, what circles they run in), so make sure that you are reading the latest luxury magazines and staying abreast of current luxury trends.

Additionally, luxury clients are also looking for those they can relate to.

"In our industry today, and especially with high network luxury clients, it's not enough anymore to be interested in our clients, you have to be interesting to them," said Paulina

Marcia Selden Catering & Events designed a custom floral installation for escort cards that mimicked the design of the event. The tablescapes incorporated mismatched antique china and glassware. Photo courtesy Marcia Selden Catering & Events



(Left) Marcia Selden Catering & Events created a custom escort card "table" for a wedding on a family's horse farm in the Hudson Valley. Photo courtesy Jonathan Young Weddings; (Right) You can take luxury to another level with the use of custom ice cubes alongside chilled champagne. Photo courtesy Michael Jurick Photography



Luxury clients are looking for concepts that they haven't seen before, like these hanging orbs that David Beahm incorporated for an event. Photo courtesy Theo Milo Photography

**“You have to be authentic, especially with a luxury client. If you're inauthentic, they can smell it in the water, and they're going to take you out.” —David Beahm**

Corvi (Events by Paulina) during *What Luxury Wedding Clients Really Want* (presented during Catersource + The Special Event 2022). “When you can talk to your clients they’ll think ‘This lady might know what it means to play in my sandbox. If she knows what it means to play in my sandbox, if she’s going to the same places I’m going to, maybe she gets who I am and maybe she can represent my vision for my wedding and turn it into reality.’”

Relating to luxury clients is where the concept of “code switching” comes into play. Code switching is the psychological act of making people around us feel comfortable while making ourselves feel confident around others, according to *All That Glitters is Not Always Gold* (a feature that appeared in the winter issue of *Special Events* magazine).

For Selden, she code switches when meeting with clients following a bit of cyber research.

“Is she always in her Lululemons and sneakers coming from the gym? If she is, that’s how I’m showing up to that meeting,” she said. “If she’s in her pearls and her sweater, that’s what I’m wearing.”

But be careful: there’s a fine line between being relatable and “being them.”

“They may want to relate to you, but they don’t want you to be them—it’s a very tricky dance,” Blum said. “You have to wear just enough designer stuff not to annoy them, but not too much that they think they’re paying you too much.



For a waterfront anniversary party Marcia Selden Catering & Events installed a custom floral ceiling. Photo courtesy Ricky Rodriguez

“It’s not pretention, it’s just craft. They want to understand that you are committed to your craft.”

## The gatekeepers

While some caterers may already work in the luxury market (and their reputation precedes them), those who



A caprese salad from Joel’s Catering featuring heirloom tomatoes, burrata, basil, olive oil, sea salt, and pepper. Photo courtesy Denny Culbert

(Right) The plated salad course during A Love at First Rose Wedding featured arugula, frisée, Manchego cheese, dried apricot, dried fig, Pink Lady apple, toasted almond, and white balsamic vinaigrette. Photo courtesy Colette’s Catering & Events

(Bottom right) Colette’s Catering & Events composed an hors d’oeuvres platter (featuring lobster rolls, chilled corn bisque, Hamachi Tartare, Tomato + Burrata, and Scallop Tartare) for the couple (Joelle Fletcher and Jordan Rodgers of ABC’s *The Bachelorette*) during A Love at First Rose Wedding. Photo courtesy Colette’s Catering & Events



are hoping to break into the market may need to look to luxury event planners and luxury event venues for referrals. According to Hall, roughly 50% of luxury business will be through referrals, which is why collaboration is so essential when working with luxury clients.

“We are your friends, not your enemy,” Blum said. “The only way forward is for all of us to figure out how to all work together.”

Consider engaging with the planner (or venue manager) from the very beginning: host a planner-only tasting to encourage referrals, discuss your menu proposals with the planner up front, listen to their ideas, and most importantly follow up after the event (possibly even with a gift) to see what worked and what didn’t.

“You are impressing the planner first and foremost because we are the gatekeepers,” Blum said. “We are able to give [the caterer] clues and tricks and insight they wouldn’t get otherwise; I can upsell things so much easier to a client because I’ve basically been living with them.”



## Luxury Locales

New research has discovered the top 10 most luxury obsessed areas in the United States

Customized jewelry experts Glamira analyzed Google Trends data to discover the level of interest in each area for multiple search terms including 'luxury vacation', 'luxury jewelry' and 'luxury hotels'.

1. Washington D.C.
2. New York
3. Florida
4. New Jersey
5. Connecticut
6. Georgia
7. Virginia
8. California
9. Maryland
10. Massachusetts

A spokesperson from Glamira commented on the findings: "There are various ways to experience luxury, whether that be heading on a vacation to stay in a five-star resort or perhaps purchasing high quality jewelry that will last a lifetime. It's no doubt that Americans desire a taste of a lavish lifestyle, but one thing for certain is that the East coast has a particularly keen interest in luxury with nine of the areas in the ranking belonging to this region. However, with one of the

areas in the top 10 being on the West coast, it will be interesting to see if any other nearby areas follow suit and develop a luxury obsession."

In a similar study, Wisevoter has analyzed Google Trends data to determine the most bougie states in the US. These states have a higher-than-average interest in luxury-related terms such as high-end fashion, luxury cars, and upscale travel destinations. This data suggests that residents of these states are more likely to indulge in luxury goods and experiences, making them a prime target market for luxury brands and businesses. Here is the ranking of the top 10 states looking to indulge in a luxury lifestyle in 2023.

1. New York
2. Oregon
3. Connecticut
4. West Virginia
5. Alabama
6. Maryland
7. Alaska
8. Minnesota
9. Florida
10. South Carolina

The above information is courtesy of:

- Wisevoter
- Glamira



Joelle Fletcher and Jordan Rodgers of ABC's *The Bachelorette* held their wedding at the Sunstone Winery. Photo courtesy Valorie Darling



(Left, from top to bottom) Joelle Fletcher and Jordan Rodgers of ABC's *The Bachelorette* had only one request for Colette's Catering & Events: beautifully plated and photo-ready food with innovative signature cocktails. Shown: Moscow Mule and Passionfruit Margarita. Photo courtesy Valorie Darling



Colette's Catering & Events received this year's Best Off-Premise ACE award for their event A Love at First Rose Wedding, which celebrated the wedding of Joelle Fletcher and Jordan Rodgers of ABC's *The Bachelorette*. Photo courtesy Valorie Darling

Beautiful blooms and luxurious crystal and china adorned the tables during A Love at First Rose Wedding. Photo courtesy Colette's Catering & Events

(Bottom) Colette's Catering & Events incorporated an interactive Burrata Bar into their A Love at First Rose Wedding (featuring imported burrata cheese, fresh sliced-to-order prosciutto, house made focaccia, grissini, heirloom tomatoes, and a beautiful assortment of fresh jams). Burrata has been gaining popularity over the last year or so, making this a trendsetting moment for the event and a wow factor for the couple. Photo courtesy Valorie Darling



Additionally, make sure to maintain that respectful relationship throughout the planning process, because it's the planner or the venue who will bring more luxury business your way in the future.

"We've all done enough events to know that things can sometimes get a little dicey," Hall said, "but that couple is going to come and go, this planner and that venue manager is who I really need to partner with. They don't become our best friend then our adversary; they're always our best friend."

## Setting yourself up for success

Working with luxury clients can be challenging, so it's important that you have your business set up to succeed in this market.

"When it comes to luxury clients, they're going to be fussy, they're



# What's the Buzz?

Here are a few buzzwords to keep in mind when working with (or promoting to) luxury clients:

- Personalized
- Customized
- Cutting edge
- Thoughtful
- Innovative
- Artisanal
- Signature
- Prestigious
- Enthusiastic
- Craftmanship

Information above courtesy Marcy Blum, *The Old Razzle Dazzle: Tips on Reaching the Next Level of Hospitality* (Catersource + The Special Event 2023)



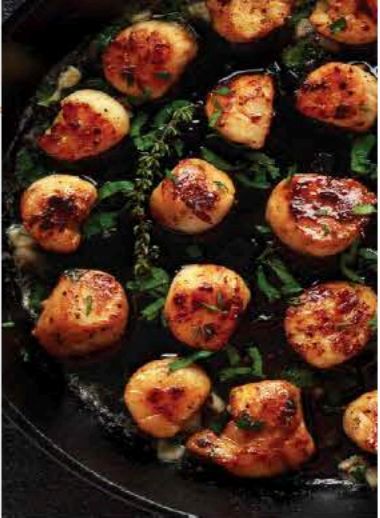
Sunstone Winery is modeled after a French villa and features both a lavender-filled courtyard & wine caves. Photo courtesy Valorie Darling



Char-grilled oysters from Joel's Catering (oysters brushed with melted butter, parmesan, garlic, and parsley), which are passed on an interactive concession tray. Photo courtesy Denny Culbert



A fig salad from Joel's Catering featuring aged prosciutto, fresh fig, chevre, and pistachio. Photo courtesy Denny Culbert



Seared scallops from Joel's Catering (served with wilted greens and presented in an oversized cast iron pan). Photo courtesy Denny Culbert

going to change their mind, they're going to say, 'I forgot,'" Corvi said. "They need to know that they can trust you."

## Proposals that pop

The first way to illustrate to a luxury client that you are serious, and you are up to the challenge of catering their event, is to present a professional, thorough, beautiful (and hand delivered) proposal.

"It has to look as important as the money they are looking to spend is," Blum said. "Share all kinds of menus so people get a sense of your range and diversity."

Additionally, do a little bit of research into who you'll be pitching to: is it the couple, the parents, or is it their assistant (which is most often the case). Also, never push back when a luxury client challenges something that you are proposing.

"They didn't become rich because other people argued with them," Blum said.

## Make it a moment

Obviously, luxury clients are looking for you to offer moments that surprise, delight, and excite them.

"You have to be a memory maker," Selden said.

In catering, luxury clients want opulently served cuisines that are made from the highest quality ingredients, presented beautifully, and personal to them (95% of luxury couples said that a vendor's ability to incorporate their personal style and taste contributes to their decision, Hall said).

Consider what Colette's Catering & Events did recently for the wedding of Joelle Fletcher and Jordan Rodgers from ABC's *The Bachelorette* (this year's ACE recipient for Best Off-Premise Catering).

# Marcy's Musts for Standing Out at a Tasting

- Showcase your creativity with interactive service elements (they are always better in-person than in a photo)
- Tastings can help to show off your hospitable staff
- You can be an active participant, and don't be defensive
  - E.g., Perspective clients can recognize your technique and talent, even without loving everything they have tried.
- Create special details that will surprise and delight your clients
  - Place cards
  - Monogrammed napkins
  - Floral arrangements
  - Live music
  - Top wait staff
  - Branded straws
  - Welcome drink
  - Ambiance
- A hotel tasting will have a different vibe than an off-premise tasting. Work with your surroundings and your client.
- Give a sweet treat for guests to takeaway

- Follow up with a thank you note and share your excitement with the planners and clients about the event
- Ask the planner for honest feedback following the tasting

Information courtesy of Marcy Blum, *The Old Razzle Dazzle: Tips on Reaching the Next Level of Hospitality* (Catersource + The Special Event 2023)  
Photo courtesy WASIO Faces





The venue is often the first thing that a luxury couple decides on. Photo courtesy Jose Villa

The initial menu proposal that they presented evolved over two years in order to further reflect the couple. Things like their favorite meals together, cherished places to visit, their shared Southern upbringing, falling in love in Los Angeles, and their values for clean eating (turn to page 80 for a look at the clean lifestyle) and sustainability became foundational pillars for the final modern American menu: an interactive Burrata Bar; filet mignon with red wine demi, Yukon gold mashed potatoes, oven-dried tomato, roasted king oyster mushrooms, sautéed spinach; and Baja Sea Bass with romesco sauce, heirloom bean ragout, hazelnut, frisée and Tinkerbell® pepper salad.

### Exceed expectations

The thing that sets caterers apart when working with luxury clients are the little things: the synchronized service, the high performing staff, the surprising moments, and general service without being asked. All these things fall under the umbrella of “unreasonable hospitality,” or service that is unexpected.

“You need to show that you’re worth what you’re getting paid,” Blum said. “It’s not about ego here, it’s about money.”

“It’s the small things that make all the difference,” Corvi said. “If you can make someone’s life easier, do it.”

“The luxury experience depends on the depth that you can anticipate your clients’ needs,” Beahm said.

### Branding matters

Look at your marketing and your brand if you’re hoping to break into the luxury market. Does your brand communicate luxury? Or is it more of a corporate brand? Is it worth considering a rebrand? Perhaps you need to create a luxury division of your business.

“Don’t just be a food page, show the events that you’re getting hired for,” Hall said. “If you really want to do this, you have to take it seriously.”

### Be authentic

Above all, go into the luxury market knowing who you are and what you do well.

“We are known in our market as being the expensive caterer, [Beahm’s] known as being the expensive designer. I am done apologizing for being who we are,” Selden said. “If we’re not right for you, that’s okay—because I have other friends who do what you’re looking for and I will gladly send you their way—but I am not going to compromise what I know we do so right.”

“If you align your company with other like brands that are luxurious, there’s something really special about that because it’s authentic and it’s not disingenuous.”

“You have to be authentic, especially with a luxury client,” Beahm said. “If you’re inauthentic, they can smell it in the water, and they’re going to take you out.”

“It doesn’t matter what you’re selling, it’s how you make them feel,” Selden said. **CS**