



Food Safety Checklist When Catering Off-Site...For Real

Catering an off-site event can be a great moneymaker for a food establishment, whether you are a large firm, a small catering company, or a regular restaurant. Food safety must be just as much of a priority off-site as on-site, which, I believe, presents more challenges. For one thing, workers are out of their “comfort zone,” and food safety might not be top of mind.

Food safety rules have one goal — to avoid food-borne illnesses due to contamination: biological, chemical and physical. How? By controlling time and temperature, avoiding cross-contamination, ensuring good personal hygiene, and maintaining good cleaning and sanitizing practices.

To control time and temperature...

...follow all time and temperature rules. Cook foods to the proper temperatures, whether in your location or on the site of the event, to kill any food bacteria. Ensure that all food transport and storage equipment is insulated and capable of keeping hot foods hot and cold foods cold. At the event, do everything possible to keep food out of the Temperature Danger Zone (TDZ) — 41°F - 135°F. Cold foods have to be held at an internal temperature of 41°F or lower, using refrigeration or ice. Hot foods have to be kept at a minimum internal temperature of 135° or higher, using hot holding equipment.

If you don't want to or can't monitor food temperatures in front of guests, use time control as your guide — and discard food at four hours. Make sure you label food with the correct discard time for your staff or your guests to follow. Hot food definitely has to be



discarded at four hours — or even earlier — if it begins to measure inside the TDZ. You can keep cold food out for up to six hours, but **ONLY** if, at the four-hour mark, it measures below 70°F!! Protect your business, and even though it's a hassle, keep accurate time and temperature logs as proof you have handled the food properly.

To avoid cross-contamination...

...keep raw meats and foods away from RTE foods, both in transport and in storage at the receiving site. If your on-site catering kitchen or satellite kitchen is big enough, set up different work stations for raw meats and RTE to keep them separated. Use color-coded specific equipment to avoid cross-contamination. Make sure you have one serving spoon or fork designated for each food item and have extra serving utensils available if the catered event will last longer than four hours. Then you can change them out versus having to clean and sanitize them at the four-hour mark, as required. Have lots of extra plates if serving buffet style so guests looking for second helpings don't inadvertently contaminate

food by touching a used plate with a serving utensil and then scooping up more food from the serving dish.

Regarding personal hygiene...

...make sure you have a portable hand washing station available if you don't have access to proper hand washing sinks at the catering site. If wearing gloves, follow proper glove-use guidelines — wash hands before putting gloves on, change gloves when changing to a new food or task or if they get dirty or torn, and at the minimum four hours if in constant use at the same job task. In fact, I recommend changing gloves every hour — two hours max — so bring lots of gloves!!!! We always use more than we think we'll need! Please don't use hand sanitizer instead of washing your hands. Hand sanitizer is to be used properly after washing hands.

Make sure your employees wear clean clothing and clean aprons. Resting a tray of food against a dirty apron during butler service is a sure way to contaminate food. My pet peeve, make sure your serving staff members know not to grab used or clean glasses or cups from the rim — please. Not good!

With regard to cleaning and sanitizing...

...it is a good idea to use more single-use items like plastic cutlery, plates, and glasses to lessen the chances of contamination. If you don't have sanitizer solution in a clearly labelled spray bottle, at least keep your wiping cloth submerged in the sanitizing solution and keep it located below food. Be diligent when it comes to food allergies. Make sure servers know the ingredients in the foods being served to avoid a potential allergic reaction. If servers don't know if a dish has a particular ingredient, they should be honest and reply, “I don't know.” Better safe than sorry.

Many of our large catering company clients don't allow food to be left or taken away after a party. They ensure enough food at the catered event, but they don't want to be liable for the safety of food after the event is over. For that reason, they don't give the leftovers to the customer. Should the customer insist on keeping the food, the catering company should state in the contract (kind of like a legal waiver) that they are not to be held responsible for the safety of the food after the event.

At the end of the day, much money can be made with catering, but play it safe with proper food safety — not only for your customers but for your business, as well.

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