

DREAM JOBS *TO GO!*



Caterer

S. C. Torrington

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The Dream Jobs To Go™ eBook: What It Is and How to Use It

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Links look and work like they do on the Web, for example, and clicking on them lets you navigate through the book. Some links are actual Web links; if you're online, clicking on one launches your browser and takes you straight to that website. And the same thing goes for email addresses. One click, and your email client program pops up, with the address entered for you automatically... just like on the Web!

Our eBooks are still books at heart, however, and are therefore equally suited for printing and offline reading if you prefer. Either way, you'll get the information you need just the way you want it!

That's really all there is to it. Have fun!

How to Get Started as a Caterer

When you hear someone say, "hire a caterer," what do you think of? A community Fire Hall stuffed with 500 residents enjoying their annual Bull and Oyster Roast? An outdoor banquet brimming with fabulous finger-food for a few dozen wedding guests? Or, perhaps, an intimate anniversary dinner for two served at a cozy, seaside bed-and-breakfast? Each one of these is brought to life by a caterer. And for a special group of people with the right blend of organizational skills, culinary talents, and aim-to-please personalities, it is the perfect dream job.



Do you have a secret family recipe, which your friends encourage you to market? Perhaps you've pulled off a top-drawer cocktail dinner, or lived through a three-hour dinosaur theme birthday party, complete with a flowing lava cake. And a little voice inside your head whispers, "I'm good at this. I could do this for a living." And, yes, you could. But the question you need to ask is, "Should I?"

This book can't teach you how to become a chef like Julia Child or Emeril Lagasse. In fact, as the caterer, you may choose not to do the cooking. It is your job to make your food, not you, the center of attention. You are in the food service business, with "service" being the operative word. An accommodating caterer, imaginative presentation, and attentive wait staff can improve the taste of any mediocre meal.

Before you tie on your apron and move to the "serving" side of a serving line, you need to be stuffed with realistic, useful information and links to help you set and achieve your goals. In addition, *How to Get Started as a Caterer* includes interviews with professionals who will

impart how-to advice and help people who "love to cook" decide if that translates into "love to cater." If you take pleasure and pride in your culinary skills, can keep your head in a chaotic kitchen, and want the opportunity to earn a decent living, a career in catering could be on the menu. Plus, you'll always have great leftovers in your frig.

What It's Like (Really) to Be a Caterer

Famous hosts like Julius Caesar, Henry VIII, JFK, or Donald Trump didn't spend their time sweating in the kitchen before a big shindig. Throughout history, as long as one person could barter, bully, cajole, enslave, or pay another person to do the cooking, there have been caterers.

However; even 20 years ago, most people's only experience with a caterer was at a wedding reception or an office party. In 1982, the publication of Martha Stewart's *Entertaining* changed all that, motivating us to turn eating into an event – even if we had to pay somebody else to do the cooking for us.

Who else is doing this?

Open your local Yellow Pages to "caterers" and you'll see the diverse range of styles and cuisine available to clients. From cheese and deli trays to roasted pig luaus, there is a catering company who can accommodate your taste buds.

Generally a caterer specializes in either social (special events like receptions) or corporate (business events like seminar breakfasts). Then the type of service is divided as full-service (set-up, cook, serve and clean-up) or no-service (food delivery only), and everything in between. No caterer can, nor should, be all things to all

people. Finding your niche will be a cornerstone in the success of your catering career.

Social caterers are what most people envision when they think of catering. Full-service can include locating the event's site, hiring the band, ordering the flowers and decorations, renting tables and chairs, not to mention the actual food service. Most new social caterers start with a small number of guests and with limited additional services, opting to put most of their energy into the menu. The more you offer to do, the more money you can make. But you better do it right. You don't want to be known as "the caterer who ruined my little girl's wedding."

Corporate caterers may offer the same detailed, full service for a huge company picnic, or they can go the no-service route and just deliver a bagel tray to the local bank. Small corporate, partial-service (delivery and set-up) catering is a good starting ground, especially if you have a limited menu. The trick is to make the mundane memorable by enhancing the menu with your own specialty items. Again, work within your abilities and grow as you learn. A bad reputation is hard to repair.

By the numbers

How much can you earn?

According to the National Restaurant Association, sales to social caterers were expected to reach \$3.9 billion in 2001. This 3.6 percent growth is attributed to an increase in household income, upscale corporate events, and marriage celebrations.

National Restaurant Association

www.restaurant.org

How much of that pie can you expect to earn in your first year? If you're not careful, you could end up with pie in your face. Your profits are based on your ability to 1) determine what size



jobs you're capable of handling, 2) getting that job, and 3) pricing the job so that you earn more than you spend. Catering will earn you as much money as the amount of work you generate. Established caterers can easily earn \$30,000 to \$100,000 per year, But that's people who have the experience, contacts, equipment, and client base. If you're choosing catering as a career based on profit margin, find another line of work. You'll hate this business before you'll make enough money at it to satisfy your bank account.

How many caterers will be needed this year – or long-term?

It's not really about how many caterers will be needed. It's about how many catered events there will be, and how many caterers will divide up those jobs. Realistically, there are dozens, hundreds even thousands of catered events going on at any one time in most cities. These events vary from corporate seminar breakfasts for dozens to gala balls for thousands. Don't worry about whether there's work to be had. Worry about how you're gonna get some of it.

Any current hot locations for caterers?

Naturally, large metropolises like Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC, will have more catered events than mid-sized cities. But they will also have more caterers. Do you want to be a big fish in a little pond or a tiny minnow in a huge ocean? Unless you're opting for culinary school, stay put. That's where your connections are, including financial.

As I suggested, flip through your local Yellow Pages and see how many caterers are currently listed. Then realize that the entire telephone book is filled with businesses who may use those caterers. Corporate caterers, as you will read, can make a comfortable living just

preparing lunches for small businesses a few times a week.

Now look at the white pages – also full of potential clients. In the cycle of life, there are dozens of events that warrant a caterer. Anywhere you live can become a catering hot spot, at least for your business. Granted, in rural farm or wilderness towns, you may have to travel longer distances or hope to be, literally, the only caterer in town. But everybody needs a caterer sometime. Your job is to convince "everybody" that they need you.

Meet a Few Caterers

William Lurz

Part-Time Freelance Caterer/Server

Bill's career path is a smorgasbord of options for people just starting out in catering. During the past ten years, personal responsibilities, choices, and opportunities have allowed him to work for a wide variety of restaurants and catered events, including his own catering business.

Here's our conversation with William:

What is your typical day like?

I don't have a typical day; that's what I like about the catering business. Because I've decided to work for other caterers, every job is different.

When I worked for The Bagel Bin, I'd get there at about 1 or 2 a.m., bake bagels till the shop opened, then start putting together their breakfast and luncheon platters. During the fall, I baked fruit and pumpkin pies at a local cider mill. For a more traditional caterer, I'd be de-boning and filleting 80 pounds of frozen chicken all morning. As a restaurant prep cook, I'd go in at lunchtime and work till closing. As a server for a traveling pit beef stand, most of my day was spent driving, then carving beef. But

when I worked for myself, I'd start prepping at 4 or 5 a.m. and work well past 8 or 9 p.m.

What do you like about being a caterer?

I liked catering because I knew, once I had the skills, I could travel anywhere in the country, go into any town, and find a job. I'm a morning person and, especially if I did just the prep or served a luncheon, I liked having my evenings free. And, honestly, I love it when customers would "Oh" and "Ah" over my food.

What do you not like about being a caterer?

It can be feast or famine. When I started catering, I was single. Now I have the financial responsibility of a family. And when I had my own business, I never saw my kid. So instead, I have a "real" job and pick up extra cash working as a server on the weekends.

I also realized, especially when I worked as a cook in a restaurant, I really don't have the temperament to work with others. I made more than one waitress cry. I couldn't tolerate people who didn't take as much pride as I did in the quality of the meals we presented. So when I had my own business, I worked alone. It was just too hard. Now that I work for other caterers, my professionalism and attention to detail is one of the things that get me hired.

How did you become a caterer?

Ten years ago, I worked factory shift work. A caterer friend, who knew I was awake anyway, would pay me to go to local farmers' markets at 3 a.m. to buy cases of fruits and vegetables. I offered to prep the platters and before I knew it, it became a daily job. Then I decided to attend the Baltimore International Culinary College. I ran out of money before I graduated, but used the skills I had learned and got work immediately.

What would you do differently if starting over as a caterer?

I'd have finished school. It would have given me the credentials to work as a chef, not just a cook. But who knows how that would have worked out?

Dana Arnold

Former owner of "Parties Unique" and current owner of "Vegan Cakes and Dessert Specialties by Dana"

Dana has been working in the catering business since her graduation from college, almost 30 years ago. She worked her way up from server to assistant to opening her own company, Parties Unique. Dana's specialty was fresh, light, and healthy lunches and dinners for small businesses. Several years ago, she followed her heart and re-defined her niche to offer only vegan dessert specialties. Our discussion relates primarily to her experience with Parties Unique.

Here's our conversation with Dana:

What was your typical day like?

On any job with fewer than 30 people, I usually worked alone. The morning of a lunch, I was up by 4 or 5 a.m., prepping whatever I needed at the last minute. A lot of the vegetables, I'd cook on-site. The day before, I'd spent five or six hours shopping and prepping as much as I could. All my dishware was pre-packed. The rest, I'd pack into coolers or Cambros (hot carriers) as it was ready. I tried to give myself four or five hours, plus travel time, and at least one hour prep time once I got to the location. The self-serve meal only lasted about 45 minutes. Then I'd clean up, drive home, unpack the van, and do all the dishes. If I were lucky, I'd put in a 12-hour day.

What do you like about being a caterer?

I really liked the people. Plus, I've always gotten pleasure from cooking and the accolades it earned me. Unlike a one-time wedding or bar mitzvah, I'd have a lot of repeat clients. So I'd keep changing my menus and try different things. That was always fun, although I think I agonized over menus a little too much.

What do you not like about being a caterer?

I hated not knowing what kind of facilities I'd be working in. Even in a rental kitchen or somebody's home, conditions are different. Out on locations, the film production manager may only be able to tell me if I'd have access to any kitchen at all, or at least electricity and running water. I'd get stressed not knowing what to expect. Sometimes I'd feel like the client was jerking me around about money. And I never felt like I'd gotten enough sleep.

How did you become a caterer?

During college, I always thought I'd work for some big corporation. But a friend asked me to help her cater a conference. I continued working with her and eventually took jobs of my own through referrals and friends. For about ten years, I'd rent a local church's kitchen and do the standard catering jobs.

Then a friend recommended me to an advertising production manager who complained about a lack of menu selection for her crews. They were happy with me and she gave other producers my name, and I'd keep getting calls. Eventually, I had enough work to do primarily TV commercial breakfasts and lunches.

Why did you stop being a caterer?

I burned out. I was getting tired of having to live, eat and breath catering. And I was having a hard time being pleasant with some of my

pushier clients. My life was taking me somewhere else. I had been teaching yoga and studying holistic medicine for years. My kids were all grown, and it was time for a change. I still enjoy cooking, so now I make vegan (no animal products whatsoever) wedding cakes and desserts. Half the fun is experimenting with the recipes, just like I enjoyed with catering.

What would you do differently if starting over as a caterer?

I'd have a partner. That way I could work more regular hours. I'd be willing to pay someone to split the work so I could have more free time. I did everything. And I'd probably be a little "meaner." I always hated haggling over prices. I feel like I gave too much.

Philippe Gallichet

Owner and Chef for Cinema Catering

Philippe and his wife, Phyllis, founded Cinema Catering, a full-service on-location catering enterprise specializing in the film industry, in 1995. Philippe was born and educated in the Loire Valley in France. Phyllis holds a B.S. degree in nutrition and dietetics. She has experience supervising food service employees, dietary consulting, and small business management. Their dozens of credits include *Riding in Cars With Boys* (Yonkers, NY), *Homicide: Life Everlasting* (Baltimore, MD), and *The Substitute* (Austin, TX).

Cinema Catering

www.cinemacatering.com

Here's our conversation with Philippe:

What is your typical day like?

I usually rise somewhere around 2 or 3 a.m. at the start of a film project. Most films will start off with breakfast at 6 or 7 a.m. We (the catering crew) will meet at the commissary two or

two-and-a-half hours before serving time. We pack up our day's work (which we have organized the day before), drive to the location and set up breakfast. We prepare breakfast: both continental and short order. The short order can go on for one or two hours. After lunch, we clean up (no pride here, chef and crew all clean up), and then we start preparation for lunch.

The chef has planned the menu for a week at a time. There will always be changes to each day's menus. Each person – chef, salad maker, and outside person – knows their job and goes about their work. Lunch is served six hours after breakfast. Lunch will have a full salad bar, dessert bar, drink station, and a selections of hot food items (two meat and one fish entrees with veggies and starch sides). After each crewmember has gone through the line, we start our clean up on-site for an hour or so, and then return to the commissary or base camp. We will continue cleanup and pull for the following day. If shopping is needed, then it will be done at this time. The day is a minimum of 12 hours (average is 14) and sometimes runs 20 hours or so.

What do you like about being a caterer?

The variety and change are good, never boring. Feeding the same people two meals per day, for many days and sometimes months, forces creativity.

What do you not like about being a caterer?

Many times we work away from home. The hours are long and hard. The worst thing is when we are ready to serve lunch and then they "push" (or delay) the ready time 30 minutes, then again, it may push two hours after we were ready. The food quality suffers.

How did you become a caterer?

I attended French Culinary School in France. I was trained in classical French Cuisine and spent 5 years working in France with famous French chefs, and then five years in Los Angeles, California, working in French restaurants.

During the 1980s, the economy suffered and many French restaurants closed. There were several French chefs, including myself, all of a sudden without a job without one day's notice! I knew several of the other French chefs and they started to work for Steve Michaelson's Food Services. Steve called me one day when he needed 15 casual chefs to serve the Soul Train Music Awards Dinner.

After that party, I was called back and worked for Michaelson's Food Service for five years. After that, I moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, from Los Angeles, and in six months' time, I was asked if I would like to buy a mobile kitchen and start my own business.

Why do you continue to be a caterer?

This business in many ways is opposite of a restaurant, which is fixed and so many elements, physically and financial, are fixed. We are totally mobile. Good or bad. For example, if the economy we live in is slow or there is no work, we can move to another location where there is work. A restaurant stays where it is.

Long range we want to work large-scale films with large numbers of cast and crew, with large budgets. We presently have three new mobile kitchens, but we do not want to grow more than two or three projects at a time. We may open a restaurant in a few years.

What would you do differently if starting over as a caterer?

I don't think I could do anything differently. I think each door opened to the next. I learned each step of the way. So much of this business is political; I knew nothing of politics. After 10 years, I still am very new to this area. I can do the finest food found anywhere in the world, but I don't have many influential contacts, so I must develop this along the road to my success.

Background and Training

What about education?

You do not have to be a great chef or good cook to be a caterer, although it certainly helps. Your understanding of the *food service business* is what will ultimately make you successful. As I've suggested, take a variety of classes to enhance your culinary, accounting, and inter-personal skills.

Peterson's Culinary Schools

www.culinaryschools.com

Let's ask our experts if they had any special education or training.

William Lurz: As I said, I went to culinary school. I like the technical aspect of cooking, and school was a very controlled, learning environment. It helped me improve my techniques, which made every job easier. And I learned about pricing and sanitation, the kind of stuff any good caterer has to know. Once I got into the "real world" of catering, I saw I knew a lot more about the art of cooking than some of the people I worked for. They understood business and marketing and had those "people skills" you need to run a successful business. Some of them didn't even do any of the cooking; they'd hire a chef.

Dana Arnold: I was a double major in college: food and nutrition plus business. But what I studied 30 years ago as proper nutrition and healthy food prep is now obsolete. So I've

learned a lot by trial and error and reading as much up-to-date nutrition information as I could find. My business knowledge helped with budgeting and keeping my accounting books.

Philippe Gallichet: Many people in this line of work did not go to culinary school. I would guess most have not. Some of the most popular and highest paid have not attended school. For me, being a French Chef, because of my culture, is a must for me, but not for this business. It is more important to know the right people to get the work.

Best Ways to Break In

(Many of these ideas are covered in more detail in Your Game Plan.)

- Be willing to work or offer your products for free or for food costs. Remember, people will be taking a chance on your inexperience. Bottom line: You have to get out there and ask for the business.
- Go work for another caterer. If you heed any piece of advice from this book, I hope it's this one. You will never know if you're cut out for catering until you try it. Catering is not the same as fast-food service or waitressing, but that experience could get you work as a server. If you know any caterers, ask if they need occasional help. (Even if they don't, maybe you can tag along on a job to see what really goes on in the kitchen.) Check out the Help Wanted Classified. Temporary agencies are always looking for experienced servers.
- If you already work for a food service business, offer to start catering for them. Many independently owned delis or restaurants feature catering services, even if it starts as deli or bagel trays.

Depending on your situation, discuss the possibilities with your manager. Test the market by putting together and displaying a brochure in the store offering catering services. The company already has a local, built-in client base who may not hesitate to hire a caterer whose products and service they already utilize.

- Cater events for family and friends for food cost. Offer to do the food for a baby shower, a birthday, a business lunch for cost. You'll build your resume, refine your skills and hopefully get some referrals. Eventually, you will be able to stop working for free. But initially, when you're asking for a favor, try to be generous with your fee.
- Offer to cater events not usually catered. Many community events feature food, usually put together by those sponsoring that event. Realtors, PTAs, Parks & Recs, Scouts might appreciate having someone else handle the food service. Again, it's an opportunity to get your name and your product in front of people who may need a caterer. But you have to ask for the business.
- Sell your pre-packaged specialty item to another business. Perhaps you make great brownies, fresh fruit pies, or, like Dana Arnold, vegan wedding cakes. Approach local businesses that might be willing to sell your pre-packaged items at their checkout counters, and share in the profit. A local restaurant or caterer may find it easier to buy your specialty than prepare it themselves. Make the rounds offering free samples.
- Learn a specialty skill like bartending, garnishing, or sushi prep. Even if you don't open your own catering business

immediately, these are skills other caterers or restaurants may pay to utilize. It's another way to test the culinary waters before making a huge commitment.

Resources

Cooking, Catering & Food Service

International Caterers Association

www.ncacater.org

Culinary and Hospitality Industry Publications Services

www.chipsbooks.com

Mobile Industrial Caterers Association

www.mobilecaterers.com

Business & Marketing

Entrepreneur

www.entrepreneur.com

Guerrilla Marketing Online

www.gmarketing.com

Tips From the Pros

from William Lurz

- Be prepared for long hours and low pay. If you're not emotionally or financially prepared for that, it doesn't matter what else I tell you.

from Dana Arnold

- Hire yourself out as a service helper at a hotel or another catering company. Work for and learn from somebody else.
- Start off renting as much equipment as you can, although you'll probably need to buy a few items to start. Gather stuff as you need it and as your business can afford it.



- Get incorporated. In this sue-happy world, it protects your home and personal assets.
- Hire an accountant. Keep good records. Save all your receipts. With so many computer accounting programs, you could probably keep your own books. But get help with your taxes.
- Take a course at your local community college about proper and safe food handling.
- Learn how to budget, price, and portion your meals. But don't scrimp. Be willing to spend a little more on food to get repeat business or a good referral.
- Always be willing to negotiate. It usually pays off in the long run.
- Never ever assume anything with a client. Get a written contract, including some of the money up front.
- Share the work with a partner, or at least get part-time help.

from Philippe Gallichet

- Attend some sort of culinary classes, and have work experience in food service (at least five years), and then go to work for a motion picture catering company to learn the job description. It is unique and not for everyone.

Special Considerations

There are almost as many niches as there are caterers. Some of these specialties, as I've mentioned, are great ways to break in." Other niches may grow out of years of experience and savings. Think about other types of professions. If you had heart problems, you'd want a cardiologist. People choose specialists when

they have a special job. Catering is a special job. Narrow your field, so that one day you can be on top of it.

Examples of possible niches

Event Planner: This could include wedding consultants, kids' party planners, or corporate events coordinators. If you're going to take on an event, you better be experienced, have a lot of business connections, and have a bankroll. It's high-pressure when you offer to do everything. But it's also profitable.

- **Wedding Careers Institute, Inc.**
www.weddingcareers.com
- **Birthday Express Party Source**
www.birthdayexpress.com
- **Successful Events**
www.successfulevents.org

Specialty Cooking: Pick one type of food and concentrate on that – cakes, omelets, muffins, clam bakes, sushi. You will be hired because you are "The Expert." How many people in a small Midwest town want a clambake? Market research will tell you. You may find a local coffee shop, diner, or even another caterer interested in using your product. It can also be an inexpensive start up, depending upon your specialty.

Ethnic or Vegetarian Cuisine: A way to carve out a niche for your business, but can also limit your client base. You may want to start by incorporating one or two ethnic dishes in your menu presentation and see how customers respond.

Personal Chef: If you have the culinary skills, this is a great way to try catering without a huge monetary commitment. You will still need liability insurance, but not much else. Use the client's kitchen, appliances, even their serving dishes.



SUCCESSFUL EVENTS
CUSTOM APPROPRIATE PRODUCTS FOR 17 AGENCIES 17 COMMISSIONS 17 FRANCHISES BY S.E.C.C.®

Special, intimate events deserve a special menu.

Frozen Take-home Entrees: Many people don't have the time to cook healthy, nutritious meals. Look at all the freezer aisles in the grocery store. By cooking in large quantities and freezing the entrees, you can limit your shopping, kitchen, and prep expenses. Refer to Health Department guidelines about how to legally market your food with all the correct nutritional information, especially if it's low-calorie and/or preservative free.

Bed and Breakfast, Mobile Kitchen, or Restaurant: Now you're talking real money. Unless you've hit the lottery and want to "go for it," try catering on a smaller scale first.

Your Game Plan

1. Talk with your family and friends. No business is started in a vacuum, especially one that will require a large investment of time and money. As a caterer, you will probably be working nights, weekends, and holidays. The more successful you become, the more time you'll be away.

How disruptive will your early morning prep and late night unpacking be to your family? Are you planning to borrow your kid's college fund as start-up money? Will your friends stop calling after dozens of "Sorry, I'm working" messages? Can you count on your family to work as servers, shoppers, or at least help you drag stuff to and from your van? If your long-range goal as a caterer is to make money and help your family, ask them if that's worth the initial price you all may have to pay.

2. Be honest with yourself about your personality. Are you organized? Do you fluster easily? How are your "people skills"? Are you a control freak? What do you do when strangers yell at you? Can you lift heavy things? Are you

able to delegate responsibilities? Do you like working and thinking on your feet?

Listen, if what you really want to be is a chef, go work for somebody else and let them handle the headaches. Because there will be headaches. They will come when you can't find the fresh produce at the price you've budgeted, when the mother-of-the-bride is complaining that the pink icing on the wedding cake doesn't quite match the rose buds in the bridal bouquet, or when you get to a corporate location and you're informed you'll have bring your food and equipment in through the busy, dirty loading dock. Expect the unexpected. Are you up for it?

3. Make an appointment with a counselor at your local Small Business Administration. It's the best free advice you'll ever get. Your counselor can help you every step of the way, including applying for a small business loan. These counselors, some volunteering from SCORE (Service Corps. Of Retired Executives), want you to succeed, just as they did, in the real world of business. And, never forget, catering is a big, serious, "you-can-go-bankrupt-if-you're-not-careful" business.

Visit the Small Business Administration's website; it's full of useful information, including a tutorial on writing a business plan. (Yes, you'll need to write one.) It can also locate and connect you with your state SBA and local servicing centers.

- **Small Business Administration**
www.sba.gov
- **Service Corps of Retired Executives**
www.score.org

If an hour with a SCORE counselor doesn't scare you out of becoming a caterer, continue reading...



4. Think niche. What type of catering do you ultimately want to do? How can you start working towards that goal? If, one day, you hope to be coordinating lavish wedding receptions for hundreds, don't run out and buy a pit beef grill. On the other hand, if you have visions of being known as the best corporate picnic barbecuer in the county, don't make your first equipment investment a silver champagne fountain.

Don't think you have to take any job that comes your way. Start off by catering small, manageable events that appeal to your strengths and interests. Accept events for which you feel comfortable and your planned menus are appropriate. Know when to say "No, thanks."

5. Take a variety of business, cooking, and hospitality classes. You don't have to enroll in an expensive culinary school. Most community colleges offer a wide range of non-credit evening programs. Occasionally, there will be a "Business of Catering" or "Becoming a Wedding Consultant" class. The National Restaurant Association has developed a Food Service Sanitation curriculum. Learn marketing and sales strategies in "Closing the Deal." Does your personality scream out for "Dealing With Difficult People" lessons? Strengthen your weaknesses.

6. Learn all about food. Read cookbooks and food magazines. Spend a few hours watching The Food Network on cable TV. It's going to be what you know about food: its prep and cooking time, its presentation, how to blend and contrast taste, color and texture that will make you successful.

caterer.com

- ***Caterer & Hotelkeeper Magazine***

www.caterer.com

- ***Gourmet Magazine***

www.condenet.com

www.gourmet.mag

7. Decide where you will do your prep and cooking. If you have any illusions of catering out of your townhouse's kitchen, forget it. It's illegal. Investigate zoning licenses and Health Department permits. Get a copy of your local Health Department's Food Service Facility guidelines. Unless you're prepared to spend easily over \$10,000 to build a stainless steel kitchen (with an EPA-approved exhaust system) that will pass Health and Fire Department inspection, look elsewhere for a cooking facility. Even if you had the money, your home is probably not zoned for your business.

Before you commit to a lease on a commissary or small storefront, you may want to consider renting a nearby church's or VFW hall's kitchen on a per-job basis. Many community organizations welcome the income that the outside use of their Health Department-approved facilities affords them. Call around and compare equipment, rental costs, and availability. It's a good contact to cultivate. You never know when the rental hall may need or refer your services.

**US Department of Health and
Human Services - Food Safety**

www.hhs.gov/topics/food.html



8. Research your market and your competition. Basically, you have to determine how many people in your area want your type of service, how often they will use that service, if they can afford it, and how many of them will select your company.

A simple way to answer these questions is to pick the brain of anyone who has used a caterer. What type of event? How many people? The cost? The menu? Were they satisfied? Why or why not? Pay close attention to any negative feedback. Make sure nobody can ever say the same thing about your business.

Every successful business, big or small, does a market analysis. Demographic information, such as population and economic base, are available through the U.S. Census. The SBA or a library can help you find all the information you'll need to make an assessment. This will become an important part of your business plan, especially if you hope to secure a business loan.

Another eye-opening way to learn about your potential competition is to imagine your ideal catering job, then telephone a nearby catering company, and ask for some general information about an event you *may* be hosting. Tell them you're just beginning to get some prices and ideas together. Ask about their basic menus, costs, and service. Don't drag it out and string them along. Sincerely thank them for the information and hang up. Don't feel guilty; one day some new upstart's gonna do the same thing to you.

U. S. Census Bureau

www.census.gov

9. Start pricing food and equipment. Your ability to develop menus and cater an event at a profit will be another cornerstone in your success. Once the contract has been signed, you cannot go back to a client and ask for more money because you have miscalculated. You will have to, excuse the pun, eat that extra cost. Granted, if the client makes changes or additions to the menu (from hamburgers to steaks), then, yes, you must change the pricing and the contract.

Pricing food can get tricky, because you have to take every pinch of spice, every disposable plate, every ice cube into account.

Unfortunately, much of your expertise will come through trial and error. But basically, pricing an event is divided into thirds: one-third is your food costs, one-third is your labor (even if you are your labor), and one-third is profit for business overhead. Once you calculate the cost

of your food, multiply it by three and that's your ballpark billable total.

As you plan your menu, be careful not to propose an entree, which no matter how delicious, is so expensive you'll never get the job. On the other hand, as our experts have suggested, don't scrimp on your food's quality and cost, either. People realize, when it comes to food, you get what you pay for.

You won't be shopping at the gourmet grocer around the corner anymore. You'll need to locate and develop relationships with wholesale food distributors. You may have to be at the produce market at 3 a.m. for a flat of fresh strawberries. What kind of deal can you get on a side of beef? Should you consider opening an account with a restaurant food service and delivery company?

- **Sysco Foodservice**

www.sysco.com

- **U. S. Foodservice**

www.usfoodservice.com

You won't be cooking with your old fry pans anymore, either. If you're going to make Banana Smoothies your specialty, be prepared to layout \$400 for a two-horsepower, half-gallon blender. Check out restaurant equipment vendors, both local and on the Web. Always be on the lookout for local restaurants' "going out of business" auctions. But too many restaurants or caterers closing up shop in your area may give you pause.

- **Central Restaurant Products**

www.centralrestaurant.com

- **Cambro Manufacturing Company**

www.cambro.com



Labor costs. This one-third is where you may have some flexibility. Naturally, if you've hired servers or kitchen help, you'll have to pay them.

Talk with the SBA counselor and your accountant about employment laws. For now, let's assume you are the labor.

So, what's your time worth? As you plan your menus, think about how long it's going to take you to shop, prep, and serve the food. Is that extra effort worth the result? Clients might be impressed that you flew to Maine to bring back fresh, live lobsters. But, unless it's in the contract, they're not gonna pay extra for it.

Business profit is another area where you may have some flexibility. Equipment and kitchen rental, utilities, and vehicle costs all factor in. If you work out of the client's home, overhead costs are lower than renting the kitchen. Owning your equipment will, in the long run, be less expensive than renting. Your accountant will help you determine what your overhead is.

Setting prices sounds complex, and it is. But, in time, you'll be able to listen to the client's needs, determine a menu, and quote a price off the top of your head. But always put it on paper and check your numbers twice.

10. Think carefully when you create your business image. Pick a company name which tells people exactly what you do. "Vegan Cakes by Dana" and "Cinema Catering" says it all. You can purchase coordinated paper sets from office supply companies, then design and print your letterhead on your computer. Graphic Art students may be willing to undertake your logo as a credited project. This is one area that is worth a reasonable investment. Avoid cheap paper, clip-art logos, and ambiguous names. Consider your cards a mini-billboard and carry them everywhere you go.

Business networkers will suggest you to develop a "30-second commercial" to share when asked, "What do you do?" Do not mutter, "I'm a caterer". Reply with something memorable like: "I turn your child's average

birthday party into an exciting afternoon of prehistoric adventure with my T-Rex Treats and Cavemen Cupcakes. Plus, my full-service catering company, "Jurassic Parties", makes for a worry-free time for parents to spend with their children." Play up the benefits: "sell the sizzle, not the steak."

- **Paper Direct**
www.paperdirect.com
- **Superior Menus**
www.superiormenus.com



11. Always look and act the part of a professional caterer. When you go to consult with a client, be on time and appear neat, clean, and well groomed. Nobody's going to hire a caterer with dirty fingernails or unkempt hair (which could wind up in the casserole). If you're late for your meeting, your customer may worry you'll be late with their dinner, too.

Be prepared at client meetings. Potential customers, especially brides-to-be, come ready with a ga-zillion questions and concerns. They have to like and trust you before they'll even consider your menus.

Have a copy of your license and liability insurance available. Present references, sample menus, and photos of any particularly extravagant banquets you've done. Offer to arrange a tasting with food samples. (Just how "spicy" is your Spicy Chicken?) Discuss portions, service and, of course, the financial arrangement – especially the deposit (usually one-third), and refund policy.

Reassure the client that you can work within their budget. But be realistic. Don't give away your profits or make promises you can't keep. Create a client questionnaire and fill it out as you listen to what your client wants. Really listen. Don't try to sell them on your favorite or easiest menu. Clarify everything. Once agreed

upon, draw up a written contract. This protects both parties.

12. Get the word out. There are as many ways to advertise and market yourself as there are caterers. Just running a one-line listing in the telephone book will not cut it. Go to the bookstore and pick a marketing book. (See Resources.) Take a small business-advertising course at your community college. Find ideas, suggestions, and plans that suit your business and your bankbook.

This really is a business of whom you know. That means developing a large client base and earning good referrals. When people search for a caterer, they ask their friends for advice. They will probably use the same caterer, if that caterer comes with glowing recommendation. Good food is subjective. Bad service is universal.

13. Don't quit your day job...yet.

Reader Feedback

Psst. Want to share a secret? Or do you have a beef? If you have a resource that you believe belongs in our book, or if you think we've made a mistake, we sure would like to hear from you.

To get in touch with us, simply send email to:

- feedback@dreamjobstogo.com



About the Author

Susan C. Gotschall-Davis (writing as **SC Torrington**) has been a freelance corporate caterer and craft service person ("snack lady") on film/video productions in the Baltimore/Washington, D.C. area since 1985. Starting as a production assistant on local commercials, Susan began helping the caterers on set. When *The Bedroom Window* (1985) began filming in Baltimore, one of the caterers recommended her to do "craft service." (On most movie sets, the caterer's meals are supplemented with a continental breakfast, an all-day buffet table, and sometimes, a hot second meal, all of which is provided by the craft service position.)



Because of her professional reputation, she was invited to become the first female member of IATSE, Local 19, the union that had jurisdiction over Baltimore film production. In the early 1990s, a new studio mechanics union, Local 487, was formed. Susan joined and was asked to apprentice and train several new members for the position.

In addition to craft service, Susan regularly works as a film production and small corporate caterer. Occasionally, she enjoys being "just a server" for many larger events, including wedding receptions and anniversary dinners.

Susan's more than two-dozen film credits (although her position doesn't always make it to the screen) include Barry Levinson's *Avalon*, John Waters' *Hairspray* and *Serial Mom*, and the long-running television series, *Homicide*.

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