



Everything You Need to Know About Choosing Your Reception Menu

Plated Sit-Down Dinner

The most traditional reception style, a plated meal is what the majority of couples choose. This is when all the guests are seated and served a formal dinner. Typically, it consists of two courses (an appetizer and an entrée), plus dessert if it's served tableside. Everyone is usually served the same appetizer and then the main course is handled a few different ways:

Guests are served the same entrée with a silent vegetarian or vegan alternative.

Guests are able to select their entrée from a menu, which is typically a meat or fish option plus a silent vegetarian option.

Guests pre-select their entrée choice when they submit their RSVP.

Pros

It immediately sets the tone for a more formal gathering.

You have the most control over the look and feel of the meal.

You can work closely with the caterer to execute your vision for the meal.

It is an efficient way to serve the reception meal and keeps things running according to schedule.

Cons

The limited variety and can be challenging for guests with dietary restrictions.

It typically requires more manpower to help with serving and plating, so staffing fees tend to be higher.

Cost

A plated sit-down dinner can be quite cost-effective because you essentially can control the price. In terms of food costs and rentals, a plated dinner typically costs less than a family-style or buffet meal because you don't need to have as much food (in terms of sheer quantity and variety), but the service costs tend to be a bit higher.

Family-Style Dinner

A family-style meal is exactly as it sounds: Everyone is seated as big platters and bowls of food are passed around the table, just like you might do with your own family at home. This is a great option if you want to keep people seated at tables but don't want something as formal as a plated meal. The first course is typically served with about one or two options and the main course includes as few as a protein and two sides or multiple proteins with multiple sides.

Pros

It offers you variety—there are lots of choices, which can be easier to accommodate picky guests or guests with food allergies.

It makes the reception meal feel more casual and laid-back.

It's good for community building—when people are passing the food around their tables, they chat and engage with each other.

It is an efficient way to serve your meal—you don't have to wait for people to make it through buffet lines or the stations. Everything lands at the table at roughly the same time and people can help themselves.

Cons

Family-style meals are typically the most expensive option because of the service ratio, needing the highest amount of food, and the cost of rentals.

The platters and dishes take up delicate table real estate. If you want elaborate florals on your tables, this is not the option for you.

Cost

Expect to pay 10 to 30 percent more than a plated dinner since you will likely have more menu items and less control over how much people eat. You absolutely don't want to run out of food, so always order more than enough here.

Wondering how much food to order? Parragué suggests one or two different dishes for the first course and as few as a protein and two sides for the main course or as many as two proteins and four sides max.

Buffet-Style Dinner

A buffet features long tables topped with a wide variety of food options. This meal style offers the most variety for your guests, making it particularly desirable if you want a wide range of cuisines or have picky eaters. The most important thing to consider here is how to get your guests through the food lines as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Pros

From a guest standpoint, buffets are great because they can not only pick what they want but how much food they want.

Abundant buffets can be visually appealing and photogenic when executed well, with vibrant food and a talented design team.

Cons

The tremendous variety and quantities of food that you get with a buffet comes at a price. Buffets are typically higher in price than many of the other reception meal styles.

Cost

Similar to family-style, expect to pay 10 to 30 percent more for a buffet than a served dinner since you will likely have more menu items and less control over how much people eat, according to Parragué. The upside of a buffet, however, is staffing costs could be about 20 percent less than they would be for a plated or family-style meal, depending on the layout and how much service you want.

Self-Serve Stations

Stations are very similar to buffets in that they give your guests a nice variety of food options. Stations typically have tables or areas specifically dedicated to certain dishes or types of foods. These are often more interactive and involved than a help-yourself buffet, so you will need people to staff these stations.

This is a great opportunity to get creative and inject your personality as a couple. For example, if you love oysters, do an oyster shucking station. If you're pizza-obsessed, bring in a pizza oven and have the chef whip up pizzas made-to-order. Love cheese? Put together an epic cheese bar!

Pros

Like buffets, stations offer up great opportunities to create stunning visual displays that lend themselves nicely to photos.

If there is a dish that would be challenging for guests at a buffet, attended stations are a good workaround.

Stations encourage guests to interact and engage with each other, particularly if they are chef-attended stations where they are picking from different options and consulting each other about their choices.

Cons

Rental costs and staff ratios could make stations quite costly.

Depending on what kinds of stations you ultimately decide on, they could require a lot of space, so keep your room size and physical station sizes in mind as you plan.

Cost

The menu price is going to be similar to a buffet or family-style meal. The staff ratios and costs are typically on par with a buffet, but keep in mind that if you have multiple stations, the cost of rentals will be much higher.

Cocktail-Style Dinner

Buck tradition and do a cocktail-style wedding reception. It combats a lot of issues that couples typically face while planning their wedding, like where to sit a bunch of people who don't seem to fit at any one table. A cocktail-style reception means no seating charts, no tablescape fuss...none of that. Instead, you and your guests can mix, mingle, and dance all night long and snack on small bites (either tray-passed or laid out on a grazing table in advance) whenever you feel like it.

The most important thing here is to offer your guests a nice variety of options, including a few that are vegan/vegetarian, dairy-free, and gluten-free, so there is something for everyone.

Pros

You can easily move around the reception and chat with your guests in a way that some other styles (like a plated dinner) do not allow.

A cocktail-style event is engaging and interactive for your guests.

If you want to invite a lot of people but you aren't able to fund a full meal for that guest count, this is a more cost-friendly approach.

Cons

Older guests might not be able to stand the whole time, so make sure you have seating options in case they need a place to rest their feet.

People are likely to drink more because they have access to the bar (rather than the servers serving set amounts of wine and cocktails).

Guests might not be familiar with this style of reception, so inform them ahead of time of what to expect in terms of the food.

Cost

This is a more budget-friendly alternative to a full-fledged dinner because you have far less food in terms of both quantity and portion-size. Depending on how big your wedding is and how many different dishes you want to serve during the reception, be prepared for the service costs to be bumped up.

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