

factsheet

Choosing a Caterer

When planning a special event, family gathering or banquet, some people hire a professional caterer. Caterers can prepare and serve food in the same location, prepare food at a licensed facility then transport and serve at the event location, or prepare and serve foods at the event location.

Errors in timing and temperature increase the risk for foodborne illness. The challenge is heightened when preparing and serving large volumes of food to many people at a single gathering.

People should be confident that all proper food handling practices are used throughout the process of handling, cooking, transporting, storing and serving food. For social events where food is being served, there are some things that should be checked to ensure the event is enjoyable rather than a high risk for foodborne illness.

When Choosing a Caterer

- The caterer should have experience preparing and serving food to large groups. The premises they work from should be licensed by the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.
- Ask the caterer about their experience and knowledge of food safety.
- They should be willing to provide references.
- The location for serving food should have hand washing equipment, washrooms and hot and cold potable water.
- The caterer should have the right equipment including cutting boards, utensils, food thermometers, hot and cold holding equipment for both transporting and serving foods.

Food Preparation

- Foods such as raw meats and fish must be purchased from a licensed supplier. Fresh foods should be purchased no more than one to two days before the event.
- When planning the menu consider your guest list and avoid high risk foods such as raw fish or

shellfish and unpasteurized cheeses, especially if you have young, aged or immunosuppressed persons on your list.

- The kitchen (and the facilities from which the food is going to be served) must have sufficient hot and cold holding equipment for all perishable food required for the function, as well as hand washing facilities, washroom and hot and cold potable water.
- Hot foods should be cooked the same day as the event and served hot, reducing unnecessary cooling and reheating.
- Meat, poultry, fish, and other high risk foods like cream filled pastries and desserts must be refrigerated at 4°C / 40°F until ready for preparation or service.
- Meat and poultry must be cooked to the correct internal temperature and kept hot (above 60°C / 140°F) until served. Temperatures should be checked using a probe type food thermometer.
- Food brought to the event that are not provided by the caterer, should be limited to low risk foods such as snack foods.

Staffing

- Staff should be knowledgeable about food safety and have taken a food handler training course recognized by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.
- The caterer should have sufficient staff to prepare and serve the meal in a reasonable time period.
- Staff should wear clean outer garments (uniforms) or aprons and hair coverings and should not smoke, eat or drink while preparing or serving food.

Transporting Foods

- All food must be transported in sealed, leak-proof containers suitably designed for holding or transporting food.

- Hot foods must be transported at 60°C (140°F) or higher and cold foods transported at 4°C (40°F) or lower.
- Vehicles used to transport food must be clean and free from contamination.

Serving Large Quantities of Food

Serving a sit down meal

- Hot foods should be plated immediately prior to serving. If there is to be a delay, the plates of food must be held at 60°C (140°F) or above in appropriate warming cabinets.
- Hot holding equipment is intended only for maintaining food above 60°C (140°F) and must never be used to reheat cold foods.
- Cold plated foods must be kept at 4°C (40°F) or lower. Any perishable food left at room temperature for longer than two hours should be discarded.

Buffet

- Hot foods are to be kept at or above 60°C (140°F) and cold foods kept at or below 4°C (40°F) while being held in the kitchen and if possible in the buffet line.
- Perishable foods not kept at hot or cold temperatures must be discarded after two hours
- Replenish hot and cold foods as required rather than placing large volumes of food on the buffet line.
- Guests are to be encouraged to use a clean plate each time they return to the buffet table.
- Sauces and dressings should be labeled to discourage tasting.

- Tongs or long-handled ladles should be provided for each buffet item to prevent guests from touching the food with their hands or utensils.

Leftover Foods

- Perishable foods that have been served or placed on a buffet should not be reused.
- Hot foods that have not been served or placed on a buffet should be cooled and refrigerated within two hours. Hot foods may be cooled quickly by placing them in shallow pans with the food no deeper than two inches.
- Refrigerated leftovers should be eaten within four days or be frozen for longer storage. Dating leftovers helps to make sure they are used quickly.
- Frozen leftovers should be used within two to four months for best quality. When taken from the freezer leftovers should be used within four days.
- Leftovers must be reheated to at least 74°C (165°F). The temperature should be checked using a thermometer.

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There are four simple rules for food safety that will help ensure an enjoyable celebration: **COOK**- cook to proper temperatures; **CHILL**- refrigerate foods promptly; **CLEAN**- wash hands, utensils and surfaces often to keep everything clean and free of bacteria; **SEPARATE**- keep foods separate to avoid cross contamination.