

# Catering: Off-Premises Service

**C**ATERING is part of the hospitality business. It is a high-profit part of the industry. Off-premises caterers provide food and related services to clients at a remote event location. Event venues—museums, parks, tents, and beaches—require special planning and equipment to get the job done. Catering jobs include owner, chef, cook, server, cater-waiter, and buffet server.



## Objective:



Summarize off-premises catering, equipment, and service options.

## Key Terms:



Alto-Shaam®  
ancillary  
buffet service  
Cambro®  
carryout  
cater  
caterer

catering  
cater-waiter  
chafing set-up  
disposable  
event  
holding cabinets  
liability

menu  
off-premises  
on-premises  
premises  
Sterno  
sub-contractors

## Understanding Off-Premises Catering Events

To **cater** is to provide food and beverage for an event or a banquet. **Catering** is providing prepared food and beverage, and sometimes service, for a specific group and/or for an event. Most catered events are planned social or business occasions (e.g., meeting, birthday party, wedding, banquet, graduation, family reunion, or family game night). To clarify, catering does not refer to picking up food “to go” from a drive-through restaurant. There may or may not be a large group involved, but catering always involves an **event** (an activity of importance that occurs once or occurs on a limited basis) for which food and service are desired.

## CATERING

A **caterer** is an independent vendor or a department within a facility (e.g., hotel, resort, or restaurant) that provides food, beverage, and sometimes service for an event. A catering manager or event manager organizes and staffs an event with servers (front of the house), chefs (back of the house), valet service, bar service, etc.

Catered foods may be simple or elegant. They may be served on-premises, off-premises, or picked up by the ordering client as “takeout.” **Premises** are the location where food is prepared. **Carryout** (sometimes referred to as takeout or to go) is food prepared in a kitchen and consumed in another place.



**FIGURE 1.** All catering occurs as a result of an “event.” Off-premises means the event is held somewhere other than the catering establishment (e.g., a private home, in a park, at a museum, or on a beach).

### On-Premises

**On-premises** are in-house; attached to the event venue. Advantages of on-premises catering include the ability of the caterer to make last-minute food or order changes due to residency in the venue (event location) and proximity to the kitchen, access to a supply of linens (napery), stemware, dishes, flatware, and décor. However, it may be more expensive than off-premises catering by the same caterer and/or from another catering source.

### Off-Premises

**Off-premises** are not at the site; removed from the venue. Advantages of off-premises catering may include full wait staff service, venue set-up, venue clean up, and a better price than on-premises catering. Disadvantages may include fewer options to adjust or change food, linen, table arrangement, stemware, etc.

Catered foods may be designed to be served (by a server) or may be designed for buffet service. **Buffet service** is food and beverage service in which guests serve themselves from a hot and/or cold food table set-up. Picked up catered foods are served by the ordering client or provided as buffet service at a location of choice.

### Ancillary Goods and Services

While catering refers to food and beverage preparation—and sometimes service—some catering businesses offer ancillary goods and services to accompany the order. **Ancillary** is supporting elements that go with the food. The ancillary items may include **disposable**

(single use) plates, flatware, napkins, serving pieces, and chafing set-ups for buffets. A **chafing set-up** is a metal frame that holds pans of food, often with disposable Sterno cans underneath.

**Sterno** is “canned heat”; usually an alcohol-based jelly-like fuel packaged in a small can. Sterno is manually lit and provides a heat source for a given number of hours when placed under a hotel pan. Ancillary items are sold for an additional fee or are included in the price of the carryout order if stated that way on the menu.

Off-premises catering may be delivered with basic ancillary items (e.g., disposable napkins, plates, cutlery, and spices). Items depend upon the food and the event. For example, pizza may be delivered with no ancillary items. In contrast, a fried chicken dinner delivery may include side dishes, napkins, and plastic flatware. Off-premise catered meals for higher-end events (e.g., weddings and anniversaries) may have ancillary items available for purchase or rent (e.g., glassware, linens, chafers, and table decorations).

## The Menu

The **menu** is a detailed printed document listing all catered items for sale, including:

- ◆ Prices are usually per person, but they are potentially by food weight or pan size.
- ◆ Any ancillary items included with the food item ordered or available for rent or purchase will be listed.
- ◆ Name, phone number, payment requirements (including deposits on big orders), acceptable payment methods, and time required between order and event date, any special options, and pick-up hours will be listed. The menu will include the price of delivery (if not included in the per person or fixed cost quote).



**FIGURE 2.** A chafing set-up is a metal frame that holds pans of food, often with disposable Sterno cans located underneath. Can you see the “blue flame” of the Sterno?



**FIGURE 3.** The client ordered a coffee carafe for this off-premises event. What ancillary items are pictured for this coffee service?

## Off-Premises Catering Rationale

People cater food for numerous reasons, including lack of cooking skills, lack of available space or cooking equipment, lack of time, lower cost than catering “in-house” at a facility, and simple convenience. Convenience does cost, so it is not surprising that catered foods are notably more expensive than home-cooked foods. Sometimes venue is a prime rationale for an off-premises **event**, which is a personal or work-related celebration or gathering. For example, professional caterers may be the best choice to handle a beach wedding, a large family reunion event at a home, or a corporate business retreat in the woods. Catered foods are generally more expensive than home-cooked foods, but they are often less expensive than a served dinner in a sit-down facility (depending on the level of service and ancillary items required).



**FIGURE 4.** Sometimes venue is a prime rationale for an off-premises event. Location plays a big part in the host’s selection of off-premises catered food. Deciding on an outdoor party or a reception has some challenges. What are those challenges?

- ◆ Off-premises catered foods can be casual in nature (e.g., sliced beef, fried chicken, pasta, and salad) or high-end for cocktail parties and receptions (e.g., fancy canapés, hors d’oeuvres, and savory pastries).
- ◆ Events that utilize and benefit from carryout catered foods include home parties (e.g., anniversaries, weddings, birthdays, communions, holidays, graduations, business events, and school events), regardless of the event location.
- ◆ Off-premises events may take place in a venue with minimal or no volume food preparation capability (e.g., homes, event halls, churches, schools, tailgate parties, block parties, and beaches).

## Key Catering Contract Terms Glossary

- ◆ A la minute: Food prepared to order in front of the guest
- ◆ Amuse-bouche: Bite-size hors d’oeuvre specialty of the chef (literal translation is “mouth amusement”)
- ◆ Bowl food: Small bowls of appetizing food passed among guests during a standing reception
- ◆ Cover: The F&B (food and beverage) term for a guest (e.g., “We have 350 covers to prepare for the wedding reception.”)

- ◆ Deposit: The amount paid in advance of and typically required at the time an event is booked
- ◆ Dry hire: Hiring a venue, a room, etc. without any labor, staff, furniture, or delivery charges included
- ◆ French service: A high-budget, labor-intensive service method in which food is prepared by wait staff tableside
- ◆ Napery: Linens (e.g., napkins, tablecloths, and draping)
- ◆ Ops sheet: The “battle plan” for the event prepared by the caterer to share with the event staff (chefs, set-up, wait staff, maître d’, etc.); shortened or jargon terms help ensure the event staff is fully informed of the targets and intended outcomes.
- ◆ Outmess: Small, often casual meals, provided on the day of set-up and the event for catering staff and other hired staff (e.g., photographers, security, and hotel guides)
- ◆ Plated service: A presentation method in which food is aesthetically arranged by the chef before it is served to the guests
- ◆ Props: Catering aesthetics that help convey a theme, including flowers, centerpieces, wall hangings, and place cards
- ◆ Set up or “the in:” The time required to move all equipment to the venue and set the room(s) and halls for the guests
- ◆ Snake service: A service method in which wait staff line up with plated food and move together (winding like a snake) through tables, finally presenting food to individual guests
- ◆ Table stationery: All items that would reside on the table near the placement (e.g., place card, small gift box, menu card, glitter to shower on the happy couple, masks, New Year’s Eve noise-makers, and individual flower)
- ◆ Tasting: Pre-event in which the host participates in tasting portions of the menu and giving final approval to the selections



FIGURE 5. What props and table stationery are used in this table setting?

## EQUIPMENT AND PACKAGING FOR OFF-PREMISES CATERING

When catering is off-premises, certain items and equipment are required to keep food at the right temperature.

## Holding and Keeping Equipment

Food safety is the first rule of foodservice. An expectation of the guest/client is that hot foods are served hot, and cold foods are served cold. This rule and expectation are further underscored by food safety codes that require specific temperatures for hot and cold food to prevent bacterial growth and potential foodborne illnesses. Hot foods are held at or above 135°F, and cold foods are kept at or below 41°F. Foodservice thermometers are used to verify these temperature ranges. With this in mind, off-premise caterers are required to have units that hold and keep proper temperatures for delivery and service. Two industry-standard equipment brands for off- and on-premises catering are:

- ◆ **Alto-Shaam**® is a vendor of holding, cooking, and cooling equipment, including electrically heated units and electrically chilled units. Alto-Shaam® units can be small enough for transport to an off-premises event or “double-decker” for kitchen use.
- ◆ **Cambro**® is a vendor of commercial grade insulated plastic units designed to hold and keep food at safe temperatures. Cambro® units are small enough for transport to an off-premises event or delivery or large enough for kitchen use.

## Holding Cabinets

Off-premises catering requires delivery of food at safe temperatures. When caterers are serving the food off-site (rather than dropping it off), they must provide equipment to continue to hold and keep proper food temperatures until the food is served. For most caterers, that means mobile units, such as holding cabinets. **Holding cabinets** are upright units—similar in shape to a refrigerator—designed to hold hot food at temperatures high enough to protect it from bacterial growth. They are not designed to cook food—only to hold hot food at a constant temperature. For example:

- ◆ Alto-Shaam’s electric upright cabinets can hold racks of hot food at minimum hot temperatures or racks of refrigerated foods at minimum cold temperatures.
- ◆ Most electrical warming and cooling unit doors have built-in temperature gauges so the holding/keeping temperature is easily viewed without opening the door. (NOTE: Plastic holding units typically do not have built-in temperature gauges.)



**FIGURE 6.** Holding cabinets are upright units, similar in shape to a refrigerator, designed to hold hot food at temperatures high enough to protect it from bacterial growth. Most holding cabinets have glass doors to make orders visible without opening the door.

## Liability

In addition to basic food safety required during food preparation, caterers have the responsibility to keep food safe through delivery (if dropping off) or through point of service (if serving food). **Liability** is the legal responsibility to keep food safe throughout the process. A caterer can be sued if guests become ill and the illness is related to the food consumption or service.

## Other Equipment for Large Off-Premises Events

When events are held in places where items are not in existence, caterers will have to bring items with them.

### Portable Cooking and Cleaning Equipment

Caterers bring portable grills, ovens, stoves, fryers, freezers, tables, sink and hand-washing stations, hand tools, etc. to multi-day events (e.g., festivals, carnivals, and sporting events). Whenever an event is held far from a kitchen venue (e.g., a golf course), caterers bring the food to the attendees.

### Transportation Equipment

Off-premises catering businesses require commercial transportation equipment—from a single van to a fleet of trucks. Off-premises food would likely be served a distance from van and truck parking, so food must be safely moved and stored close to the point of service.

### Electrical Equipment and Cords

Off-premises caterers bring sufficient extension cords. In some cases, they may provide their own electric generator (when no power source is available).

### Casual Events

Casual off-premises catering may require the client to purchase or rent a variety of supplies, tools, and/or equipment:

- ◆ Chafer units
- ◆ Tongs and serving spoons
- ◆ Condiments and dispensers
- ◆ Disposable tablecloths, etc.

### Formal Events

Formal off-premises catering may require the client to purchase or rent an extensive variety of supplies, tools, and/or equipment:

- ◆ Linen cloths and napkins
- ◆ Serving trays and tray jacks

- ◆ Service plates, glasses, cups, and flatware
- ◆ Glass or metal punch bowls
- ◆ Bus tubs and stands
- ◆ Mobile dishwashers or a dish rinse station (e.g., to eliminate packing and moving dirty dishes, glassware, utensils, and flatware)
- ◆ Mobile storage units for breakable dishware
- ◆ Outdoor heaters
- ◆ Outdoor lighting
- ◆ Tents and tent fans
- ◆ Tables and chairs



## ON THE JOB...

### CAREER CONNECTION: Corporate Caterers

Independent caterers can be found everywhere (e.g., within chain restaurants, some grocery stores, independently owned restaurants, and catering companies). Income potential in these jobs is steady, but it is not high in annual salary. However, corporate careers are different financially.

Corporate caterers are on a different level. They can be a department within a specific corporation—GM, Westin Hotels, Apple, etc.—that provides all catering required for that company (and only that company) as well as benefits and pay. Benefits are in addition to your salary (pay) and part of your employee compensation package.

Corporate caterers can be their own corporation; serving other companies, schools, universities, on-site film crews, and other major employers that want to contract-out regular catering service for ongoing periods of time—short or long.

Employment with corporate caterers may only require a high school diploma for entry-level jobs (e.g., line cooks and servers). Generally, higher-level positions require two- or four-year degrees. All positions require people skills; service-oriented views; organization and detail skills; and flexibility regarding work hours.

People who work in corporate catering generally make significantly more money than independent caterers, with potential for high five- and low six-figure incomes depending on the business and location. Keep in mind the importance of the caterer's geographic location. For instance, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Boston, and Los Angeles pay significantly more than smaller cities. However, the pressure and work load will similarly be significantly higher.



Which of these fringe benefits are most important to you as part of your salary?

- ◆ Flowers and/or other table decorations
- ◆ Garbage cans and recycle containers
- ◆ Beverage dispensers and bar stools

[NOTE: An individual caterer may not provide the entire listing of supplies, tools, and equipment. Different types of caterers are used in different markets for specific events. It is an extraordinary challenge to provide full restaurant service for set-up and breakdown for an off-site single event. How does this impact the cost of weddings, parties, reunions, etc.?.]

## Containers and Packaging

When deciding which container to use for packaging a specific catered food, you must decide which elements are most important. Will the food be dropped off or served? This is a huge issue because foods being delivered and left by caterers require disposable food packaging, while caterers that serve the event commonly use standard kitchen pans and containers. If food items are dropped off, off-premise caterers that deliver and leave that food must consider:

- ◆ What packaging best supports safe movement of the food during transport?
- ◆ What packaging best protects the integrity of the food?
- ◆ Is the food hot or cold?
- ◆ How long will the container remain intact with food inside?
- ◆ Where will the filled container be stored prior to pick-up or service?
- ◆ What is the storage environment after transport?
- ◆ What is the container cost? (e.g., What is the cost of a plain container versus a container with a logo?)
- ◆ What does the client expect? (e.g., Would placing expensive food items in Styrofoam containers meet the client standard?)
- ◆ How much space do filled containers require?
- ◆ Do the containers require assembly? (What is the associated labor cost to construct the container?)
- ◆ Can a logo be placed on the container?
- ◆ Is it possible to write labels on the containers?
- ◆ Are sizes available that meet the needs of business and client?
- ◆ In what quantities are containers available for purchase? (e.g., only available in lots of 1,000, etc.)

Off-premise caterers that deliver and serve need to be sure they have sufficient commercial pans and tools to transport to the event while reserving enough for other events or in-house use.

## SERVICE OPTIONS FOR OFF-PREMISES CATERING

Off-premises catering has a variety of options.

### Buffet

Buffet line set-up is a service in addition to delivery that includes:

- ◆ Setting up and draping buffet tables
- ◆ Arranging plates, flatware, glassware, napkins, etc. for pick-up by guests
- ◆ Setting up the chafer units for hot foods; adding and lighting Sterno cans
- ◆ Placing food into hotel pans and covering the pans
- ◆ Arranging cold foods and ice as necessary

Caterers are often asked to provide servers to work a buffet line. This is a more formal approach to buffet service that includes:

- ◆ Setting up and refilling pans with food during the event
- ◆ Serving food from one side of the line to guests

At the conclusion of the event, the same catering staff is commonly paid to break down the line and conduct clean up.

### Cater-Waiter

A **cater-waiter** is a roaming waiter who is responsible for assisting all guests, rather than a particular set of tables, as he or she moves around the room. He or she must be able to stand and walk for long periods while politely interacting with guests. Events designed for guests to mingle, move, and socialize (e.g., a cocktail party) may require one or more “cater-waiters.”



**FIGURE 7.** When requested, caterers usually supply their own staff servers for a buffet line, especially if the service required slicing meat, assembling a salad, dressing a dessert, etc.



**FIGURE 8.** Events designed for guests to mingle, move, and socialize may require cater-waiters. These servers walk among the guests and serve food from trays; guests help themselves from the passing trays.

These servers walk among the guests serving food from trays. The guests help themselves from the passing trays so they do not have to carry a beverage and a plate of appetizers from another location.

A server (or servers) works from a kitchen or plating area to refill trays and then returns to the guests. Similarly, a server may walk about with trays of champagne, wine, or another beverage. Typically, a cater-waiter is responsible for cleaning the foodservice area, the glassware, and possibly the party area at the conclusion of the event.

## Full-Service Catering

Full-service catering is service similar to that of a sit-down restaurant. Plated food is served to seated guests. This service requires a “staging” area where foods are cooled, heated, chilled, plated, and assembled for service; a dishwashing area; and a beverage outlet. It also requires servers trained in full-dining service skills and vehicles to transport all needed equipment (e.g., tables, chairs, lighting, décor, and cooking/cooling units). It is similar to setting up and running a portable restaurant and can be challenging and expensive to operate. This type of off-premises catering is expensive and is often reserved for high-end weddings or similar events, sporting events, political events, etc.

Full-service caterers are primarily located in major cities and commonly fill a niche where the client may have extensive needs and particularly high expectations for service and detail. Caterers of this caliber may even coordinate a series of sub-contractors to supply services beyond their scope (similar to a home construction general contractor). **Sub-contractors** are companies or individuals hired by the catering service rather than by the host. These sub-contractors typically have a specialty service or product that warrants their hiring and expertise, including:

- ◆ Ice carving
- ◆ Live music or entertainment
- ◆ Specialty cakes, confections, or desserts
- ◆ Guest transportation
- ◆ Fountain displays
- ◆ Fireworks
- ◆ Large plant and tree staging
- ◆ Tents and gazebos
- ◆ Outdoor heating and cooling

## Summary:



To cater is to provide food and beverage for an event or a banquet. Catering is providing prepared food and beverage, and sometimes service, for a specific group and/or for an event. A caterer is an independent vendor or a department within a facility

(e.g., hotel, resort, or restaurant) that provides food, beverage, and sometimes service for an event. A catering manager or event manager organizes and staffs an event with servers (front of the house), chefs (back of the house), valet service, bar service, etc. Carryout (sometimes referred to as takeout or to go) is food prepared in a kitchen and consumed in another place. Ancillary is supporting elements that go with the food. The ancillary items may include disposable (single use) plates, flatware, napkins, serving pieces, and chafing set-ups for buffets. A chafing set-up is a metal frame that holds pans of food, often with disposable Sterno cans underneath.

## Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Describe types of portable equipment to transport food at safe temperatures.
2. What are six services a sub-contractor might provide to a caterer?
3. How does liability apply to off-premises catering?
4. List potential ancillary items that might be needed for a casual off-premise catering job, such as a Super Bowl Party.
5. What makes catering different from a pick-up order at the drive through?

## Expanding Your Knowledge:



Production and sales of tools and equipment for off-site catering is a career path with many opportunities within the catering arm of the hospitality industry. It is an attractive career path for those wanting different hours or with different skill sets than those needed for catering, but those who want to stay connected to the industry. Do some research on what these jobs are like, where they are, and how you get one. To get started, access the following: <https://www.linkedin.com/job/equipment-sales-jobs/>.

## Web Links:



### Food Truck Revolution

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnF4Pxjko8>

### How to Start a Mobile Food Business

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/220060>

### How to Start a Catering Business

<http://www.nfib.com/article/how-to-start-a-catering-business-59046/>

### Vegware Packaging Made From Plants

<https://www.vegware.com/index.php?act=viewDoc&docId=1>