

Wedding food gets a *Touch of Class*

By Brent Lang

Weddings aren't usually known for the food. Rubbery chicken, limp salads chock full of iceberg lettuce, and Fettucine Alfredo drowning in heavy, buttery sauce have long been staples of the after-party, leaving guests, brides, and grooms desperate for food that's big on taste, not just cost.

Here on Block Island, a number of caterers and restaurants are trying to dispel the notion that the entrees and munchies at receptions and rehearsal dinners are always less than inspired.

"When I'm planning a menu, I'm thinking of something exciting that looks good and tastes better," said Sean Kivlehan, event manager



Photo courtesy of the Spring House.

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Photo by Justin Mott

Becky Stover and Bogdan Suciu at the Atlantic Inn.

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Often that means stocking up on local catch and fresh produce. It also involves incorporating culinary options from around the world – Italian, Indian, and Spanish cuisines have become popular choices on Block Island in recent years. Island chefs are also investing heavily in the latest food movements. Caterers are embracing the organic food phenomenon, offering up gluten-free meals, and are ahead of the curve on emerging trends such as the slow food movement, which emphasizes knowing where food comes

from and buying locally produced goods. Sometimes it even means turning your guests into chefs.

“One time we dug a pit at Rose Farm Inn and roasted a whole lamb,” said Kimberly Ward, owner of the Beachhead restaurant. “We gave everyone spits and let them cook their own over the flame. It was great fun.”

Block Island weddings aren’t just day-long celebrations; they’re really a collection of events that frequently span a weekend. That means that if you want to keep guests engaged and interested you have to plan several different menus, each one interesting and unique.

For the rehearsal dinner, island caterers recommend keeping it simple. The reception should be elegant and upscale, but the rehearsal dinner is a chance to unwind and kick back with family and friends. That means the food should also be informal. Kivlehan recommends family-style meals, heaping plates of paella or pasta that can be passed around, and

Ward has had great success with barbecues.

Appetizers and hors d’oeuvres are a great way to highlight the fresh fish that is a hallmark of Block Island cuisine. A raw bar, sushi, mini crabcakes, and maple glazed scallops wrapped in bacon are all can’t-miss selections that will leave guests raving about the quality of the seafood here, according to Danielle Dziok, catering manager at the Spring House. There are also some non-meat options for vegetarian guests that are more imaginative than the standard crudité. Wild mushroom, gorgonzola, and pecan filo cups glazed in lemon butter, grilled artichoke hearts filled with blue cheese, and saffron rice-stuffed small baby red peppers are some of the finger foods that Kivlehan has found are a hit with meat-wary guests.

Entrees have also come a long way from generic chicken, fish, and meat options served with the cafeteria-style efficiency that once characterized wedding receptions. In these tough economic times, there are also menus to fit any budget. Lobster bakes and seafood

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kabobs are another fun option that can scale back costs and give the festivities a more informal feel, according to David Baptista, innkeeper at the Narragansett Inn. To cut back on costs, consider having stations instead of plated meals or even skipping entrees in favor of sandwiches and finger food.

You will (hopefully!) only have one wedding day, so you may decide to not sweat the budget when it comes to planning your reception menu. In that case, island chefs are well-equipped to handle even the most elaborate requests and happy to create a menu that is a dream come true for any gourmand. Beyond the shellfish, surf & turf and other staples, there are a number of new choices that have been big hits with wedding parties. At the Beachhead, Ward says that her clients have raved about fresh swordfish grilled and served with a mango salsa. She's also been serving bok choy and mini-asparagus as sides with great success, finding that both provide a hint of color and a blast of taste.

Block Island Gourmet has been getting

lots of requests for its oven roasted rack of lamb with a red onion marmalade and a pan seared sea bass served with a lemon chive beurre blanc and roasted beets that are colorful, tasty entrees. Kivlehan emphasizes that if something is visually appealing it goes a long way towards creating an elegant setting for the after-party and making a magical culinary experience for the newly wed couple and their guests.


Beyond the menu, Block Island chefs stress the importance of getting to know your caterer.

"The most important thing is to be comfortable with your caterer, so you don't feel awkward or inadequate or stupid by asking questions about your menu or budget," said Baptista. "It all boils down to personal chemistry."

Although the menu choices for wedding receptions have grown more eclectic to meet a bride and groom's array of culinary interests, some things remain constant.

"It's Block Island, so chances are there's going to be a lot of seafood," Dziok said. ♡

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