

The 7 don'ts of event catering

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Event planners and managers from Johannesburg and beyond quake in their Nike's when certain things are suggested in the catering arena. Be it a brand activation, product launch or year-end function, some concepts and food you steer clear of when feeding large groups of hungry people.



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1. No "gig slop"

“ *It is a mistake to think you can solve any major problems just with potatoes. - Douglas Adams* ”

Secondly, it refers to meals better reserved for lunch with elderly relatives, or what's sometimes called “comfort food”. What's “gig slop” you ask? Firstly, you don't want it Tweeted WRT your event food. Not that there's anything inherently evil about these dishes, they just lack glamour don't hold together well when served to big numbers of attendees. The gig slop list includes:

- Macaroni and cheese
- Shepherd's pie or badly made lasagna
- Sloppy, dead stir fry vegetables
- Jelly and custard

You get the picture.

2. Avoid the Fyre Festival Cheese Sandwich Syndrome

“ *Of the many wonderful things about the #FyreFestival debacle, I think the cheese sandwich ("chef-curated culinary pop-ups") is my favourite. - @chrisrusselluk* ”

Bad things happen when people [pay US\\$12,000](#) to go to a music festival with “beachside barbecues and champagne brunches” and get fed a wilted cheese sandwich instead.

Ultimately a whole festival was brought to its knees by a photo of the (now infamous) cheese sandwich - posted on

Instagram by an influencer.

“ Here's the dinner they fed us tonight. Literally slices of bread, cheese, and salad with no dressing. [#fyrefraud](#) [#fyrefestival](#) [#dumpsterfyre](#) [pic.twitter.com/NmNXakSFIq](#)— Trevor DeHaas (@trev4president) [April 28, 2017](#) ”

Avoid over-hype and food-shaming on social media by bearing in mind:

- Don't over promise on the event communications and under deliver
- Match the food to the occasion, if it's a formal corporate event think - sit-down silver service. Ditto if it's something fun and relaxed; don't bring the mood down by serving fussy food from an over-designed menu.
- Also, don't make it too fancy so the guests are too scared to pick it up
- “Make it Instagram-able” words which should ring in every strategic event planners' ears. This means fresh, good looking food served elegantly. Even the humble cheese sandwich can look (and be) beautiful.

3. Terrine

“ When you cook under pressure you trade perfection. - Gordon Ramsay ”

The French cuisine dish “terrine” is a good metaphor for what to *avoid* serving at any event. The definition of [terrine](#) being: “A dish of ground meat, organ meat, seafood, vegetables, boiled eggs, herbs and/or other seasonings packed or layered in a ceramic or steel loaf-shaped mould, cooked in a water bath, cooled, turned out and sliced for serving.”

Just. Say. No. This is also stuck in the '70s! This is comfort food on designer steroids and no matter how “chef-y” it sounds it's unlikely to be a hit. Rule of thumb:

- If it involves boiling, layering, moulding, cooking and cooling - leave it off the menu
- Surprise guests with unusual dishes but made up of ingredients they love to eat.

4. Queues

“ When food is involved, people move in packs. Consider the movements of herds and corral accordingly. - Faith Durand ”

Queues - not an event food but a barrier to entry, often bringing back memories of the 1st *Jurassic Park* movie and usually found at the ubiquitous but often necessary buffet. Ways to avoid guests queuing for food for long periods of time include:

- Allocate enough serving stations – work on a maximum of four tables of eight per buffet station
- Circulate snacks/appetizers/drinks/cocktails before/during the buffet to keep blood sugar levels up and [hangry](#) levels low
- Put the drinks stations/bar as far from buffets as possible
- If possible, stagger each group by having event planners invite each table up
- On the buffet tables put several points of access to plates, serviettes etc
- Put the most delectable food at the end of the buffet so people are encouraged to move faster
- Create a diversion while guests are queuing – great music, a video or live performance.

5. Don't NOT feed your crew

“ An army marches on its stomach. - Thought to be said by Napoleon Bonaparte (or something similar) ”

This one is super-important - we work hard and long hours making sure great events happen and your team are the vital cogs in the magic-making machine. Plus, when the crew is always well watered and fed they appreciate it and this equals good vibes.

6. We want plates

“ *The #wewantplates online movement has gathered thousands of pictures of absurd, unexpected and downright stomach-churning occasions when restaurants have shunned the ordinary plate.* - Ross McGinnes ”

The [@wewantplatesofficial page](#) on Instagram is amusing. It's a “global crusade against serving food on bits of wood and roof slates, chips in mugs and jam-jar drinks.” There's even a book.

Although we've been known to serve “outside the plate” (when it works) we're with author Ross McGinnes on the following:

- No soup in a stiletto
- No bread in a hat
- No Beef Wellington on barbed wire.

But if it is interesting we may consider it – remember it has to be Instagram-able.

7. Approach trends with caution

“ *Following a trend is useful until you start alienating the original.* - J.S. Strange ”

This last point was originally called, “Substance over Trends”, but that's not strictly true. Trends keep cuisine exciting, incorporating unexplored ingredients and finding fresh ways of visualising and engaging with food, beyond just being sustenance.

Besides which, many of the latest trends *are about substance*, which we love. Just don't leap onto a food trend bandwagon without considering setting and audience. That said, here are some cuisine ideas worth exploring in 2019:

- “Ugly” food [will shine](#) – ugly meaning not perfectly formed, for example, organic vegetables
- Meat substitutes are hot – these include the new “miracle” food, [jackfruit](#) and brinjal and mushroom [biltong](#)
- Deep diving into different cuisines, such as [Sri Lankan and Burmese](#)
- Zero alcohol craft beers and [mocktails](#)
- [Alternative grains](#) – such as buck wheat (which is no family to wheat) pearl barley, quinoa, farro and steel-cut oats, chia seeds, great for breakfast feasts and uplifting salads
- Local food explored as identity, as Chef Adriaan Maree of Fermier [says](#),

“ *The food trend I would love to see happening is a truly South African way of doing things. Not to follow the world trends but to use locally grown produce and create a South African identity (not bobotie in a fancy way).* ”

Local is always lekker.

ABOUT KELLY MCGILLIVRAY

Putting productions of every shape and size together for over 20 years. Now CEO of TheSquad Creative Events and on a mission! Creating brilliantly planned, well executed and bodacious event experiences. Teamwork, underpinned by strategic planning with passion and expertise. That's what it's all about.

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