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A LOOK DOWN

The Aisle

This year's hottest wedding trends

By Amanda Nicklaus

Whether scrolling TikTok, chatting with clients, or attending weddings yourself, you've likely been noticing some interesting trends taking place at the altar. 2024 has been quite a year for couples getting creative, whether they're going big and bold or keeping festivities to a minimum. As this year comes to a close, let's look back on wedding trends that have gained traction, and look forward to what is on the horizon for 2025.

Let's talk numbers

According to *The Knot's 2024 Global Wedding Report*, the global average marrying age ranges between 33–35 years old. Winter continues to be the most popular engagement season, and technology is playing an increasingly important role in weddings.

In our *Special Events* annual State of the Industry survey, 56% of respondents said that the average wedding budget of their clients has been in the \$25–50K range.

Turn to [page 28](#) for a more in-depth review of the state of weddings.

Ceremony magic

Whether micro weddings or lavish destination weddings, ceremonies are increasingly being sandwiched between (at least) two extra days of activities. The day before is no longer limited to the rehearsal dinner; guests are invited for a casual pre-ceremony event to break the ice and amp up excitement. In some cases, the hype takes different forms; Sebastien Centner ([Entertainment](#)) Events & Catering told *Special Events*, "pre-ceremony activities, such as welcome kits for out-of-town guests, are becoming more common." The day after is popular for brunches and official goodbyes.

Yet even on the wedding day, formal dinners are sometimes replaced by cocktail receptions, and vibrant after parties keep everyone partying until the wee hours of the morning. That being said, not everyone wants to party hard—some couples are calling it an early night, or even holding ceremonies in the morning. Timelines are at the whim of the couple.

"The trend toward intimate, luxurious celebrations will continue, with many couples opting for smaller weddings followed by big parties months later," says Jaclyn Watson (Jaclyn Watson Events).

Centner adds, "We also expect to see themed wedding weekends grow in popularity, turning weddings into immersive festival-like experiences."

On top of these flourishes, there are other changes afoot: some couples are opting for private vow readings, and many are choosing a pre-ceremony look, doing away with the superstition of old traditions.

Increasingly, officiants are someone that know the couple well. "One of the more memorable things I have seen at weddings this year is family members or close family friends marrying

(Opposite Page) Extravagant floral arches have been quite in vogue in 2024. Photo courtesy Tracy Autem Photography

Untraditional seating was spotted throughout the year, like this circular ceremony by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy John Meyers Photography



the couple," says Kelsey Strickland (Twickenham House and Hall). "The intentionality of this choice reflects the couple's values, and it is so refreshing to hear a first-hand account of their love for one another."

Mixed heritage weddings are also continuing to stick. Melani Lust (Melani Lust Photography) notes, "I am excited to see more interfaith marriages. I recently photographed a Catholic church ceremony where the bride was Catholic and the groom was Jewish. The priest incorporated some Jewish traditions into the Catholic ceremony, including the breaking of the glass. A small note describing this Jewish ceremony custom was placed next to the bibles in the pews."

Lastly, we're seeing the continuation of scaled-back weddings. "Intimate micro-weddings were a major theme in 2024, with couples opting for weddings that focused more on the experience than the guest count, creating highly personalized events with fewer people," notes Craig Peterman of Craig Peterman Photography & Videography.

For the guests

As traditions change and leave, couples are refocusing their priorities. "It seems like couples want less focus/attention on them and are focused more on the guest experience," says Kevin Dennis (Fantasy Sound Event Services). "They're wanting to get to the party portion of the evening as early as possible!"

Julian Ribinik of Julian Ribinik Studios echoes this sentiment. "I think we will see more focus on the guests, less time spent on 'wedding traditions' but more investment in cultural traditions, more simplification and longer receptions to allow for more time to party and connect."

One thing that has stayed in the back of some couples' minds is keeping the wedding free from heated political division. Some couples carefully curate seating charts to avoid any divisive conversation, while others have opted for a "no politics" sign to avoid the discussions altogether, keeping the night light-hearted and focused on celebration.



ON TREND

“With the economic landscape changing, many are prioritizing experiences over material things, focusing on creating memorable moments with loved ones.”

—Jaclyn Watson

Decorative touches

Whether simple or extravagant, sophisticated is in.

“This year has been all about refined elegance,” says Watson, “with simplicity leading the way—clean lines, natural palettes, and flowers that seamlessly complement the wedding’s surroundings.”

This look is often deemed the “Nancy Myers aesthetic”: inspired by the interior designs of Nancy Myers’ movie sets (*Something’s Gotta Give*, *The Holiday*, *It’s Complicated*), this vibe is charming, cozy, and elegant, with neutral tones and coastal flair, and we expect to see more of it in 2025.

Bold colors provide an interesting touch, draping is in, and bows are everywhere—on candlesticks, linens, walls, even the wedding party themselves (more on that in a bit). We’re also seeing fruit and vegetables stealing the spotlight as part of the décor; think pearl-encrusted pears set upon each plate, or a centerpiece spilling with artichokes, lemons, even carrots.

When it comes to tents and other outdoor “rooms,” extravagant glass structures have taken the spotlight. “There has been a trend in tented weddings toward those having clear tops with black trim,” says Lust. “This is starting to become the norm, and I’m seeing more black trim on tents, and I rarely see sailcloth tents now. I think this trend will continue to build in 2025.”

Looking forward, Lust says, “We will also see the continuation of the circular wedding arch, which is shaped in a pure circle, with every point on

its circumference equidistant from the center.”

Florals have made a splash, too. “Florals took center stage, with extravagant installations, floral arches, and even floating flower arrangements making bold statements,” says Centner.

Joan Wyndrum (Blooms by the Box) foresees a mix of tradition and trend for the foreseeable future. “It’s safe to say that traditional floral trends will continue for many years to come. Rising costs of living may also lead couples to choose smaller, more budget-friendly floral arrangements with loose, organic shapes, incorporating a mix of different flowers, textures, and shapes,” she observes. “There are no rigid structures—just letting the flowers’ natural curves and personality shine through! Look out for flowers being used in surprising ways, such as in infused floral cocktails, ice displays, and whimsical florals in hairpieces.”

Strickland sees other floral options on the rise, too. “I hope that fun floral arrangements will remain for 2024, but it seems people are opting for fake flowers and candle-heavy receptions.”

Wedding wardrobes

This year, overarching trends in matrimonial garb hovered around bold yet simple touches. “The bridal space is getting creative, with plenty of bold designs that push the envelope,” *Vogue* noted of the looks from the 2024 New York Bridal Fashion Week.

2024 has been the year of floral touches, elegant bows, long and intricate veils (a holdover from Kourtney Kardashian’s iconic Dolce & Gabbana wedding veil in 2022,



Guest engagement was revamped in 2024, like with this audio guestbook. Photo courtesy Amy Kolo Photography



Wedding desserts saw all kinds of creativity in 2024. Photo courtesy Tracy Autem Photography

perhaps?), even bold pops of color (and in many cases, entirely black dresses). Wedding gowns feature unique structural elements, like dramatic skirts and Basque waists, or gowns are being swapped for pants. Suits are a chance to make a bold statement. Multiple outfit changes are also becoming a staple. And as for hair, it seems simple, flowing curls and elegant ponytails tied with a bow are becoming the preferred style.

Wedding fashion is on the path of intentional, expressive looks for all

wedding party members. In fact, according to Zola’s 2024 *Wedding Trends report*, 5.99% of those surveyed said that wearing non-traditional or unexpected attire was a way to make the wedding feel more personal to who the couple is.

Dinner & drinks

We can’t talk about wedding trends without touching on changing catering preferences.

The Zola report noted that 42.6% of survey respondents were most willing to splurge on an open bar, while 28.54% splurged on catering. In fact, the report found that couples used catering as a way to personalize the event, looking for a caterer who is willing to accommodate dietary preferences and needs. Likewise, *The Knot* reported that “a significant portion of the cost per person is allocated to expenses like catering and beverages.”

Beverages are always an important part of the wedding reception, and in recent years, **zero-proof cocktails** are making their way onto menus in an attempt to provide something for everybody. Alcohol pairings for each course of the dinner are also gaining popularity as the dining experience becomes an elevated moment.

As far as the revered wedding cake goes, vintage styles may stick around for a moment but not for long. Ribnik shares, “The traditional, old-school ‘80s cakes are making their way back in. Most memorable, we had a bride from Texas who had a St. Regis wedding in New York ... who ordered a huge, very traditionally shaped cake from Ladurée.”

“In 2025, it seems like large-tiered cakes will be back in style,” says Strickland. “These will also take the place of passed desserts because cakes of this size will feed the entire guest count, if not more.”

We’re seeing a lot more personalization, too—custom flavors, cake toppers, even cultural elements all play a part in making cakes that represent the couple as individuals. Be on the lookout, too, for dome-shaped cakes, textured icing, and metallic elements. Plus: a plethora of extra, surprising desserts to win over the guests with a sweet tooth.



(Above) Bold pops of color are in! Photo courtesy Rosy and Shaun Photography; (Left) 2025 will see more creative food stations. Shown here: Miniature Chicken Tacos and Tequila Cart by Occasions Caterers. Photo courtesy Elisabetta Marzetti



ON TREND



Black-trimmed clear tents are having a moment. Photo courtesy Melani Lust Photography

Centner says, "We see minimalist cake designs or deconstructed 'cake tables' gaining popularity, offering individual treats instead of a traditional multi-tiered cake."

When it comes to food, a few noticeable trends have been established this past year: **late night snacks**, farm-to-table dinners, plant-based menus, street food, sushi bars, and post-wedding brunches. "I predict we'll see even more interactive elements, like live food stations and entertainment, keeping guests engaged throughout the event," says Watson. In fact, according to *Brides*, we can expect to see more

activities like "blending your own wine, making pastries that double as favors, catching and grilling your fish filet for dinner, or learning about local foods through tastings."

As we've seen in events the past couple years, dining is an experience, a chance to bring guests into the moment and leave lasting memories.

Let us entertain you

More and more weddings are relying on over-the-top entertainment to impress guests. Watson has observed the return

of silent discos, and Penny Haas (Penny Haas, LLC) recalls, "I liked interactive wedding vendors this year. Vendors like live painters were great. It was another conversation starter, a wow factor (which I love!), and the first piece of art for the couple."

Music playlists are hyper-personalized, and **3D immersive music soundscapes** give guests a chance to sink into the moment. Of course, the aforementioned after-parties are the top way couples are hyping up guests, creating a more relaxed scene for the night owls (often the couple's inner circle) to let loose and celebrate.

In the case of luxury spectacles, *The New York Times* reported on a couple that turned their wedding into a **private music festival**, hiring A-list artists including the Isley Brothers, Davido, Quavo, and Moneybagg Yo. For some couples, nothing is too much when it comes to creating a unique and memorable wedding.

Visionary venues

Traditional ballrooms are still popular, but **unique wedding venues** are gaining traction. Watson predicts we'll "see a rise in destination weddings in unexpected locations." As couples look to make a statement and create a personalized experience, the venue itself offers a way to impress guests by offering a one-of-a-kind setting for the celebration.

Regardless of how unique or traditional, according to the Zola report, the top three priorities that couples look for in a venue are the **ambiance/vibe of the location** (57.34%), being in line with their **budget** (55.81%), and having an **outdoor space** (31.83%).

On top of that, many couples are choosing wedding dates based on the availability of their preferred venue or vendors (33.72%).

The *Special Events State of the Industry survey* found that hotels, private homes/estates, restaurants, open areas like fields and parks,

and museums/art galleries/cultural centers are the top five most popular venue types.

Picture-perfect

According to the Zola survey, 54.76% of respondents prioritized photography as the element of the wedding they were most willing to splurge on, making it the top spend above having an open bar and the venue itself.

Wedding photos are no longer a stiff, posed affair. Couples want their special day captured creatively—on the rise is candid, documentary-style film photography. "Photographers are getting inspired by magazine-styled shoots, fashion, cinema, bringing abstract vibes and bold colors into their work," says an article from *BrideLifeStyle Wedding & Lifestyle Media*. "Couples are looking for photographers who can add that avant-garde flair, making their wedding portraits pop in a way that's totally refreshing."

Some couples are even hiring wedding content creators to take charge of documenting the day for socials. "As social media continues to rise, people will hire creators to make content for them. These would be reels, posts, TikToks, and more," says Strickland. "I experienced my first time with a content creator this September, and it was so fun. I am really excited to get her media back because, as a wedding professional, it is one less thing on my plate to create." In the social media influencer era, couples want the photography to tell the story of their love and to be shared with everyone they know.

Hi-tech nuptials

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in weddings—not just the ceremony, but in every aspect before, during, and after.

"In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the reliance on online resources and advancements

in technology to support wedding planning around the world," noted the report from *The Knot*. "Many couples utilize technology from start to finish—whether that means watching videos or turning to social media for wedding inspiration, connecting with vendors via video conferencing or using AI to help plan."

Tech doesn't just help couples; event pros are amping up the incorporation of **recent technology** in both the business and events side of things.

"AI will play a larger role in design and other elements, sparking even more creativity," notes Watson.

Centner agrees. "AI-powered photo booths will become more popular, offering personalized images on the spot." Every part of the wedding day will continue to see technology take hold in new ways. "Elopement celebrations with virtual guest streams will likely rise, allowing couples to combine adventure with technology." Another use? "Stationery is also shifting toward digital RSVPs and augmented-reality invitations."

Technology can offer an elevated guest experience. "Tech-driven entertainment such as drone shows, interactive art installations, and virtual reality booths give you memories for a lifetime!" says an article from wedding destination company *Destify*.

In the past few years, various forms of fun and flashy technology have been

integrated throughout the wedding experience in the form of audio guest books and even holograms—and this will only keep getting more creative as event pros learn how to use the latest tech. Anything to stay on the cutting edge!

Circle of life & love

Sustainability is no longer a trend; it's a shift that has found roots in the past few years, producing real changes.

"These smaller weddings allow couples to focus on the details, creating thoughtful moments that leave lasting impressions. Eco-conscious weddings have also made a strong impact, with couples opting for sustainable florals, reusable décor, and zero-waste catering," says Centner. "Sustainable wedding gowns and rentals will become the norm, reflecting a broader shift toward eco-conscious living."

Couples increasingly want to work with vendors who are mindful of their footprint and actively create **sustainable experiences**.

This setup at a wedding venue *crawl* featured video mapping projected onto the walls and floors for added flair. Event by VT Group. Photo courtesy Ambient Sky





ON TREND

Traditions leaving the group chat

Now more than ever, couples are personalizing their wedding to fit who they are, and that often means leaving behind longstanding traditions. Parent dances, parents walking their progeny down the aisle, garter and bouquet tosses, and long speeches are among some of the most ditched traditions as of late.

Ceremonious cake cuttings are out, too. "The traditional cake-cutting moment has taken a back seat as couples embrace creative alternatives to put their own spin on wedding cakes. We see silent cake cuttings or skipping cake altogether, with inspired dessert stations serving late-night food, such as waffle sundaes, pastries, espresso martinis, and espresso cappuccino bars," says Wyndam.

"2024 is going to continue to see couples planning weddings that fit their vision for their celebration, forgoing traditions, norms, and expectations that don't align with their priorities," Mara Mazdzer (WIPA, Fuse Weddings) predicted for *Special Events* in 2023. This prediction was accurate, and 2024 saw immense creativity as couples cultivated their own traditions that felt authentic to them.

Peterson notes: "I have personally seen a decline in traditional, formal wedding structures like assigned seating and formal sit-down dinners. A more casual, free-flowing event that will allow for mingling and more relaxed vibes throughout the day." Couples are opting for warm and inviting celebrations that keep guests engaged, rather than lose guests over stale rituals of the past.

As couples recraft their [traditions and rituals](#), personalization and authenticity reign supreme.



Wedding dresses are becoming more expressive, with fun and flashy elements like this fringed dress. Event by Jaclyn Watson Events. Photo courtesy Caroline Moretz Photography

2024 in context

Couples are on a mission to make a memorable experience that expresses their personalities and tells their story.

"Social media has turned life into a game of showing off and keeping up/beating their friend's weddings. Everyone is committed to having the best wedding and they want their guests to show off on socials on their behalf," says Dennis.

In a post-pandemic world, couples are choosing the elements that matter to them, while working what they have—no matter the size of their budget.

"Current wedding trends reflect broader social, cultural, and economic shifts. Couples are focusing on creating experiences that feel authentic to their personal stories, moving away from rigid traditions," notes Centner. "Culturally, sustainability and inclusivity are at the forefront, with couples making conscious choices about décor, catering, and guest experiences."

Watson agrees. "Right now, personalization and sustainability are trending because couples want their day to feel unique and reflect their values," she says. "With the economic landscape changing, many are prioritizing experiences over material things, focusing on creating memorable moments with loved ones."

As we enter 2025, prepare for celebrations to let the couple shine and connect with their guests for as long as they can. And as couples practice their authenticity and individuality, practice yours, too: incorporate trends that resonate with you and leave the ones that don't. As couples leave room for more organic experiences, event pros can offer truly creative and meaningful services that set them apart and showcase their brand.

At the end of the day, love, connection, and enjoyable memories are what make a lasting impression—on the couple, on their guests, and certainly on your event business. [SE](#)

MIX, MINGLE, CHEERS!

How to plan a flawless cocktail-style reception

By Amanda Nicklaus

LUX Catering & Events partnered with Visit Salt Lake for an event, using the mayor's signature Old Fashioned recipe for a unique and memorable touch. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull

You don't need to close your eyes to picture it: the hum of conversation, the clinking of glasses, soft music in the background punctuated by laughter here and there. Cocktail receptions are a timeless style of events, great for gathering people together to enjoy beverages and each other's company.

At social events, they allow people to connect with ease while chattering and drinking, often in between activities. The past few years have seen the rise of cocktail-style receptions replacing seated dinners at weddings (for more on wedding trends, turn to [page 10](#)).

In the corporate world, there are plenty of reasons to host a cocktail reception. "A company plans a cocktail party for two primary reasons: budget and variety," says Fausto Pifferrer (Blue Elephant Events and Catering, Saco, ME).

Chris Sanchez, Managing Partner of LUX Catering & Events (Salt Lake City), adds, "Cocktail receptions give clients the chance to create a dynamic, engaging atmosphere where networking is effortless, and connections are made in a more experience-driven setting. Guests get to relax and immerse themselves in the brand in a way that's natural and memorable." It's an easy way for a company to reinforce their brand, reconnect their team, and boost employee morale.

But there are benefits for event pros, too. "For us, it's an opportunity to flex our creative muscles—from designing stunning hors d'oeuvres to crafting signature cocktails that complement the event's aesthetic," says Sanchez. "The logistics may be complex, but the payoff is worth it when you see guests delighted and the brand elevated to new heights."

You've likely hosted a cocktail reception or two in the course of your career. Sometimes, as we learn and grow, it can be helpful to go back to the basics once we've mastered finer detail work.

Here's a crash course on how to plan a successful cocktail reception.

Set the scene

The venue is one of the most important factors in creating a great cocktail reception. [Jim & Tonic](#), a distillery based in London, recommends choosing a venue "appropriate for your [client's] company's brand and image. It should be large enough to accommodate your guests and have a good layout for mingling. It should also be convenient for your guests to get to and have good amenities."

Sanchez notes a few things to look for in a venue. "The venue needs to reflect the client's vision for the guest experience while offering practical solutions for everything from acoustics to lighting. The architecture and natural elements should enhance the event's vibe without needing

over-the-top decor. I love venues that offer seamless transitions—indoor to outdoor spaces or multi-level designs—to keep things interesting and encourage guests to explore."

Loni Peterson, MLS, of LP Creative Events (Denver, CO), says, "Make sure your venue capacity and space are appropriate for your guest count. You want there to be plenty of room for people to mix and mingle, space for either a food station(s) or servers passing apps, some cocktail tables, and some soft seating for guests if they want to take a load off."

There are other things to look for, too. Lisa Costantini, Director of Events & Catering at [Entertainment Events & Catering](#) (Toronto), adds, "Accessibility is also key; the venue should be located near public transit with ample parking. A unique setting with a distinctive aesthetic adds to the ambiance, creating a backdrop that aligns with the event's theme or branding. Additionally, the venue should be equipped to support AV equipment for speeches or entertainment, as most corporate events include presentations or toasts."

Remember, event attendees are increasingly looking for unique experiences. Choosing a venue that's both interesting and functional guarantees a great start to the event.

Hit the right notes

Entertainment is a key factor in a good cocktail reception. Guests don't want to have to talk to each other the entire time—and besides, it's 2024; events big and small need to have an immersive, experiential element.

"For a high-energy event, go with live bands or DJs; for something more refined, acoustic music or jazz quartets are perfect," recommends Sanchez. "Adding interactive elements—think mixology stations, still walkers, or a photobooth with a branded backdrop—adds personality and gets guests engaged. It's all about the vibe you want to create."

Also, think about adding high-engagement elements into the mix. "Activities like trivia games or themed photo booths can engage attendees and encourage participation," says Costantini.

In fact, creative entertainment can be a way to set your cocktail receptions apart. "Thinking about entertainment or activations during cocktail hour is always fun! Is there a photo booth, a beer burro walking around serving drinks, watercolor artists, or custom poems?" Peterson muses. "Having simple things for your guests to engage with helps people get to know each other and makes it less awkward for those who struggle in networking situations."

Make sure you have the right vendors working alongside you. "Depending on the event's scale, you might need AV, lighting, or décor specialists," says Sanchez. "If entertainment is central, a DJ, live band, or event interactive element provider can elevate the event. Local artisans are great for unique touches that give the event a sense of place and originality."

FOOD FOR FÊTES

Snack it up

The focus of a cocktail reception may be the beverages, but there absolutely *must* be food, both for the guests' enjoyment and to help control alcohol consumption effects.

"I'd recommend six to eight hors d'oeuvres per guest for a two-hour event, with a mix of passed items and food stations," says Sanchez. "But let's be clear: food stations are where the magic happens. Get creative—think themed stations that encourage guests to explore and mingle. If you're going all out for a longer event, make sure guests don't go hungry. Offer more substantial options. The trick is to make food part of the experience, not just a necessity."

Pifferrer echoes this thinking. "We always suggest between eight to 10 passed bites for a cocktail party and plan for two of these each per person. This assumes that stationary offerings like cheese, fruit, and crudites will also be available."

Work with your caterer to offer a variety of food heaviness options, from lighter hors d'oeuvres to heavier **snacks**.

Event planner Penny Haas (Penny Haas, LLC) says that food stations can improve guest engagement if done creatively. "**Action stations** and displays are great for cocktail hour receptions. Create fun arrangements, small plates, and setups. Incorporate a chef experience to add some conversations and flair to the food. Action stations can also help you use different areas of the room and break up any buffet lines."

Another exciting idea? Try using a **grazing table** to centralize food in a photo-worthy, art installation way!

One thing to keep in mind: "Too many passed options are only sometimes a good thing!" says Pifferrer. "We have found that eight to 10 is the magic number for passed bites. More than that can easily overwhelm the guests and unnecessarily complicate the process in the kitchen."

A toast to success

Clearly, the beverages are the main focus of a cocktail reception. There are several ways to approach this portion of the event.

Jim & Tonic suggests having multiple bar stations. "It will ensure that everyone has a place to get their drink and help avoid any bottlenecks at the bar."

Sanchez agrees. "I love incorporating multiple bar locations to keep guests moving and [also] adding roaming bar carts or tray-passed drinks to cut down on lines. A great bar experience is all about flow and making sure no one has to wait too long for a perfectly crafted drink."

"I always recommend at least two bars for every 100 guests," says Pifferrer.

Pour Bar Services encourages adding to the guest experience by offering a **welcome beverage**. "Why not set out a welcome glass of ... champagne or fruity cocktail for a warm

day or hot cocoa or coffee for your winter [events]? It's a personalized touch that sets you apart and gets your event off to the perfect start."

It's also important to provide options for those who don't consume alcohol. A *Catersource* article published earlier this year highlighted the importance of offering non-alcoholic cocktails: "Inclusion is another major consideration that significantly intersects with the alcohol-free movement. Simply put, you should make sure that every attendee feels welcome at your events."

You can also make things fun by offering a signature cocktail. "Using seasonal ingredients or even incorporating local flavors is a great way to add a twist as well. Displaying the drink in a fun way, such as custom signage or a unique serving station, adds a memorable touch for guests," says Craig Peterman (Craig Peterman Photography).

Another idea: make a splash using **branded ice** that features your client's logo. In fact, the brand can be infused into every aspect of the event, not just the beverages. "It's all in the details. Branded napkins, glassware, or even lighting projections make the brand pop without feeling overdone," says Sanchez. "But let's go deeper—pull in elements of the client's history or culture or create custom maps guiding guests to different activations. It's these thoughtful touches that take an event from good to unforgettable. Trust me, people will remember that custom stir stick or the signature cocktail named after the brand's origin story."

To sit or not to sit?

While most guests will probably stand, you'll want to provide seating options, both to offer a respite to guests and to ensure accessibility. "Limited seating is best—lounge-style for about 10–15% of guests. I love creating intimate seating clusters

Opposite page, top row from left: Stilt-walking dragons are great entertainment to spice up an event! Event by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Aerie Photography; Variety of food options is a must. Event by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy Ivory Door Studio; Salt Lake City Mayor Erin Mendenhall drinking from a custom branded "SLC" straw while hosting Sundance Institute in her backyard. Event by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull

Middle row: Roasted beetroot and pickled melon salad; Pomegranate spritzer with lime and pomegranate garnish, which guests topped with sparkling water; Compressed watermelon, alpine strawberries, golden raspberries, white wine crema. All photos: Events by LUX Catering & Events. Photos courtesy Billow & Mull

Bottom row: Mango Spritzer with lime, mint, and sparkling water by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Dee and Cory Productions; Bite-sized snacks are a good way to ensure guests keep eating while they imbibe! Event by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy Felten Photography; Coconut Mojito presented with a smoke gun in ice glass (both delicious and entertaining!) by LUX Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull



FOOD FOR FÊTES

where people can take a break, chat, or just admire the space. The idea is to keep people moving, so seating should be more of a feature than the main attraction," says Sanchez.

Pifferrer recommends "seating for approximately a third of the guests at various high and low tables and lounge seating. This can vary depending on the needs of the guests." He warns, "Sometimes, a client will push for seating for everyone, which we do not recommend. It confuses the guests to be seated at what they assume are dinner tables when no dinner will be served. It also makes it more challenging and awkward for the server team to pass bites to an entirely seated crowd. It just doesn't work."

Sanchez encourages keeping the furniture casual. "High-top tables for 25–30% of guests are perfect for a cocktail reception. You want people mingling, not sitting down for a full meal. But make sure there are enough surfaces for guests to set down their drinks while they're networking or heading to the next food station."

Fun for everyone

Speaking of inclusivity, make sure to get dietary preferences and restrictions from guests ahead of time. "Inclusivity is everything," says Sanchez. "Make sure your menu covers vegan, gluten-free, nut-free, etc., but don't make those options an afterthought. Seamlessly integrate them into the menu, so no one feels left out. It's a creative challenge, but when done right, it makes the event feel effortlessly luxurious and thoughtful."

This can even be the first step in planning the event. "Our first goal is to determine the client's expectations and needs," says Pifferrer. "Is this a large meat-eating group? Are there many vegetarians? ... These factors will help us create a menu that meets the client's various requirements."

Balancing the budget

With so many factors, how should the budget be spread? "Prioritize food and beverage, because let's face it, that's where the magic happens," says Sanchez. "Some clients opt for drink tickets to control costs, while others go all out with an open bar. I think it depends on the occasion—if you're celebrating your team, cover everything. For industry events, you could offer a couple of drinks on the house and let guests purchase more if they choose. The key is to balance indulgence with a clear goal of the event. Beyond F&B, ensure there's enough for entertainment, décor, and those little branded touches that elevate the experience."

Make sure that your clients' expectations are realistic, too. "Corporate clients are sometimes under the impression that a cocktail party is a cheaper alternative to a dinner," says Pifferrer. "This can be true, but it is only sometimes an even

"The logistics may be complex, but the payoff is worth it when you see guests delighted and the brand elevated to new heights." —Chris Sanchez



At one event, LUX Catering & Events featured a customizable spritzer bar with beautiful glassware adorned with garnishes, playful ice spheres, and custom-branded acrylic stir sticks. Photo courtesy Billow & Mull



Combined soup and sandwich bites at an event by Your Jubilee Weddings. Photo courtesy Noa Griffel



With the right elements, a cocktail reception brings people together. Event by Penny Haas. Photo courtesy Feiten Photography

switch. I always point out that if it is dinner time, we need to anticipate that guests will be arriving with dinner appetites. Hosting a cocktail party is not necessarily cheaper. We have earned a reputation in our market for always having 'enough.' We always aim for guests to leave feeling full, whether we have prepared a cocktail or dinner menu."

"Budget allocation should reflect the priorities of the event," says Costantini. "Generally, around 40% of the budget should go toward food and beverages, including passed hors d'oeuvres, drink service, and food stations. Venue and décor typically account for about 25%, as they play a key role in setting the atmosphere. Entertainment, such as live music or photo booths, should take up around 15% of the budget. Service staff should account for 10%, ensuring the event runs smoothly. The final 10% can cover miscellaneous items like transportation, permits, branded elements, etc."

The right numbers

A reception might seem casual, but you'll still want to be well-staffed.

"Staffing is everything," says Sanchez. "I usually recommend one server per 15–20 guests and one bartender for every 75. This ensures that service is seamless, and guests

catersource + THE SPECIAL EVENT
 FEBRUARY 24-27, 2025 | HIGHLAND COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER
 FORT LAUDERDALE, FLORIDA

Catersource + The Special Event 2025 is excited to announce the addition of a new Beverage Garden to the Tradeshow Floor during this year's conference. With the purchase of a special tasting ticket, attendees can take advantage of such experiences as:

- **Bitters Bar:** Attendees can step up and taste the differences between the same "types" of bitters between purveyors to understand how they can change the composition of a cocktail.
- **Garnish Goodness:** Sample your way through various garnishes including olives, cherries, and pickled products.
- **Liquid Loves:** Taste various Bloody Mary mixes & discover the differences.
- **Fort Lauderdale Fling:** Join our guest bartender, who will show you how to create the special CS+TSE show cocktail, the Fort Lauderdale Fling. The recipe will be shared for you to bring back to your kitchen.
- Plus, enjoy a wine tasting seminar on Wednesday or a non-alcoholic cocktail session on Thursday, among other activations.

[LEARN MORE](#)



Interactive cocktails gets guests excited, like this added injection at an event by Your Jubilee Weddings. Photo courtesy Noa Giffel

feel taken care of." He also recommends the event manager keep things moving smoothly. "There's nothing worse than a slow line or a guest who can't get a drink."

Managing alcohol

One thing to be mindful of from the start is controlling alcohol consumption. Especially if there's an open bar and smaller bites of food, it can be easy for guests to lose track of their drinking habits. Remember, overserving is a liability that can harm you and your business. You can get ahead of it by placing water stations around the room.

"If everyone's driving, then yes, make sure to have ride-share partnership or taxi vouchers on hand," suggests Sanchez. "I always say it's better to over-prepare when it comes to guest safety."

Hello, my name is...

There are other small touches you can add to make guests comfortable, especially if networking is the main object of the reception.

"Nametags can be fun and functional," observes Sanchez. "Engraved or printed tags on stylish lanyards or pins can double as keepsakes, and if you're feeling techy, digital nametags with wearable tech add a modern twist. It's about making something mundane feel intentional and aligned with the event's tone."

You can take other actions to make guests feel comfortable if networking is the reason for the event: set up a check-in table, host an icebreaker portion of the event (or weave icebreakers into the fabric of the event), and work with the client to understand the guestlist ahead of time. "Consider incorporating QR codes that link to LinkedIn profiles for easy networking or nametags designed with fun facts about each

guest! For larger events, drink charms or lapel pins could serve as both name identifiers and conversation starters," suggests Costantini.

Cheers to success

At the end of the day, your creativity and effectiveness will make even the smallest reception memorable.

"Details, details, details," emphasizes Sanchez. "A successful corporate cocktail reception isn't just about food and drinks; it's about creating an unforgettable guest experience. Thoughtful touches, seamless flow, and well-planned branding will leave guests talking about the event long after it's over."

Pifferrer notes, "We saw a marked change (especially with corporate clients) during and after the pandemic. Cocktail parties were always popular but not seen as an alternative to a sit-down dinner. During the pandemic, the trend was to plan cocktail parties, as they allowed people to space out and avoid groups seated at tables for prolonged periods. Everyone got used to this, and it has become much more common."

Cocktail receptions are no longer a preamble; they are main event material and deserve to be treated as such. Work with your caterer to cover all your ground and get creative with ways to make the reception impact every guest.

"Planners need to maintain a detailed run-of-show schedule to ensure everything runs on time, and a pre-event walkthrough with venue staff will help avoid last-minute surprises. After the event, gathering feedback from the client is a valuable way to improve future events," says Costantini.

If we learned anything from the pandemic, it's that we as humans long for connection, and one of the easiest ways to make that happen is over a well-crafted beverage in an inviting space. Get creative with your cocktail receptions, and connection will follow. Cheers! **SE**

Positive Predictions for 2025



Amanda Lincoln

As we wind down 2024 and prepare ourselves for 2025, it's time for our annual Positive Predictions. This forecast checks in with select industry professionals to see what good things might be in store for the upcoming year. This tradition started in 2020, with event leaders seeking hope in difficult times. This year feels no different—with politics, economy, and staffing concerns, we are once again looking for a kernel of hope.

We asked several event pros what they think the new year holds. Here is a bit of what they predict—read the [full version](#) at [specialevents.com](#). **SE** — *Amanda Nicklaus*

Amanda Lincoln, CMP, CSEP
Senior Manager of Private Events, International Spy Museum

Over the last few years, we've seen lead times drop drastically for many events, especially in the corporate market. What used to have a three-to-six-month lead time might now only have a three-to-four-week lead time. With this trend continuing into 2025, we should consider this the new industry standard and work with it.

Chris Weinberg
Lead Wedding & Event Producer/ Founder/Chief Experience Officer, Chris Weinberg Events

In 2025, luxury events will center on deeply personalized experiences that tell each client's unique story, with design elements, entertainment, and interactive installations crafted to evoke emotion and meaning. Sustainability has become a necessity, with eco-conscious planning like local, seasonal catering and green certifications highly valued. Technology, including AI, AR, and VR, will further enhance guest interaction, adding sophistication when implemented thoughtfully.

Colbert Callen
Sales & Marketing Director, Footers Catering

Many anticipate that economic uncertainty will lead to corporate and individual spending pullback over the next year. While this understandably sparks fear from a revenue perspective

in our small-business industry, it also quietly drives competition and ultimately, excellence.

Colja Dams
CEO, VOK DAMS

2025 will be the best year for events. Studies show that corporate events budgets will rise. The reason? Only live experiences create unforgettable 'Wow-Moments' and real human connections. Live events deliver powerful, emotional experiences. As generic content floods the world, real-life interactions matter more. They bring authenticity and a sense of community. People want real, memorable connections.

JC York
President/Owner, Classic Entertainment/Wise Guys InterACTIVE

The events industry has experienced a strong recovery in 2024, with positive signs continuing into 2025. Event bookings have surged, and there's been an uptick in early contracts, with many holiday events secured by mid-summer. This indicates growing confidence in the market. Another promising trend is the return of last-minute event requests, which, although challenging, suggest that clients are once again willing to invest in enhancing their events and making them more memorable. This shift shows that clients are eager to take their events to the next level, signaling renewed optimism and creativity in the industry.

Jim Hooker
Executive Director of Academic Programs, The Special Event Company

In 2025, institutions will continue to experiment with AI in their academic events—integrating it in ways that enhance, but not overshadow, the human elements that make academic events so memorable and impactful. The key to enduring success in the coming year is to engage donors, students, faculty, staff, community, and alumni through personal, impactful, and transformational experiences that move and motivate attendees into action.

Julie Roth Novack
CEO & Co-Founder, PartySlate

In many areas of the country, the event industry has more than rebounded—it has boomed—and we're excited by all the innovation we are seeing... Personalization at events has grown immensely, with live experiences that create lasting memories. From live champagne and perfume [bottle] etching to personalized, on-the-spot leather travel tags, these touches bring a new level of meaning and luxury to celebrations.

Julie Sabatino
Founder, The Stylish Bride
Brides in 2025 are setting themselves apart from previous years. This generation is informed, well-researched, and passionate about discovering something truly original. We're noticing a strong trend toward "vintage" or nontraditional pieces, with brides seeking a deeper meaning in their choices—a "why" behind each selection that goes beyond simply finding "the one."

Katie Mast
Director of Community Engagement, Rock Paper Coin
As we look toward 2025, the wedding and event industry continues to shine as a beacon of creativity, community, and resilience. In regards to events, I predict a significant rise in hyper-personalized events as couples and clients are leaning into storytelling like never before. The guest experience will reflect deeper, more meaningful connections, making each event as unique as the individuals behind it. From a community standpoint, this focus on authenticity can help drive professionals to refine their offerings and collaborate with other pros in new ways to elevate creativity and create higher client satisfaction.

Sebastian Centner
Founder, Eaterainment Events & Catering/Lead Consultant, Assemble Advisors

For me I see an amazing number of opportunities for our industry as we head into 2025, from trends that are exploding like immersive events and culinary curated events, to new technologies that are available like live attendee tracking or AI tools that are designed specifically for the event industry, but what excites most is how the past few years will shape our resilience and our determination going forward.



Jim Hooker



Julie Roth Novack



Julie Sabatino



Katie Mast



Sebastian Centner

[Read the Full Version Here](#)

2025

FOOD TRENDS

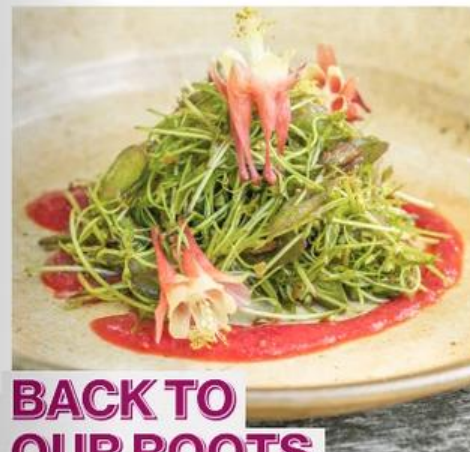
YOU'LL WANT TO SINK YOUR TEETH INTO

Get ready for a deliciously adventurous 2025! This year, the food scene is exploding with bold flavors, innovative ingredients, and playful takes on familiar dishes. In 2025, food is about exploring, savoring, and daring to try the unexpected. Here's a sneak peek of what's on the plate for 2025, and then head over to [Catersource's website](#) for a deeper look at each of these trends. **CS** —Amber Kispert



CRUNCH TIME

From crispy grains and granola to sprouted and fermented nuts to roasted chickpeas and mushroom chips, now more than ever, diners are looking to enhance their meals with the addition of texture.



BACK TO OUR ROOTS

Heritage and indigenous ingredients are gaining newfound recognition and popularity, as chefs and food enthusiasts alike embrace the rich cultural histories and flavors these ingredients bring to the table.



CRAZY FOR COTTAGECORE

Seeds and honey are riding the wave of the cottagecore movement, as people lean into the romantic, rural-inspired lifestyle that embraces simple, natural, and self-sufficient living.



DUMPLING DELIGHT

With their endless variations in fillings, wrappers, and cooking styles, dumplings are the ultimate versatile dish, reminding people of family gatherings, celebrations, and cultural heritage.



EGG-CELLENT

Eggs are set to be a major food trend in 2025, capturing global interest due to their versatility, nutritional profile, and adaptability to various diets. Plus, they're comforting.



MANGO MADNESS

Known for their vibrant color, tropical sweetness, and juicy texture, mangoes are now being celebrated as both a refreshing snack and a versatile ingredient in everything from cocktails to desserts and even savory dishes.



PRIORITIZING PROTEIN

Unique and alternative proteins are making waves as people seek sustainable, nutritious, and creative options to traditional meat.

(Crunch Time) Roasted cauliflower, currants, and pine nuts. Photo courtesy Diwas Photography; (Dumpling Delight) Xian Lamb Siu Mai. Photo courtesy Royal Palms Dim Sum Club; (Egg-celent) These over-the-top paninis include all of the breakfast classics—cheese, sausage, and eggs—all on a cinnamon roll. Photo courtesy General Mills Foodservice

(Back to Our Roots) Saxifrage is an edible plant with a crisp, juicy, and refreshing mild flavor. Photo courtesy Alan Bergo; (Crazy for Cottagecore) Truffle Honey Ricotta Jar. Photo courtesy Kayla Denae; (Mango Madness) Mango mousse with jumbo lump crab, Regia Ova caviar, arugula oil, and micro greens. Photo courtesy Buzz Orr Multimedia; (Prioritizing Protein) Chicken liver mousse tartlet. Photo courtesy Gate Gourmet



MAKING A SPLASH

With the continued popularity of seaweed and the increasing interest in harvesting readily available aquatic plants for more-sustainable sources of protein and nutrients, the tide is turning toward foods made with more sea and freshwater greens.



SNACK ATTACK

International snacks will be bringing bold flavors and cultural flair to snack tables everywhere, offering a delicious way to explore diverse food traditions with every bite.



STRIKING A SOUR NOTE

Sourdough is being utilized in both traditional and innovative ways—pizza crusts (turn to page 08 for a deeper look at pizza), flatbreads, brownies, crackers, and more—with customers looking for the benefits and flavor that sourdough offers.



TEA TIME

There's tea talk everywhere you turn—both in flavor popularity, new steeping formats, and new products like plant-based milk teas and sparkling teas.

(Making a Splash) Crispy karaage chicken with Nappa seaweed slaw. Photo courtesy [Entertainment Events & Catering](#); (Snack Attack) French-inspired snack buffet. Photo courtesy [Culinary Canvas](#); (Striking a Sour Note) Turkey croquettes with sourdough stuffing. Photo courtesy [Entertainment Events & Catering](#); (Tea Time) Afternoon tea. Photo courtesy [Sergio Zacchi](#)

CATERSOURCE

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

2024

This year saw a renewed focus on people, personalized experiences, & the planet

By Amber Kispert



The catering industry is experiencing a period of dynamic transformation. From adapting to evolving consumer preferences to embracing technological innovations, caterers are navigating a landscape that is both challenging and brimming with potential. As 2024 comes to a close, it's clear that the industry is in a state of flux, influenced by a range of factors from economic conditions to shifting social trends.

"Our clients all wanted to believe in a brighter future and the general shift was to move to booking events further out, but there was still some trepidation and unease as to how the landscape would look in the next months," says Sebastien Centner (Eatertainment Events & Catering). "We had to understand this frame of mind and empathize with it, not fight it, to give our clients the confidence to feel supported by a partner, not just a supplier."

Let's take a look at the trends, challenges, and opportunities that have shaped 2024.

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3. The crucial case for company culture
4. Sustainability in 2024: a green revolution
5. Talking trends
6. Technology means streamlining
7. Inclusive business
8. Turning the page

(Clock-wise starting at top) The incorporation and importance of cultural backgrounds are becoming essential. Shown: This intercultural wedding (from Events by Ayesha) between two grooms from different backgrounds (Indian-American and Midwestern) featured whimsical elements from the couple's collection of curios. Photo courtesy Forever Photography; A prom-themed corporate holiday party from Vibrant Table Catering & Events featured a warm and hearty winter menu and kitschy nods to the school dance experience. Photo courtesy Evrim Icoz Photography; Dish Food & Events' ACE-nominated 420-person wedding featured a Mediterranean-inspired menu that highlighted the area's local produce and featured many ingredients from the venue, such as heirloom tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers. Photo courtesy Corbin Gurkin



SURVEY SAYS...

Earlier in the third quarter, *Catersource* released a survey to our readership. Let's first look at the questions we asked, and some of the interesting responses we received, and then we will move into the overall *Catersource* State of the Industry 2024.

Who responded to our survey?

- 38% identified as Owner/CEO
- 19% as Sales/Marketing
- 18% as Director/VP
- 15% as Event Planning & Staff
- 7% as Culinary
- 3% as CFO

Interestingly, 20% noted that they have been in the events industry for 10–14 years, 19% have been in the industry for 15–20 years, and an impressive 42% have worked in the industry for more than 20 years.

This year's survey looked at everything from staffing to challenges to trends to client requests. Take a look at the accompanying data to hear from your peers on what they encountered this year.

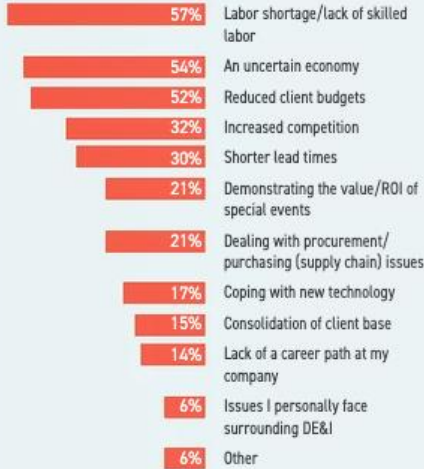
How many events of any kind have you been contracted for in 2024?



Which business sector have you garnered the most business from thus far in 2024?



What are the greatest professional challenges facing you in 2025?



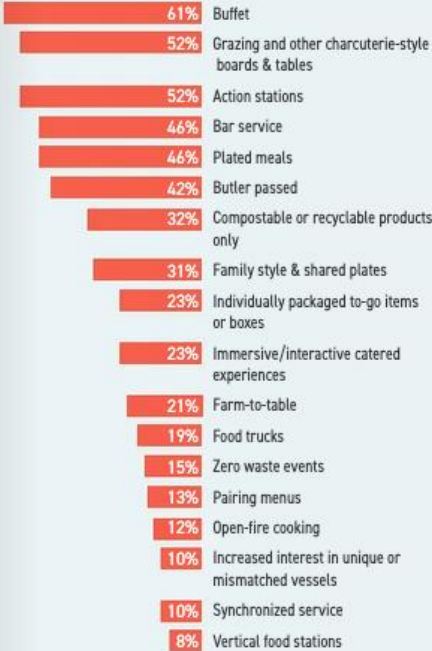
What has been the most concerning for your company in 2024?



“The catering industry in 2024 was hopeful. With the pandemic wreaking havoc on hospitality that had long-lasting ramifications, 2024 was a year where many organizations were able to settle into what felt something like a new normal. With that normalcy on our side, hope for more stability in the future was able to grow.”

—Christie Altendorf

What catering styles or requests were highly requested throughout 2024?



How does the 2024 projected profit compare to 2023?



What key steps are you taking in 2025 to improve your business?





Proof of the Pudding's staff preps in the kitchen in advance of the ACE-winning corporate event, Standing the Test of Time. Photo courtesy Amanda Mazonkey

Operations outlook

The post-pandemic boom may still be in effect (45% of survey respondents saw an increase in events over 2023 while 26% did not see any change), but now the industry is settling into its new normal.

"The catering industry in 2024 was hopeful," says Christie Altendorf (D'Amico Catering). "With the pandemic wreaking havoc on hospitality that had long-lasting ramifications, 2024 was a year where many organizations were able to settle into what felt something like a new normal. With that normalcy on our side, hope for more stability in the future was able to grow."

For starters, planning timelines are getting shorter and shorter. Whereas previously caterers had months to plan and execute a corporate event, today they are being tasked to turnaround in mere weeks, and in some extreme cases, even days. In fact, 30% of survey respondents cited this as one of their greatest challenges in 2024.

"It seems to be the year of last-minute booking requests," said Betty Kalin (Dish Food & Events) during an operations roundtable with the International Caterers Association. "It's not economic uncertainty anymore,



Miniature Quesabirria Grilled Cheese sandwiches from 24 Carrots Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon

though there may have been an element of that during the pandemic; now what's really driving the shift is the change in our consumer base and the focus on convenience. Our clients can order anything on their phone, and have it delivered within a matter of hours or within a matter of days, so why not catering? We must decide what is most important to us and what is operationally possible."

"This shift required caterers to be flexible and fast in order to accommodate shorter lead times," adds Michael Stavros (M Culinary Concepts). "For many in the industry, the rapid response to these bookings became a crucial part of the business model."

Meanwhile, costs have risen—everything from staffing to food (28% of survey respondents expect expenditures to increase by an average of 10% in 2025). Caterers are now juggling the need for efficiency while delivering high-end service in an environment where every decision costs more than it used to. Striking the balance between customer experiences and managing costs is more critical than ever. Caterers are navigating these challenges by optimizing their supply chains, exploring cost-effective ingredient alternatives, and offering flexible pricing options. In response to economic pressures, many caterers are also diversifying their services.

"The best part of the year is that brief moment when I can look back at what we have accomplished, and plan for the future. Numbers don't lie, but if you don't listen closely, they can definitely bamboozle you," said Craig Cooper (Pinx Catering) in an article for Catersource. "At the end of the year or quarter when you have a moment, take a deep dive into your numbers to understand where your bread is buttered. You will be shocked to find how much money was left on the table. Once you look and you identify the opportunities, make a plan and work that plan."



The team from Marcia Selden Catering & Events can frequently be found exploring together during off-site conferences, such as Catersource + The Special Event. Photo courtesy Marcia Selden Catering & Events

The crucial case for company culture

Despite improvements in the overall economy, labor remains a critical issue in the food and beverage industry with nearly a quarter (23%) of the industry expressing concern over shortages today, according to Expert Market's food and beverage report survey.

Additionally, 82% of businesses are actively seeking new hires, highlighting the long-term difficulty of staff recruitment, retention, and training, according to the survey. This is particularly acute in hiring skilled culinary roles like chefs and cooks who represent 30% of open roles across the industry.

To put this in perspective, 19% of respondents to the Catersource survey indicated that the number of employees has decreased since this time last year, whereas 44% of respondents didn't see any change. In fact, 57% of survey respondents said labor shortage/lack of skilled labor was their biggest challenge in 2024.

Many caterers have implemented training programs (41% of survey respondents said increasing staff training will be a focus in 2025) aimed at attracting and retaining talent, as well as an increased focus on employee well-being and work-life balance. Companies are seeking to create supportive work environments through strategies such as flexible scheduling, competitive wages, and opportunities for career advancement.

"The challenge now is how we evolve our training and culture to meet these expectations while maintaining high standards for clients," says Chris Sanchez (LUX Catering & Events). "Retention is crucial, and it hinges on continuous training, mentorship, and a shared sense of core values. It's about fostering accountability, ownership, and teamwork to navigate the shifting dynamics together. Success comes when teams are fully aligned and moving forward as one."

This is where things like the "family meal" have become such an asset within the hospitality industry.



During Parléview's Innovate Canada (which won the Gala Award for Sustainability in Events) guests were served meals with locally-sourced ingredients, including fully vegetarian lunches. Photo courtesy Destination Canada/Johnson Studios

Holistic well-being improvement programs are also being implemented, which will quickly amount to a better work environment and satisfied customers. An [employee wellness program](#) can serve as a key differentiator and critical means of long-term staff retention. In fact, 79% of employees indicated that they would leave a job for one that supported their well-being, said Anthony Lambatos (Footers Catering) during a session on employee well-being during Catersource + The Special Event 2024 (turn to [page 41](#) for Lambatos' thoughts on employee burnout).

"We need to start valuing people for more than the job that they do," said Lambatos. "It's not so much a work-life balance anymore, but a work-life blend. I don't think 'Personal Anthony' stays behind and 'Professional Anthony' shows up and is ready for work—we need to hold space for both because they are equally important."

These programs aim to promote healthy lifestyles, prevent illness and injury, and improve employee morale and productivity. Studies have shown that [80% of employees](#) at companies with robust health and wellness programs show increased [employee engagement](#).

Sustainability in 2024: a green revolution

One of the most noteworthy trends in 2024 was the industry's commitment to [sustainability](#).

"As you all know, the new trend supposedly is sustainability," said Dana Buchanan (Primal Alchemy) during a session on zero-waste events at Catersource + The Special Event 2024. "While we love the fact that it's a new trend, we don't like the fact that it might only be a trend—we want it to remain permanent."

Throughout 2024 caterers increasingly prioritized eco-friendly practices, everything from sourcing local and organic ingredients to minimizing food waste (32% of survey respondents indicated that compostable or recyclable products were one of the most requested trends in 2024).

Many catering companies implemented composting and recycling programs, aligning with consumer demand for environmentally responsible practices. This shift not only appeals to eco-conscious clients but also improves operational efficiency, demonstrating that sustainability can enhance profitability.

"Putting on green events isn't going to necessarily cost us more green," said Chef Alyson Zildjian (Zildjian Catering and Consulting) during a session on green events at Catersource + The Special Event 2024.

Numbers don't lie, and 57% of [consumers say sustainability practices](#) at least somewhat influence their choices when dining away from home.



Chef Alyson Zildjian (Zildjian Catering and Consulting) is a committed leader in green business practices and her dedication to sustainability extends beyond the kitchen, teaching and educating the community on the benefits of reducing our impact on the planet. Her passion for clean food leads to supporting local farms and sourcing local and seasonal food. Photo courtesy Zildjian Catering and Consulting

Environmental concerns are no longer a niche consideration but a mainstream expectation.

"Sustainability is no longer optional—clients are demanding it in every aspect, from zero-waste initiatives to eco-friendly décor," says Sanchez. "They want luxury, but they want it with a conscience."

[One third of consumers](#) say they will pay a premium for sustainable products. Operators should prepare for demand to grow and for sustainability to become the expectation and not the exception.

As awareness and demand for eco-friendly practices continue to rise, innovation in this field will likely lead to even more solutions. Adopting sustainable practices will allow caterers and event organizers to make a significant positive impact and play a crucial role in fostering a healthier planet while delivering exceptional experiences.

"By modeling what's possible, we pave the way for everyone to adapt a green mindset," said Zildjian.

Talking trends

This year saw several new trends (and a few continuing trends) take hold of the catering industry. Here's a look at a few that helped to define the year (turn to [page 04](#) for a sneak peek of what food trends to expect in 2025).

The personal touch

Today's clients are seeking more personalized and customized catering experiences. Whether it's a corporate event, a wedding, or a private party, guests want menus that reflect their unique tastes and preferences. Events are experiences, and these days, those experiences need to be filled with dramatic flair. Every aspect of the event should be entertaining.

"Really get to know your clients and listen to what they're saying and find a way to bring it to life because one size does not fit all," said Susie Perelman (Mosaic) during a session at Catersource + The Special Event 2024.

This year clients were seeking customized menus that reflect individual tastes. The incorporation and importance of cultural backgrounds are also becoming essential. This trend extends beyond just food; caterers also embraced experiential dining (more on that next), incorporating elements like interactive food stations, chef demonstrations, and [themed events](#).

"Clients rely on us to help tell their story through thoughtful design and curated experiences," says Sanchez. "From branded stir sticks with company values to custom cocktail napkins featuring quotes from the founder, it's the little details that leave lasting impressions."



TOP TRENDS OF 2024

We asked, you answered! Here are the top trends that took the spotlight throughout 2024 according to the *Catersource State of the Industry* survey.

- Dietary restrictions and/or allergies
- Composed small plates
- Grab and go
- Premium cocktails and mocktails
- Eco-friendly practices (such as compostable materials and reducing single-use plastics)
- African-inspired food
- Chef-attended stations
- Charcuterie boards and family-style
- Locally focused menu items
- Comfort food with a twist
- Dessert bars
- Heavy appetizers in place of a full sit-down
- Family-style service
- Finger foods
- Global flavors and the incorporation of bold spices and ingredients from regions like Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America
- High-level décor and upscale presentation of food
- Martini bars
- Burrata bars
- More personalized menus
- Lower headcounts, but not lower budgets
- Korean and South Asian flavors
- Simple, basic, traditional foods
- Snacks
- Walking action stations

Catersource State of the Industry 2024

Sharing an experience

In all aspects of life, we're demanding bigger, better, more vibrant experiences that we won't forget—and why should the food we eat be any different? We're in an era of sensory overload, and it's time to lean into that. Diners are keen to see chefs tear up the rulebook and experiment more—they want wild fusion and a no-holds-barred approach to the dishes they see on the menu.

The future of dining is about seeing food as a form of escapism, a vision that is achieved through the need to surprise and challenge diners with sensorial dishes that are designed to delight.

"One of the biggest wins has been meeting the demand for personalized, story-driven events—clients want experiences that feel unique, and we've delivered that through creative, tailored menus and setups," says Lauren Eck (Wolfgang Puck Catering). "Clients are looking for events that don't just entertain but also feel memorable and unique, with every detail customized to reflect their vision, company, or theme. Whether it's bold décor, interactive food stations, or stunning presentation, these memorable touches are now essential to be successful and almost a requirement for every event. Gone are the days of a standard buffet with chafing dishes."

Additionally, we're living in a time of increased connectivity, which means that unique, playful, and multi-sensory dining experiences are more celebrated than ever; through **beautiful food boards** or **cross-cuisine mash-ups**, diners have the opportunity to enjoy food together, creating organic conversations and a sense of community.

"We have this crazy, upside-down world, and it's such a heavy world, and people really want to escape from that world and enter into a dream," said Perelman.

Good food is great; good food wrapped up in an immersive, photo-worthy, theatrical experience is better (23% of survey respondents indicated that immersive/interactive experiences were one of the top requested trends in 2024). This highly engaging form of food service is in high demand, too: **Eventbrite** found that 75% of diners believe it's worth paying more for a one-of-a-kind experience.

Gone are the days of an isolated activation moment. Now, clients want to weave the photo moments into the entire fabric of the event. Caterers now need to make the full duration of their event social media-ready—it's time to say goodbye to the singular Instagram moment.

"Creative food displays have become a popular element of photo opportunities at catered events, with food displays now designed not just to satisfy taste



(Above) As guests took their seats at the table during a dinner with Unilever Food Solutions (as part of the National Restaurant Association Show) at Esmé, they were welcomed with an elaborate arrangement at the center of the table. This centerpiece wasn't just for show, however; hidden within the grass was the evening's first course, thus challenging guests to "forage for their dinner." Featured items included: Fava Bean Tarts, Sunflower & Caviar bites, and Strawberry and Wagyu tartlets. Photo courtesy Ambercita; (Right) Perfect Paloma + Sparkling Tropical Mocktail from Colette's Catering & Events. Photo courtesy Lisette Gatliff



(Above, clockwise from top left) Filo Pizza (artichoke, red onion, tomato, parmesan, and garlic); heirloom tomato with burrata and herb pesto; nut-free pesto shooters (made with fresh herbs); Seasonal Vegetable Salad (romaine, parmesan crisp, cucumber, marinated tomato, pickled red onion, and balsamic vinaigrette); and Spring Rolls (rice paper, mixed vegetables, cilantro, and sweet Thai chili sauce). Photo courtesy Culinary Canvas; (Below) This year clients were seeking out customized menus that reflect individual tastes. Shown: wild mushroom and cheese roulade, braised red cabbage, and seasonal local greens from Zingerman's Cornman Farms*. Photo courtesy Julia Bartelt



Catersource State of the Industry 2024

buds but to capture attention on social media,” says Meg Grasso (Constellation Culinary Group). “These visually striking setups serve as both décor and conversation starters, encouraging guests to snap and share photos. As a result, food presentation has become an integral part of creating a memorable and Instagram-worthy event experience.”

“One of the biggest trends we saw in 2024 was the return to fine dining at weddings,” adds Altendorf. “From restaurant-like atmospheres with cozy banquettes and table lamps, to multiple courses at the table with perfectly paired wines—intuitive table service fueled by warm hospitality took center stage.”

It’s no longer about traditional buffets and sit-down meals. Interactive dining experiences are on the rise, with options such as [live cooking stations](#), grazing tables (see the fall issue of [Special Events](#) magazine for a deeper look at grazing tables), [smoke and fire](#), food bars, and tasting events becoming popular. These setups not only engage guests but also create memorable moments, allowing them

to connect with the food and the chef.

“Today’s clients are looking for experiences, not just events,” says Sanchez. “Caterers are creating immersive moments where food and drink become interactive parts of the event.”

Modernizing menus

The wellness trend continued to gain traction on menus, with consumers becoming more [health-conscious about their food choices](#). Caterers adapted by offering nutritious menu options, highlighting superfoods, and providing transparency regarding ingredient sourcing. These health-conscious options reflect a growing desire for holistic, mind-body connection.

In the coming years, health and wellness will likely become even more central to catering services. Expect to see a rise in functional foods—those that offer additional health benefits beyond basic nutrition—as well as increased demand for transparency around ingredient sourcing and nutritional content. Additionally, the integration of personalized nutrition advice into catering services could become a standard offering.

Beverage programs are also evolving beyond the standard fare. Clients now want immersive beverage experiences—from build-your-own cocktail stations to mobile mixologists and curated pairing experiences.

There’s also been a rise in [zero-proof cocktails](#) and non-alcoholic pairings, as wellness trends drive inclusivity for those who prefer not to drink alcohol. “Mocktails” are gaining recognition for their complexity and craftsmanship, right alongside their alcoholic counterparts.

Menus are also responding to seasonality and supply chain changes. Caterers are designing

menus in real time, creating seasonal cocktails and limited-time food stations based on ingredient availability.

“Menus not only help keep guests energized and engaged,” says Altendorf, “but also act as a community building opportunity.”

Technology means streamlining

Another theme of the year has been technology and the best ways to implement it within catering operations (34% of survey respondents said technology will be a focus in 2025). The integration of technology is weaving its way into the fabric of catering services, revolutionizing how caterers and clients interact.

“Tech is non-negotiable and AI and automation are becoming essential tools for planning, executing, and managing real-time client interactions,” says Sanchez. “From dietary preferences to guest experience tracking, technology is now deeply embedded in the event process.”

Caterers are leveraging digital tools for everything from booking and payment processing to menu customization and event planning. Online ordering systems, interactive apps, and virtual tastings are streamlining the catering process, making it easier for clients to plan their events. Technology has proven time and again its ability to improve efficiency and customer experience (turn to [page 28](#) in the adjoining [Special Events](#) magazine for a deeper look at the technology trends that shaped 2024).

One tool that has taken the catering and events industry by storm in 2024 is the continued rise of artificial intelligence (see the [fall issue of Special Events](#) magazine for a crash course on everything AI).



Every caterer knows the importance of displaying common food allergens and dietary information at food stations. Photo courtesy WASIO Faces/SpotMyPhotos



These chicken meatballs are not only Certified Gluten-Free, but they are also free of the USDA Big 9 Allergens including soy, wheat, and dairy. They’re also free of fillers, binders, and breadcrumbs, making them the perfect option for catered events where guests have varying dietary restrictions. Photo courtesy Jones Dairy Farm



Earlier this year Ben Garelick unveiled an AI-generated Barbiecore-inspired wedding photo album, tapping into the pop culture phenomenon. Photo courtesy Special Events magazine

With AI readily accessible, caterers can leverage this new technology to build more efficiency into their workflows and reduce time spent on routine tasks. After all, repeating the same processes over and over is a waste of time—letting AI take over allows you to dedicate your brainpower elsewhere in your business to maximize your efforts.

“The future is all about balancing efficiency with creativity,” says Sanchez. “The brands that blend tech with personal service will stand out. Companies that thrive will be the ones that fully embrace AI and tech tools and find ways to integrate them into every part of the business.”

Inclusive business

In today’s diverse society, catering businesses face an evolving landscape that demands more than just excellent food and service. As client expectations shift toward inclusivity, caterers have a unique opportunity to enhance their offerings and build stronger connections with their communities. Embracing inclusivity not only fosters a welcoming environment for all clients but also positions caterers for success in a competitive market.

Inclusivity in catering means creating an environment where everyone feels valued and catered to—literally. With dietary restrictions on the rise, including allergies, veganism, and gluten intolerance, it’s crucial for caterers to recognize and accommodate these needs.

To put this into perspective, Centner says that 75% of the menus being requested are predominantly gluten-free, dairy-free, or vegan.

“Inclusivity has become more than just a box to tick,” adds Centner, “it’s woven into how we plan and execute every event.”

Beyond dietary concerns, inclusivity extends to cultural representation. Events celebrating diverse traditions and backgrounds provide a platform for caterers to showcase a variety

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Think outside the typical snack break setup and consider setting out various breads and accompanying spreads. Photo courtesy Amelia Lyon

of cuisines (such as [Kosher](#) for example). Engaging with different cultures not only enriches the menu but also demonstrates respect and appreciation for diverse backgrounds, creating memorable experiences for guests.

Additionally, caterers and planners are now focusing on making events physically accessible and welcoming to guests of all backgrounds. This means ensuring that events are easy to access and engage with for individuals of varying abilities. As the topic of event accessibility grows, it's time to take inventory of your practices and make sure that you're providing event services that are indeed accessible to all your potential clients and guests.

There are three main types of accessibility: physical, sensory, and cognitive accessibility, according to an article on accessibility that appeared in the [fall issue of *Special Events* magazine](#).

"We're trying to level the playing field in order to allow [everyone] to connect, participate, engage in, and benefit from the events you are creating," said Cazoshay

Marie (Divine Intervention Design) during a session on inclusivity at Catersource + The Special Event 2024. "Inclusivity is no longer an 'ask,' it is now an expectation—it's the standard, not the exception."

Turning the page

The catering industry in 2024 was characterized by a blend of innovation and adaptation. As caterers face challenges ranging from economic pressures to labor shortages, they are also seizing opportunities to differentiate themselves through sustainability, technology, and personalized experiences.

Caterers are stepping up, transforming from mere food preparers to holistic experience creators. As we set our tables for the remainder of 2024 and beyond, it's clear that the industry is moving forward with purpose, creativity, and an unwavering commitment to excellence.

Looking ahead to 2025, the industry will continue to evolve, driven by advancements in technology,

a deepening commitment to sustainability, and increasingly sophisticated consumer demands. By staying attuned to these trends and embracing new approaches, the catering industry is poised to thrive in a rapidly changing world. As we move forward, innovation and adaptability will be key to navigating the future landscape of catering.

"The best way to describe the industry is 'resilient,'" says Centner. "Despite economic headwinds, catering businesses that thrived were the ones that embraced change and leaned into creativity. The most successful players were those who invested in their people, in sustainable practices, and in staying on top of technological innovations. Flexibility and foresight became critical assets." **CS**

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