

# NATIONAL CULINARY REVIEW

# DREAM KITCHENS



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# CHOOSING CATERING

Caterers are shifting their focus on certain clients to maintain work-life balance amid challenges

// By Amanda Baltazar

These are difficult times to be in the catering business, but those chefs who work in catering find the work very rewarding.

**Chef Meg Walker**, CEO and executive chef of Made by Meg Catering in Redondo Beach, California, got into catering because the life she wanted to lead involved not only being creative in the kitchen but also being a mom at home. “I looked at the life I wanted to lead, and I wanted to be home at a reasonable hour, so I chose catering,” says Chef Walker, who currently feeds guests at about 600 annual events, almost half of which are weddings. The remainder are corporate events, personal milestone celebrations and Hollywood parties.

Before the pandemic started, Chef Andrew Brackner, owner of Talk of the Town Catering in Roswell, Georgia, was looking to move away from weddings because corporate clients “know what they want,” he says. “It’s cut and dry, and they have bigger budgets. Whereas with brides, if there’s an issue, you’re going to hear about it and it’s blown out of proportion.” Nowadays, Chef Brackner’s business breakdown is 60% weddings, 20% corporate (mostly drop-offs) and 20% social events like birthdays — though he’d like the number of weddings to decrease.



Various spreads by Chef Meg Walker, CEO and executive chef of Made by Meg Catering in Redondo Beach, California.

## | Segment Spotlight |



Dishes by Chef Andrew Brackner, owner of Talk of the Town Catering in Roswell, Georgia, who has shifted his focus from weddings to corporate clients.

In what turned out to be horrible timing, **Jo Ann Poulias Schmidt** and her brother, **Chef Evan Poulias**, launched Old Ballard Catering Co. in Seattle in March 2020. Their events are evenly split between corporate and social events, and though the corporate events are fewer in number, they're greater in income.

"People want to make sure the events they're throwing are really great," Poulias Schmidt says. "They used to have food and some drinks, but now there's a photo booth, photographer and food stations. Corporate clients are trying to get people excited about coming back to the office."

Old Ballard is also catering weddings, but more often than Poulias Schmidt would like. "There's so much emotional investment in a wedding," she says. "I'm going to be more careful next year when I'm having conversations with brides and couples, and I'll look for cues about their expectations."

### Coming Back from COVID-19

Though catering business completely dropped off for many in March 2020, some were able to find other ways to stay afloat. Made by Meg made money delivering meals to senior citizens. "It wasn't the most exciting cooking, though it was rewarding," Chef Walker says.

Old Ballard sold food to the community through a window out of its facilities. And Talk of the Town stayed afloat by feeding 500 people quarantined on a nearby cruise line, as well as making lunches for local school children who were no longer being fed at school. Through these jobs, Chef Brackner just made his margins.

Since 2021, catered events have picked up, starting with smaller events for just 10 to 25 people. But the events are more lavish now, Chef Walker says.

Plated events are up, especially for weddings, and are lower risk when it comes to COVID-19. For corporate events, Chef Walker says, clients are asking for stations with grab-or-go items rather than exhibition-style food.

### Catered Food Trends

When it comes to food trends and catering, "comfort food such as a brisket taco station with fried green tomatoes, pork chops with pistachio crust, or smoked salmon with potatoes are popular," Chef Brackner says. "Wholesome, nourishing foods that remind people of a better time is what people want these days." He's also getting very specific requests for Hispanic foods for events like quinceañeras or Indian food specific to a region. Poulias Schmidt of Old Ballard Catering says she's seeing more interest in foods from island cuisines like Hawaiian and Filipino.

Chef Walker says individualized desserts — from macarons to dessert shooters — are rising in popularity.

### Rising Inflation

Post-COVID-19, what's most affecting the catering business is the rising costs for supplies and labor.

Prices of food are up 30 to 40%, Chef Walker says, and disposable glove prices have doubled. She has had to increase prices for clients, though at a lower rate (around 20%) than her costs are increasing. To handle the increases, Chef Walker started adding a 20% gratuity to her clients' bills, which almost all of the clients are happy to pay, she says.

This increase in prices has only "somewhat" affected clients' extravagance, Chef Walker says. "However, given the large guest counts we're seeing again, there have not been a lot of caviar and raw bar requests."

For her own costs, she's looking really closely at expenses and at which vendors she uses. "I've implemented a new ACH payment option to help with credit card fees and have evaluated everything from the internet to the laundromat that washes our linens."

One difficulty with catering is that many events are booked way in advance, she points out, "and I can't go back and renegotiate."

Chef Brackner has a clause in his contract that states if prices go above a certain amount, he can substitute other food items or dishes. However, he says, "If you're a bride, you're not happy about this. A few are understanding, but the majority fight it and I cave because I don't want to damage our reputation."

He has had to raise some prices; for instance, the price on crab dishes has increased by 30%. He also switched to "market price" for items like ribeye, New York strip steak, filet mignon and lobster tail. He removed all pricing from his website, "so we can adjust to the last-minute market increases."

To keep costs down, Chef Brackner has taken some of the more labor-intensive items off the menu and is buying things like filo dough ready-made, which he says he's not happy about since he's a from-scratch operation. He also raised the gross total minimum to accommodate fewer events "while staying as profitable as possible. Our corporate drop-off menu has been raised, and we are limiting our breakfast availability."

Poulias Schmidt is seeing ingredient costs rise by around 45% and is increasing the prices of her catering, too. Individually packaged meals that were \$15 are now \$20. "We used to look at our pricing once a year, but now we do it as frequently as we can and at least on a monthly basis."

Her clients mostly accept the price increases, she says, "because they see it at the grocery store." But she notes that her prices often seem much worse to clients because the invoices are for so many people.

Like Chef Brackner, she has a contract clause to protect the company if the price of food jumps significantly. "If the guest doesn't want to absorb that increase, we'd offer them other products, but the price is not guaranteed."

## Labor Shortages

Labor is an enormous challenge for Talk of the Town because so many people left the industry during the pandemic. Chef Brackner is finding that people who want to work in



Catering dishes created by Chef Evan Poulias, who co-owns Old Ballard Catering Co. in Seattle with his sister, Jo Ann Poulias Schmidt.

foodservice are seeking jobs through apps, and there are always jobs available through them. This means, he says, "there's no responsibility, no accountability, and they pay \$19 to \$20 an hour. We can't compete with these wages."

Because of this, he's turning down business "left and right." In his best year, Talk of the Town made \$5 million in sales; this year will be closer to \$3.5 million, "with everyone busting their gut."

Labor's a problem for Old Ballard Catering, too, and Poulias Schmidt says applications for positions are "pretty slim pickings" at the moment.

## On the Plus Side

Chef Brackner got into catering because it's a more predictable industry than restaurants. "You know exactly what to order, and you can plan your prep over several days. We know who, what, when, where, and we get paid before we show up."

He also loves being part of special milestone events, which bring him "a sense of being complete," he says. "There's a feeling of success when the efforts of our team are well-received and help to create a memorable event."

Chef Walker says, "catering is called for when there is an occasion — a day that your client may remember for years to come. To be a part of those moments and to make them smooth and memorable is one of my greatest joys."