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Thursday, July 29, 2010

South China Morning Post

Serving quality cuisine at weddings

It's your wedding and it's time to get personal. With hotel weddings more popular than ever, if you don't add your magic touch, it could be utterly forgettable.

Where to start? Wedding planners say to focus on the food. They believe it is the most memorable part of the wedding, second only to the bride's beauty. Many couples are bringing a little spark to the table. Professionals put the change down to growing affluence; an increase in couples, rather than their parents, paying for the wedding, and an increase in international travel and an emerging environmental conscience.

One noticeable shift is from the traditional eight- to 12-course feast, to a less-filling five to six courses. The thought is that the money can be spent on better quality dishes, while retaining the auspicious meanings behind certain kinds of food.

A lack of venues has contributed to the change. "In Hong Kong, everyone wants to have a wedding banquet on a good wedding day. There are 101 good days this year, and a limited [number of] hotel ballrooms," says Kitty Tang, director of catering at the Langham Place Hotel.

She says many brides who cannot book an evening banquet will opt for a smaller lunch banquet to preserve the auspicious date. Afternoon banquets are

less expensive options, but Tang doesn't feel that is the motivating factor.

Another big trend is that the presentation of food is taking centre stage. "It needs to be unique," says Gladis Young, marketing communications manager at the Grand Hyatt Hong Kong.

Of course, personal touches come at an expense. A team of costumed waiters dressed as Qing dynasty soldiers and presenting a suckling pig can run from HK\$6,000 up to HK\$20,000 for a two- to three-minute presentation.

Evelyn Mills, founder and group creative director of Marriage Maestros, noticed her rich clients becoming more selective and environmentally conscious three to five years ago.

"Quality, presentation and the way it is made - the skill of the chef - that's what people are appreciating, instead of copious amounts of food," she says.

When dealing with an event as traditional as a wedding, certain people expect certain food items - in particular, shark's fin soup. Traditionally, it is the most expensive dish on the menu and serves as a tribute to the family who can afford it, and guests who are worthy of such a dish.

"There are alternatives that make up for the value of prestige and face of shark's fin," explains Mills, who adds that one or two out of every five clients opt

for an alternative dish. With television advertisements illustrating the torturous way sharks' fins are harvested, minds are changing. "I believe, in the next generation, this will be a hot topic again, even hotter than it is right now," Tang says.

Shark's fin alternatives work wonderfully with fusion menus. Among them are foie gras, caviar and bird's nest soup, and the rare white truffle. A truffle soup can serve as the traditionally expensive fifth course.

"White truffles don't hurt anyone or kill anything. Serve truffles and you don't need shark's fin," Mills says.

Other alternatives include crab bisque and spaghetti squash soup, which has the same consistency of cooked shark's fin cartilage, but arguably more flavour and nutrition.

Another trend Mills sees is more requests for duck and delicate lobster salads to replace deep-fried food such as crab claw. "They are healthier and lighter," she notes, two things her fashion-conscious and uber-wealthy clients demand.

The latest menu trend is wine pairing. Add expensive wines and champagne to the printed menu and guests will forget whether shark's fin was ever served. A fusion menu of roasted lamb with a fine red wine will take most guests' breath away.



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