

Forget the formalities, we want fun

The sit-down meal is giving way to something more edgy, writes **CARLA GROSSETTI**.

Cheese and mac truffle toasties, naked cakes, empanadas and banh mi sliders are food items you might not expect to see on a wedding menu. But according to caterers from Melbourne and Sydney, they are just a few examples of what modern couples are demanding for their big day.

Fresh Catering's culinary director Geoff Haviland says a plethora of TV cooking shows combined with the popularity of Pinterest mood boards are driving modern couples to curate more informal and interactive wedding receptions.

Haviland leads the catering operation that handles everything from garden parties and glamorous weddings to top-shelf events such as Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour. He says party planners are replicating what is happening in the food and wine scene with a shift away from fine dining and more of an emphasis on fun being part of the formalities.

"We are seeing a move away from tradition and a progression toward events that create a bit of theatre and a talking point. More and more people want us



to curate weddings that have that wow factor," says executive chef Haviland, who has years of experience managing five-star hotel kitchens around the world. "If you have paid for 100-plus people to celebrate your big day you want some great memories to take away, rather than just a few happy snaps at the chapel. Eating an a la carte meal while you're stuck with the same people around a table is not as popular at parties these days.

"We're seeing a big trend towards satellite stations where you can get a mojito muddled in front of you, or a taco stand where you can mingle with other guests while you choose a hot sauce, which adds to the theatre of it all."

Bright Young Things' founder Kate Stewart agrees weddings have changed a lot in the 15 years that she has been involved in event planning. She says wedding trends in Melbourne have also moved away

A sumptuous seafood buffet creates a bit of theatre. Image: Fresh Catering for MCA Rooftop Venues

from formal sit-down meals with two choices of entrees and mains to events that are a lot more edgy.

Stewart recently catered for a wedding on the Mornington Peninsula that included a roster of hawker-style food stalls that told a story about the couple's romance. Stewart says the couple came prepared with a look book and back story about their romance that they wanted to be told. "We set up a market that had a festival atmosphere that celebrated the couples' favourite meals and moments – from handmade pasta that he made on their first date to giant pretzels and baguettes from their time travelling through Europe," Stewart says.

Haviland says that while couples planning their impending nuptials now have the confidence to express themselves, it's important that the food does not detract from the event.

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Haviland, who spent five years catering for weddings in Dubai, concedes that there is often a bit of one-upmanship at play with brides and grooms wanting to go one better than the last wedding they went to.

"I catered a wedding a few months ago where the group wanted a laboratory-themed wedding, so there was lots of smoke and dry ice," he says. "They wanted something that was a talking point. They want their wedding guests to be talking about their big day five years down the track, 'Remember the wedding when the guy in the lab coat was making popcorn in a beaker?'"

"Weddings still need to include a few formalities, such as the nuptials and speeches, so the food must enhance the overall experience, not interfere or detract from it," he says.

Some of the experts' top trends in party food:

1. Putting fun into the formalities

Be it Bollywood or *The Great Gatsby*, more and more wedding couples are embracing a bit of fun with food that adheres to a theme.

2. Naked cakes and cheese towers

Couples are forgoing the formal cake in favour of a so-called naked cake, which can be adorned with everything from berries to blooms. Tiered cakes made from wheels of cheese are also popular.

3. Seasonality and sustainability

It's all about the provenance. Couples are keen for the event to reflect their values, perhaps plumping for a starter of sustainable kangaroo tartare and insisting their food is locally sourced.

4. Satellite food stations

Satellite food and drink stations create activity and encourage social interaction, whether it's an ice-

Left: A dessert buffet creates a talking point. Image: Fresh Catering for MCA Rooftop Venues

Above: The hot wedding trend for 2016 is the interactive experience for guests.

Image: Bright Young Things

cream trolley, an oyster-shucking bar, a DIY seafood station or cocktail corner.

5. Nose-to-tail eating

Copying what's happening in the restaurant scene, couples are requesting a whole pig on the spit is roasted and then carved up and distributed onto platters, which are delivered in a procession around the tables.

6. Rustic share plates

Family-style feasting is more and more popular: platters are placed in the middle of the table to share, allowing for a more casual, relaxed dynamic. This approach also makes it easier to cater for those with dietary requirements.

7. Happy endings

Late-night snacks of Mac 'n' cheese toasties or mini hot dogs are given out as take-home snacks instead of a piece of cake.



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