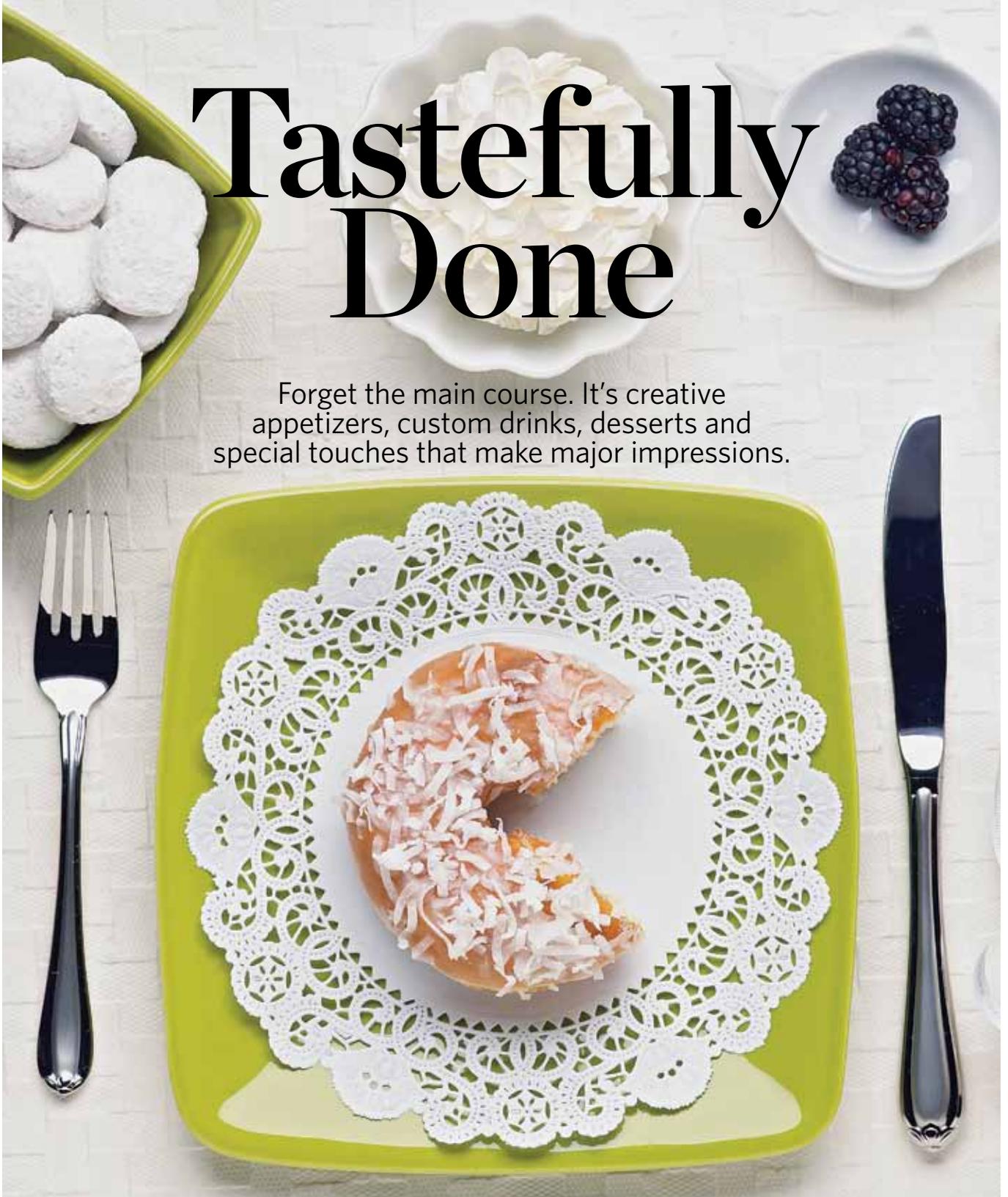


Tastefully Done

Forget the main course. It's creative appetizers, custom drinks, desserts and special touches that make major impressions.



There's no getting around it: Wedding guests talk about the food. But it's probably not the entrees they're dishing about over brunch the next morning; after all, how many different ways can you do steak, fish or chicken? Instead, it's the delicious details, from edible favors to unexpected drinks, that are getting guests' attention (and making taste buds happy) at receptions around the country — and around the world. We asked planners, caterers and chefs for the scoop on 10 top wedding food trends, plus their tips for creating a menu that's truly unique.

1 Take-Out Candy Displays

Heavy apps, a three-course dinner and an open bar can stuff guests long before dessert is served. By providing little take-out bags, boxes or even vases (pictured top), you allow them to bring the sweet stuff back to their rooms to enjoy later. Because guests can choose their own selection, they're always a big hit, says Shantal Solomon, director of group events at Sugar Beach, a Viceroy Resort, in St. Lucia. "Couples feel good about their event when they see guests taking home their favors." **PERSONALIZE IT** Color-coordinate to your theme and destination, and add local confections (Jamaican coconut drops, Mexican sugar skulls). Or send guests home with boxed-up slices of wedding cake.

2 Food Trucks

From barbecue to tacos to flatbread pizza, food trucks rolled onto the wedding scene several years ago and aren't leaving any time soon. "Food trucks are a great showstopper," says Brittany Pritchard of Events 306, a planning company based in Denver, Colorado. "They add nostalgia and an experience that stands out in guests' minds." Depending on what else you're serving at the reception, food-truck fare can serve as a less-expensive alternative to dinner or a fun addition to cocktail hour or the after-party. **PERSONALIZE IT** Take the trend to the next level with a truck that customizes its goodies. For example, King of Pops, a chain



of gourmet popsicle trucks in Georgia and South Carolina, will print your names or a custom logo on its sticks.

3 Carnival Treats

No room for an entire food truck? Consider renting a carnival machine to churn out whimsical favorites, such as popcorn, funnel cakes or pretzels, instead. "It's usually off in a separate area, and it lights up and comes alive toward the end of the night," says Caryn Roland, catering manager at Heirloom Cuisine in St. Francisville, Louisiana. Machines and carts take up less room (and less of your budget) than a full-on mobile kitchen, but will still be crowd-pleasers for many of the same reasons. And we love the potential photo ops of guests posing with fluffy pillows of cotton candy (pictured left), giant lollipops and red-and-white-striped boxes of treats.

PERSONALIZE IT Upgrade standard carnival grub by incorporating local flair, says Ragan Evans, co-owner of the Colorful Palate in Arden, North Carolina. "We contracted with a local baker to create signature popcorn flavors for one couple; we've also done candied apples in the fall using apples grown in neighboring counties."

4 Creative Sodas

Whether you've got a fully stocked bar or are planning a dry reception, it's nice to offer guests an alcohol-free alternative that's a step up from ordinary — especially in warm locales, where staying cool and hydrated is key. Sodas served in vintage bottles (pictured bottom) can add charm to a rustic, country-style wedding, while a DIY or Italian-soda station — consisting of carbonated water and several flavor add-ins — gives guests even more options.

PERSONALIZE IT Instead of hiding retro sodas behind the bar, display them in a way that reflects your wedding theme or personalities. "We sometimes fill up a pirogue (the Cajun version of a canoe) with ice and bottles of Fanta and local Abita root beer," says Roland, "with a bottle opener tied to the boat."

5 Mason-Jar Goodies

They're not just for flowers and

candles anymore. "Mason jars have had a huge push over the last few years, and we've filled them with everything from cocktails to cake," says Tabitha Roberts, owner of Virginia-based Roberts & Co. Events. Inexpensive and versatile, mason jars (pictured right) can be used as escort cards, favors and decor, all in one. Fill them with homemade jam, local honey or pickles. "They look really cute with chalkboard paint and guests' names on the side," Evans says.

PERSONALIZE IT Give guests their own DIY project for when they return home, Roberts suggests. "One client gave out s'mores kits in mason jars, complete with graham crackers, marshmallows, chocolate, a small tea light and matches."

6 Hot-Chocolate Bar

In cooler destinations, nothing warms guests up after dinner like a hot cup of cocoa — and letting guests mix their own concoction sweetens the deal. "Couples want a spin on the traditional coffee station," says Francesca DiSalvo-Follmer,



co-owner of Pure Luxe Bride planning services in Charleston, South Carolina. "They get creative with a variety of toppings: Toffee, salted caramel, fudge, whipped cream, peppermint and cookie sticks all have a nice look when displayed in clear containers."

PERSONALIZE IT Choose glassware that matches the tone of your reception. Black-tie ball? Go with Irish coffee mugs. Casual party on the beach? Opt for paper cups with monogrammed cardboard sleeves.

7 DIY Cocktail Kits

A tiny bottle of liquor, a recipe card and a few special ingredients can make for top-notch favors; they also give couples a chance to become their own mixologists. Special cocktails — whether served at the reception or sent home with guests — are a great way to incorporate your destination into your reception: bloody marys in New Orleans, Firefly Sweet Tea vodka drinks in the South, margaritas in Mexico (pictured left) or rum punch in the Caribbean.

PERSONALIZE IT Instead of handing out

CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PAGE, BOTTOM: JOHN BLOK/GETTY IMAGES; PICTURE PRESS/ALAMY; CRITSEY ROWE PHOTOGRAPHY; VICTORIA ANGELA PHOTOGRAPHY; AMY BENNETT PHOTOGRAPHY

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the kits as favors at the reception, surprise your guests the night before. If everyone is attending a rehearsal dinner or another activity, arrange for the kits to be left in their rooms while they're out.

8 Interactive Dessert Buffets

Build-your-own-treat tables add a hands-on element to your after-dinner dance party: Think s'mores cooked over a fire pit or Sterno flame, ice cream with sundae toppings, or a mix-and-match spread of brownies and cookies — with milk, of course. It's an easy way to incorporate fond childhood memories into your special day,

says Pritchard, and it'll get guests up out of their seats, moving around and socializing.

PERSONALIZE IT "I love when family members and other loved ones are invited to share their favorite dessert recipe with the couple," Pritchard says. Ahead of time, select a few of these recipes for your pastry chef, who may be able to create a special station as a surprise for your guests.

9 Mini Late-Night Snacks

Comfort food served up at last call will be a big winner with your party-hearty guests, especially if they're heading to a bar after your reception. "Serving casual snacks is a great way to transition from a formal reception to a late-night dance party," says Pritchard. Tasty bites — sliders, milkshake shooters, mini donuts — are yummy without being too filling.

PERSONALIZE IT Got a quirky favorite food you can't fit anywhere else on the menu? This is the place for it. "We try to find out what's most important to the wedding couple, such as what they ate on their first date," Roland says. "Take that and class it up: Instead of buffet-style mac and cheese, we'll do a truffled mac and cheese served in a demitasse cup."

10 International Street Foods

Cocktail hour is the perfect time to push your guests' palates with a sampling of something exotic, whether passed as hors d'oeuvres or at appetizer stations. It's also an opportunity to highlight your cultural background or the regional cuisine of your destination. Smaller portions make it easier to take risks, DiSalvo-Follmer says. "People always want to incorporate authentic, rich Southern food, but they worry their Northern relatives won't eat much of it. This way, you can serve Southern bites — or Thai or Indian — but you can still have traditional dinner to satisfy everyone."

PERSONALIZE IT Use food to tell a personal story. "One couple had traveled the world before their wedding," Roland says. "So they included a food station from every country they'd visited." ■



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