

Pretty Tasty!

Presentation counts when it comes to the reception menu. Create one that's almost too elegant to eat | *By Laura Nathan-Garner | Photography by John Salazar* |



Forget the mashed-potato Martini bar and a little sauce drizzled on the edge of white plates. Between Houston's competitive culinary scene and its discriminating foodie population, dazzling wedding guests' eyes and stomachs requires food that borders on art.

"If you want to catch and hold someone's attention, you have to bring something really unique to the table," says John Salazar, owner of **JA Salazar Catering** (713.560.8472, jasalazar.com) and Minute Maid Park's former executive chef. "When you do that, you create a memory as well as a 'wow' factor that will have people talking for days."

Few caterers do this better than Salazar or **Jackson and Company** (713.523.5780, jacksonandcompany.com) owner Jackson Hicks, who has catered the biggest events for three decades. What sets both chefs apart is the way they play with the color, texture, depth and flavor of classic dishes.

For the 2010 Houston Ballet Ball, for instance, Jackson and Company played on the event's surrealist theme by serving quail in tiny birdcages as hors d'oeuvres and for dessert, a dark chocolate torte garnished with a piece of white chocolate resembling Salvador Dalí's signature clock.

Guests were as dazzled by the likeness of the food to surrealist art as the textures—the crunch of the hard white chocolate clock paired with the apricot- and raspberry conserve-filled torte. "Texture is extremely important," says Hicks. "You really notice when you look at it and when you put it in your mouth."

Texture matters equally to Salazar, who counts among his picture-perfect plates thinly sliced root vegetables woven like a basket and topped with a protein. For cold dishes, Salazar often gives his food some height using ice. He may place caviar at the center of a star-shaped block of ice, for example, and use each point to hold capers, crème fraîche or another garnish.

This isn't to say that food must be overly complicated to

impress. In fact, caterers are moving toward "less is more," says Hicks, who has amazed partygoers by serving a familiar dish—BLTs—with one tiny modification: They are the size of a quarter.

At a wedding reception, passing around understated little cocktail-hour appetizers like these will leave guests wondering what's in store for dinner. And a seated meal is the perfect canvas for many caterers, who can add special details as they plate the food.

Couples preferring interactive stations can also give guests a memorable meal—one that allows them to participate in its creation. Salazar offers risotto bars, where guests top a risotto-filled Martini glass with the garnishes of their choice. And Jackson and Company often features cold curry dishes at a station, leaving guests to choose from a variety of chutneys and other toppings.

Plated dinner and stations aside, artsy wedding meals work best when they reflect the couple's tastes and aesthetic, whether they prefer casual Southern elegance or exotic, spicy cuisine. So before meeting with a caterer, jot down notes about what flavors and dishes you and your fiancé like and dislike. It also helps to tear food photos you like out of magazines to give your caterer a better idea of your definition of "really beautiful food."

Also be up-front about your budget. Most caterers can craft dazzling dishes and eye-catching buffet spreads in almost any price range, as long as everyone has the same expectations about what's possible within your budget.

"Ultimately, it's important for the caterer to know what the couple likes and what they can afford," Hicks says. "Whatever that is, we can create something beautiful and imaginative." Now that's something to feast on! ●

CUISINE ART

From left: Salazar's pork terrine in a potato cube, decorated with julienned carrots; petite root vegetables and poppy seed cracker on woven asparagus lattice; and pheasant mousseline with mosaic-patterned vegetables.