



KUNAL LAMBA COMES FROM A FAMILY WITH A LONG HISTORY IN FOOD AND BEVERAGE HOSPITALITY. AS THE SON OF A NEW DELHI RESTAURATEUR, KUNAL CAME TO NEW YORK FROM HIS HOMETOWN VIA A STINT IN LONDON. HE HAS A BACHELORS IN HOTEL MANAGEMENT AND HAS WORKED WITH ONE OF THE TOP HOTELS IN SOUTH ASIA, THE ITC MAURYA (THREE US PRESIDENTS HAVE STAYED THERE IN THE LAST 10 YEARS, INCLUDING OBAMA). SINCE THEN, HE HAS MANAGED THE GAYLORD IN LONDON, THE DOUBLETREE HOTEL IN NEW YORK AND TODAY, IS AT NEW YORK CITY'S DEVI RESTAURANT. KUNAL IS ALSO GUEST FACULTY FOR THE HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AT LA GUARDIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

# The Final Foodtier

ASIDE FROM JOINING YOU IN CELEBRATING THE MOST IMPORTANT DAY OF YOUR LIFE, THE MAJORITY OF YOUR GUESTS ARE MOST EXCITED ABOUT THE FOOD. FOOD IS SOMETHING THAT IS NOT INCIDENTAL; IT IS SOMETHING YOUR BODY RESPONDS TO, AND THOSE PLEASURES (OR DISPLEASURES) ARE VERY PERSONAL TO YOUR GUESTS.

In South Asian weddings worldwide, food has been an important element, but something that the parents usually took care of. Brides have often been too busy with outfits and décor details and grooms are happy to simply show up on the day. Over the past few years, however, food is playing an increasing role in our social life, our entertainment (how many food shows on TV can you count?) and our daily conversations. Food has become a form of art and weddings are a great platform to showcase a family's or couple's culture and creativity.

## Been There, Done That!

Wedding food is predictable. We all love dal makhani, chicken tikka masala and samosas, and why not? These dishes are the foundation of our world-renowned cuisine, and delivering consistently good samosas is no joke. No one knows this better than me, as I run restaurants for a living! But why should we all be subjected to this repetitive charade of samosa-eating to the point where we don't find these samosas interesting anymore?

There may be an unwritten rule that we serve South Asian fare at our weddings, however, this fare can be presented in a worldly way with brides

embracing the concept of fusion (without turning it into confusion). A lot of caterers are becoming aware of this and are starting to deliver our classics in new avatars. Sometimes, it's merely the presentation that makes it different and sometimes, American, European or Asian elements are entwined with our good ol' desi fare.

## Choosing a Caterer

Dividing assignments between different caterers according to their strengths makes a lot of sense. If you have three events, why should the same caterer do the food for all of them, unless economy of scale is your mantra. I suggest working with two different caterers, in some cases even for the same event! One can be in charge of the appetizers, while the other handles the main course. And if you have a wedding planner or coordinator, leave it to them to handle the transition and logistics.

If your venue is a hotel, consider ordering some food items from there while interspersing those with an ethnic caterer to achieve a more out-of-the-box experience. Another option is to hire a caterer who is known for their creativity and can singlehandedly execute this fusion experience. Such caterers are

*Featured Caterers:* Devi, [DeviNYC.com](http://DeviNYC.com); Tulsi, [TulsiNYC.com](http://TulsiNYC.com);  
Chand Palace, [ChandPalace.com](http://ChandPalace.com); Sweet Silk, [SavorSweetSilk.com](http://SavorSweetSilk.com);  
BitterSweet, [BittersweetNYC.com](http://BittersweetNYC.com); Chocal8Kiss, [Chocal8Kiss.com](http://Chocal8Kiss.com).



Devi: Vegan Harvest stir fry



Devi: Coconut shrimp bruschetta



Chand Palace: Falafel bite



Devi: Ragda pattice chaat

easier to find in large cities like New York and Chicago, and many of them are willing to travel, so don't rule that option out by restricting yourself to local caterers.

### The Cocktail Hour Begins

Experienced caterers are not only knowledgeable about the latest trends in food menus, but are also seasoned in presentation creativity. For instance, the cocktail hour is a great window to showcase creativity with minimum risk. Food stations beyond chaat and kebabs are the way to go. For example, if you are doing chicken tikka, why not add a little guacamole, wrap it in a tortilla (or a mini phulka) and serve a chicken tikka taco? Or if you are doing a curried shrimp, take it out of the curry and place it on a small round toast and serve it as a shrimp bruschetta. If you are planning to serve chaat, serve

individual portions in either bamboo boats or in molded form. Try a falafel bite, filled with tabouleh and hummus in a mini pita. The point is to present the traditional in an unexpected way.

### Main Course: Buffet, Plated or Family-Style?

This is the million-dollar question I am asked anytime I am in a catering meeting. Buffets are good for very large crowds (over 400

guests), but plated food will give you the most opportunity to be creative. I see people doing plated food just for the sake of it, but if your caterer is simply going to dump curry over rice on a plate, you might as well do a buffet.

Plated meals should be photographable. The only ethnic presentation for Indian food is a thaali, but with all the bowls and special thalis required, this is usually quickly ruled out. This is when couples should think of following American or European food presentation techniques to serve food in an artistic way. This involves having a balance of color, thinking about the size of food on the plate and adding height to give an aesthetically pleasing, three-dimensional look.

It's always a great idea to limit plated food to a main protein with some sauce and garnish, with all other accompaniments served family-style in the center of the table. Even vegetarians can follow this rule in substituting the main protein with a main focal point such as banana dumplings laced in a spicy curry sauce. However, if you do insist on serving biryani, serve it as individual portions in a mound or pretty container. A great service team is obviously instrumental to delivering the correct meal to the correct guest in a timely fashion, so it is important to ensure the venue or caterer can handle



Bittersweet NYC:  
Ginger panna cotta  
with orange gelée and  
poached pears



Tulsi: Upma tower with crispy okra



Tulsi: Individual dum biryani



Tulsi: Shrimp and crab pappadum



Chand Palace: Pashto kebab

this approach and has had experience doing it before. When choosing a caterer, ask for references, see where they have served in the past and most importantly, make sure you have at least one, if not two tastings of your items before your event.

### And the Dessert?

Gone are the days when only very traditional gulab jamun and gajar ka halva would mark the culmination of a meal. A combination of South Asian *mithai* with western confections is the new way to go. For this, you would need to involve either your cake designer or another pastry caterer to do something like a South Asian version of a Venetian dessert table. Companies like Bittersweet NYC are serving up mini desserts with dishes like coconut lemongrass falooda and shrikhand so beautiful you won't recognize it as yogurt. How do dal halwa truffles sound? Bittersweet NYC has a version.



Tulsi: Banana dumplings



Sweet Silk: Date and pistachio truffle tree



Bittersweet NYC: Dal halwa truffle with pistachios and Valrhona chocolate



Chocal8Kiss: Chocolate cake pops

The smaller the desserts, the better. The more creative... you get the idea. One innovator in this field is Sweet Silk who has taken traditional *mithai* and designed it to look like a *petit four* but with a fusion of ethnic and western flavors, like fig roasted cashew and vanilla chai spice. I have also come across some chocolate confectioners like Chocal8Kiss from New Jersey using Indian spices.

Cakes, of course, are the originator in wedding food presentation. Today, however, cakes are being viewed as art and the more creative the cake, the better. From cupcakes, to cake pops to a multi-tiered cake, you now have a choice in cake styles and you should take advantage of that.

Break out of your mindset and explore the vast options of fusion cuisine from your cocktail hour all the way through to your dessert table. Your food choices while help you create a truly memorable culinary experience for your guests, and one that they will remember long after the wedding is over. ☺

Chocal8Kiss chocolate photos by Raj Balani



Chand Palace: Key lime kulfi