

[Below] This trio of desserts features 'Take on a Teacake', cranachan with an atomiser of whisky and heather-scented panna cotta. Bravo, **Bespoke Catering & Events!** (bespoke-catering.com)

Food & drink

Raise the STEAKS

At its heart, wedding fare is about please-all dishes, so how can you take your menu from simple to showstopper? *Zoë Boothby* asks about upping the ante

One of my friends recently applied for **MasterChef**. If you walk into the kitchen while he's cooking, you can

expect to find an aromatic cloud of herbs and spices, pile upon pile of chopped veg, or maybe – if you're lucky – a Peking duck hanging above the stove, filling the air with sweet, hoisin-y goodness. Hanging out with him one Tuesday, I watched as he heated up a very rare beef wellington for lunch, all the while insisting that his dining habits were no different from the average person's (at which point the microwave pinged, signalling his red wine jus was ready).

So, yes, he can be a bit extravagant at times (lobster, anyone?), but I'm always happy to sit down to one of his foodie creations, since most of his cooking is hearty, crowd-pleasing fare, augmented by small touches: think self-caught fish with homegrown veg; coconut curry garnished with spring onions and chilli; deconstructed enchiladas sprinkled with sesame seeds.

Impressive on the details, yes, but this is food that prioritises tasty, accessible ingredients, to be enjoyed by whoever might walk in the door. (Like a lot of aspiring chefs, he also has his own dedicated Insta – @bigneilsbigmeals, if you're interested.)

When it comes to catering for weddings, a lot of suppliers follow the same logic. Start envisioning your menu for the day by focusing on one meal that will appeal to a broad range of your party, suggests Susannah Nixon of Bespoke Catering & Events: "Choose a classic dish that everyone knows, and then elevate the presentation or particular

elements to create a more refined dining experience. Maybe fish-and-chip canapés with mini atomisers of vinegar, or a classic steak pie with sea salt and rosemary pastry and a bone marrow centrepiece to create a really luxurious finish."

Finalising your meal choices is always a difficult process, but there are things you can keep in mind when attempting to cater for all. Lisa Thom at Simon Preece Food Creations is sympathetic: "Getting the menu right for every guest is a hard task – you're trying to work out what will suit everyone's tastes," she says. "We usually suggest having widely liked ingredients that your loved ones will be able to identify easily."

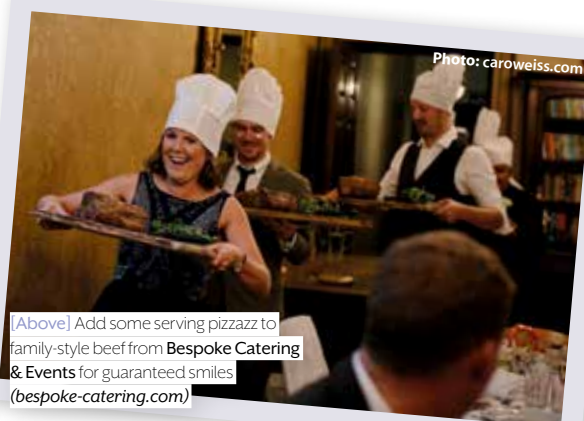
LET'S EAT

With the breakfast blueprint under your belt, now you get to have fun with it. So, what can caterers offer to take your choices to a cut above? "Using high-quality, locally sourced ingredients is always a great

Photo: danielafloresphotography.com

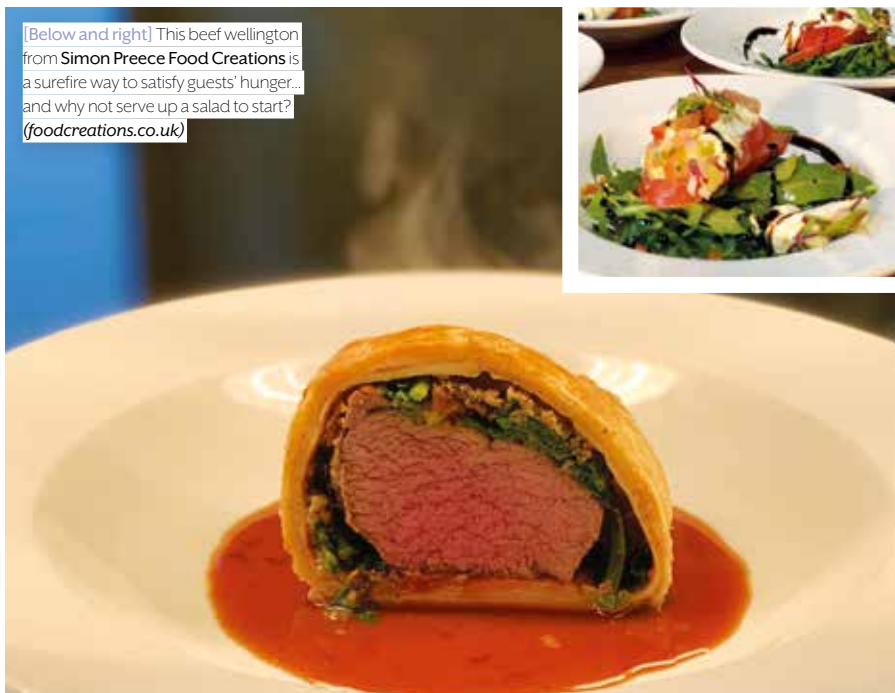
[Below] Deconstructed crème brûlée from **Bespoke Catering & Events** will wow any hard-to-impress guests (bespoke-catering.com)

Photo: danielafloresphotography.com



[Above] Add some serving pizzazz to family-style beef from **Bespoke Catering & Events** for guaranteed smiles (bespoke-catering.com)

[Below and right] This beef wellington from **Simon Preece Food Creations** is a surefire way to satisfy guests' hunger... and why not serve up a salad to start? (foodcreations.co.uk)



starting point for adding finesse," Susannah says. "You can definitely taste the difference between a dish that has been hand-crafted with top-end produce versus one that has been bought in or made with subpar elements. You can also update a standard dish by using more interesting takes on the usual components, such as foraged vegetables or wild game."

This approach can also work for your Friday-night fare: Susannah proposes battered monkfish instead of cod, with parmesan and truffle chips, or luxe toppings like lobster or pulled pork for your mac and cheese. At Food Creations, the most popular picks are family favourites that have been given a gastronomical upgrade. These include pan-fried chicken breast with a haggis bon bon, crispy skin and thyme jus, or braised cannon of beef topped with haggis, with a fondant potato and carrot-and-turnip mash. "These are modern dishes, but they incorporate some classic elements," explains Lisa.

IN FINE FORM

It isn't just about flavour, however. As Susannah reminds us, people eat with their eyes first, so it's very important to make whatever you serve look appealing: "Colourful or unusual crockery adds a wow factor. We're also big fans of small, interactive touches, such as serving sauces in pipettes or putting the stock base in miniature teapots."

Lisa agrees: Food Creations' presentation will be just as flawless at your event as it would be at any menu-tasting, she promises.

Weddings are all about narrative, and, when it comes to that all-important meal, guests sure do savour a good tale. "We find our couples really like to include a personal touch when finalising their menu," Susannah says. "This could be a duo of the couple's favourite desserts, or a dish they tried on their first trip abroad together. Guests always enjoy hearing the story behind such choices, and it can make for an interesting talking point at the table."

[Below] **Simon Preece Food Creations** garnishes a mackerel dish with a slice of lemon and chive-sprinkled *crème fraîche* (foodcreations.co.uk)



"UPDATE A STANDARD DISH BY USING MORE INTERESTING TAKES ON THE USUAL INGREDIENTS, LIKE FORAGED VEGETABLES OR WILD GAME"

My friend hasn't heard back from *MasterChef* yet (if anyone at the BBC is reading this, I can vouch for his skills and lovable, made-for-TV personality), but should he turn up on the show, I'm sure he'll stick to his wholesome, nourishing style of cooking, with a little added pizzazz... deconstructed stovies coming right up. ♥

BOOST YOUR BOOZE



It's all well and good sprucing up your dinner menu, but what about those tasty tipples? We spoke to Michael Mackenzie, director at Pure

Bartending, which is based in Glasgow's southside but willing to travel widely for events, and asked him for his top tips.

"For starters, you need the right glass for each cocktail," says Michael. "That's because the shape of the glass affects how the drink is experienced. For example, a coupe glass is suited to holding something like an espresso martini, whereas only the classic V-shaped glass will do for the gin variety. For your whisky old-fashioned, a heavy rocks glass adds sophistication."

Michael also suggests putting thought into how you decorate your drink ("A garnish adds texture, makes it more attractive and gives aroma and visual appeal"), but there are other elements you may not have considered, such as how to keep your refreshments chilled. "High-quality, clear ice cubes will make your drink more elegant; loading the glass with ice keeps the drink cold – less melting means less dilution, so the flavour lasts longer."



And when it comes to taste, this expert bartender knows what he's talking about. One simple hack that might seem obvious is that premium spirits will *always* elevate any cocktail; regardless of this, however, keep in mind that, for events, it's best to have your drinks mixed by a professional. "Sticking to the recipe is paramount – consistency is key," Michael emphasises. "You want your guests to return for that same amazing flavour!"

www.purebartending.co.uk



[Above] **Pure Bartending** adds a touch of class with a floral garnish... *Voilà!*