



Local Flavors

Chicago's coolest restaurant trends are now being served at a wedding near you | *By Lisa Shames* |

If you want to get an idea of what will soon be hot in wedding catering, forget looking into your crystal ball. Rather, says Paul Larson, executive chef of Blue Plate Catering, take a look at what's being served up in the most popular restaurants around town—and then wait a year.

With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that the local, seasonal ingredients that have become de rigueur at restaurants worthy of the hype—we're looking at you, The Publican, Mado, XOCO and The Bristol—have been popping up on wedding menus faster than you can say “I do!” And that's just one trend brides and grooms are warmly embracing: Alternative meat cuts and sustainable agriculture have also made the journey from resto to reception.

When it comes to tracking down local ingredients, Larson admits his five-acre farm in Michigan gives him an advantage. This year he grew 750 pounds of heirloom tomatoes, some of which made their way into dishes for **Blue Plate** (312.421.6666, blueplatechicago.com) events. “You can really taste the difference,” says Larson, citing their honey-lacquered chicken, which uses honey from Michigan hives and free-range chickens from Indiana, as proof.

For those who are picky about the provenance of their ingredients, Larson recommends opting for a wedding between June and September when the growing season is at its best. (During the winter months, local meats and cheeses can do the trick.) But if a couple has their heart set on a specific item, the more notice he has the better. “If I know in October that a couple really wants peaches, for example, I can make sure I have them available for their summer wedding,” he says.

Following in the footsteps of restaurants like Province and Lula Cafe, **Jewell Events Catering** (312.829.3663, jewelleventscatering.com) created a company-wide green initiative program promoting

the utilization of organic and sustainable products whenever possible, including working with lesser-used meat cuts for minimal waste. Case in point: To help accommodate couples with tenderloin palates but ground beef budgets, they offer “bistro beef,” also known as petite tender or shoulder tender. Bonus? “The price is quite close to chicken, so brides and grooms can offer guests the choice as opposed to a single entrée,” says Myles Bosack, Jewell's director of marketing.

Alternative cuts of meat have also been showing up at plenty of weddings catered by **Limelight Catering** (773.883.3080, limelightcatering.com). Co-owner Rita Gutekanst is a big fan of using short ribs, flank steak and brisket (à la Sepia and State and Lake), which she says requires extra planning on their part for the slow-style cooking techniques—think braising and marinating—that work best for these less-tender meats. “Once a couple tastes it, they realize it's as good as or better than tenderloin,” says Gutekanst.

Taste is also a big advantage when it comes to using local, seasonal items. “Would you rather have a local apple or something that's been waxed and sitting on a shelf?” asks Gutekanst. As a board member of Green City Market for the last six years—Chicago's only year-round farmers' market used by the city's top restaurants for produce and more—she is no stranger to the freshest options out there and, more importantly, the farmers and purveyors that provide them.

“It may seem small,” adds Gutekanst, “but using local speaks volumes about a couple's desire to bring a part of themselves to the party, much the same way so many Chicago restaurants put loving care into what comes out of their kitchens.” Good eats *and* a clean conscience? Now that's what we call a remarkable wedding feast. ●

GOOD NATURED
Clockwise from top left:
An heirloom tomato salad
by Blue Plate Catering.
Limelight Catering's trio
salad of heirloom beets,
tomatoes and microgreens.
Free-range organic chicken
with peach-and-tomato
slaw and forbidden rice
by Blue Plate. Cold local
spring pea soup shooters
from Limelight.