



10 questions

with Colin Cowie

by Suzy Feine

The most notorious and sought after event planner offers his insight on infusing style and elegance into every event



photo by Julie Skarratt



photo by Quentin Bacon

Colin Cowie, event planner to the rich and famous, has orchestrated many million-dollar events for well-known celebrities such as Jerry Seinfeld, Charlie Sheen, Holly Robinson Peete and Oprah. "But it wasn't always like this," he says.

After arriving in America 22 years ago from South Africa, Cowie started from modest beginnings, but he possessed the essential qualities of any successful entrepreneur: big dreams and big ideas. After starting as a caterer, Cowie ventured out on his own by throwing small dinner parties for 10–20 people, then gradually partnered with vendors to produce larger events. When he met Bruce Willis in Hollywood and threw a legendary bash for the emerging celebrity just after he landed the role on "Moonlighting," everything changed. "That was the beginning of the business. I had a unique sense of style in Los Angeles and I started working with more celebrities," Cowie says. "Then I started to diversify with books, weddings, and designing china, crystal and silver for Lenox."

With seven books under his belt and an eighth one on the way (a wedding planning guide scheduled for a December 2008 release), Cowie's abilities as a designer, event planner and author seem limitless. We sat down with him during the 2008 *catersource* Conference & Tradeshow to discuss the future of event planning and ways caterers can turn prospects into buyers. ❄

1 What is the most important element of exceptional events?

I always say service is one of the most overlooked issues. Service is the glue; it's what completes the experience. Maybe your guests got their food hot and the wine in the correct glass, but it always comes down to service. I place a very big emphasis on service—I train waiters for three days to get it right—and that leads to the success of our business. The night before the event, I always have dinner with the staff to get everyone excited about the event and to make sure that everyone understands their role.

2 What tips do you have on hiring event staff?

I hire very well and very deeply. Plus, we treat our staff so well, no one wants to leave. Make sure you hire people that share and understand your culture, and they must understand the service business. When you hire someone new, start them out with small jobs and give them a situation where they can succeed, not fail. This is all part of the education and grooming process.

3 In terms of marketing, what can caterers do to gain visibility?

Get into as many newspapers and magazines as you can. Pitch lifestyle and food editors, and then send copies of those interviews to the local news to build your own press. Go to trade shows, show up for every event and do whatever it takes to get your name out there. Once you have an elevated status, then you can charge more and you'll get more clients. If you're hungry for success you'll find it, but you can't sit in the office looking for it.



photo by Julie Skarvatt

I hired a publicist to help me determine what stories worked for us. This is a very fluid business; today's menu is yesterday's news. Plus, it's not always the person with the best qualifications; it's the person with the best drive and tenacity that gets visibility.

4 How can a caterer gain a potential client's confidence?

It's all in the way you present yourself. When you go into a client meeting, make sure you're dressed up, show up on time and send a thank you note immediately after the meeting. Always deliver proposals on the day you promise them. You need to build up the client's confidence in you so that they will say, "I hired the right person." It's all in the details, and treating people the way you want to be treated.

5 How do you get your clients to disregard budget and focus on the event?

Send your clients schedules, floor plans and blueprints before the event. Always visit the venue together to share ideas. Then do a full presentation where the client gets to taste the food, see the flowers, hear the music—give them a complete trial run so you know exactly what you're doing in terms of plates, silverware, glassware, etc. If you put the client in the driver seat, they will spend.

6 What advice do you give your clients when hiring a caterer?

I always tell them to look for someone who will enjoy the journey. They need to find a caterer who is passionate about their event, open to new ideas, excited to take on new ideas, up for a challenge and has a good focus in terms of service. "No" is not a word we use with our clients; there's always a way to get it done and make it right. I love working with caterers who are open to working together and collaborating with signature chefs so we can all win. Caterers need to develop a celebrated approach to what they're doing, and understand production value. A good caterer will coordinate production meetings with everyone involved so we're all on the same page and working toward the same goal.

7 What does the future hold for weddings?

We live in a much more casual world today, and casually chic is where we are headed. It's more chic and more fun to do something that's indicative of your style and not something you read in a book. It's a way to make a statement of your style—serve what you love to eat, dance to what you love to dance to. Technology is making our lives easier, and we've never been more in power to do events better. Weddings in the future will ooze personality.

8 How do you create a customized wedding experience for every bride?

I always start by asking every bride to go through magazines—interior design magazines and food magazines—and select things they like and dislike; this allows me to understand who they are, what

they're all about, and it gives me a window into their soul. I listen carefully to their wishes, and then start to add my magic to it. You can't be all things to everyone, so you need to decide what works for each scheme; weed out the important ones and focus on those. Brides always tell me I'm a genius not realizing all the ideas came from them.

9 Where does your inspiration come from?

Everywhere around me—everything I smell, taste, touch and feel. I saw a beautiful, flowing dress recently and we used this idea to design new table coverings. I'm also always looking for interesting ways to serve food, whether it's using square plates or serving family style; I always try to think outside of the box.

I travel a great deal; 60 percent of my travel is outside New York and Los Angeles, so I get to meet amazing chefs and designers, and discover interesting cultures. We stay in tune with trends by going to trade fairs in Paris and Frankfurt at least once a year, and we're always thinking 6–9 months out.

10 What is the next big idea in event planning?


When doing a party for 2,000 people, there's nothing worse than carrying around food. Why not make a restaurant in the middle of the party with tables and menus that feature food and wine pairings? The menu could list five items, each person could order what they want, and your guests don't have to stand in line for food. It's a much more elegant way to serve large groups of people. 



photo by Julie Skarvatt



photo by Julie Skarvatt