

Catering Manager interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for Catering Manager roles test whether you can run a profitable, compliant service under real time pressure, not just describe good food. Expect a mix of technical process questions, behavioural questions about past events, and scenarios that probe how you'd handle things going wrong on the day.

- **Process:** Questions on how you actually plan and cost menus, staff a roster, or manage inventory, often asking for a step-by-step walk-through.
- **Behavioural:** Past-experience questions about handling staffing gaps, difficult clients or high-pressure service, usually answered with a specific example.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations, such as a compliance breach or a client complaint mid-event, testing judgement under time pressure.
- **Compliance and food safety:** Direct questions about food safety systems, health regulations and how you'd manage them across staff and venues.
- **Client-facing:** Questions about managing client expectations, changes to bookings, and communication style under pressure.

Most panels open with background and motivation, move into process and compliance questions to check technical grounding, then use one or two scenario or behavioural questions to see how you handle pressure and people. They usually close by asking about your availability for irregular hours and multi-site work, then leave time for your questions.

1. Walk me through how you'd plan and cost the menu for a large multi-course event.

Why they ask

This checks whether you can actually run the budgeting and menu planning tasks central to the role, not just talk about food.

How to structure your answer

Step-by-step walk-through: start with confirming guest numbers and dietary requirements, then menu design, ingredient costing against a target margin, supplier ordering, and final sign-off with the client.

Example answer

"I'd start by confirming final guest numbers, budget per head and any dietary requirements with the client. From there I draft two or three menu options that fit the budget, cost each dish out using current supplier prices in Excel, and check the total against our target food cost percentage. Once the client signs off, I place orders with enough lead time for any specialty ingredients and brief the kitchen team on prep timing so everything's ready before service starts."

2. Tell me about a time you had to manage a staffing shortfall right before or during an event.

Why they ask

Staffing gaps are common in catering and panels want to see you can problem-solve without the event falling apart.

How to structure your answer

STAR: situation, task, action, result, focusing on the decision you made under time pressure.

Example answer

"Two casual staff called in sick the morning of a 150-guest corporate lunch. I reviewed the roster and pulled one staff member from prep to front-of-house, then called a nearby venue I had a relationship with to borrow a casual server for the shift. I briefed both quickly on the run sheet before doors opened. Service ran slightly tighter than planned but every course went out on time and the client didn't notice any disruption."

3. A client tells you mid-event that a guest with a severe allergy has been served the wrong dish. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests judgement under pressure on a genuine safety risk, not just customer service.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: immediate safety action first, then communication, then follow-up and prevention.

Example answer

"My first move is to stop that guest eating the dish immediately and check with the kitchen exactly what's in it, in case medical attention is needed. I'd inform the client straight away, offer a safe alternative fast, and stay close to the guest to monitor for any reaction. After the event I'd review how the mix-up happened, whether it was a labelling or communication failure between front-of-house and kitchen, and fix that process before the next booking."

4. How do you make sure your team complies with food safety standards across different venues?

Why they ask

Catering managers work across multiple sites and the panel needs to know compliance isn't tied to one kitchen you know well.

How to structure your answer

Compliance walk-through: reference the systems you use, how you train and audit staff, and how you handle a breach.

Example answer

"I run every event off a HACCP-based food safety plan that covers temperature control, storage and allergen handling, and I check that plan against each venue's own health regulations before booking staff in. I train casual staff on the specific plan at the pre-shift briefing rather than assuming they know our standards, and I do spot checks on temperature logs during service. If I find a breach, I address it on the spot and note it so we can adjust training before the next event."

5. A client wants to change the menu two days before their event. How do you handle it?

Why they ask

Client-facing flexibility matters, but panels want to see you protect food cost and kitchen capacity too.

How to structure your answer

Negotiation approach: acknowledge the request, check feasibility against supply and cost, then propose a workable solution.

Example answer

"I'd first find out exactly what's changing and why, since sometimes it's one dish, not the whole menu. Then I check with suppliers on ingredient availability at short notice and recast the change against the agreed budget. If it's workable I confirm it in writing with any price adjustment; if it's not feasible in the time frame I offer the closest alternative that still meets what they're after, so they're not left without an answer."

6. How do you use rostering and inventory tools to manage costs across a busy event calendar?

Why they ask

This checks practical familiarity with the software tools the role actually relies on, not just people skills.

How to structure your answer

Tools-based walk-through: describe the specific systems and how they feed into your decisions.

Example answer

"I build rosters in a staff roster application against projected covers for each event, so I'm not overstaffing quiet functions or understaffing large ones. Inventory management software tracks stock levels and flags what needs reordering before a big week of bookings. I pull that data into Excel monthly to compare actual food cost against target and adjust menu pricing or portion sizes where margins are slipping."