

# Activist catering guide

Have you just volunteered to organise the food for an activist event? Are you freaking out because you've just realised you have no idea where to start? Has it just dawned upon you that feeding four hundred people might just be a little harder than feeding your household of five?

Well stop panicking 'cause this document is for you! Much of it has been written with large, time-rigid events in mind (like Students of Sustainability conference) but hopefully even if your event is not as large or more time-flexible, you will find some useful tips in this document anyway.

## ***First things first!***

As great as it would be to just be able to work through these steps chronologically, the reality is various tasks will take longer than others, most tasks will progress quite slowly at first, and mostly everything will happen all at once at the last minute. So...

### **1) Don't panic**

I have a motto when it comes to panicking – there's no point until you can't do anything about it... And there's rarely a time you can't do anything about it, so really, you shouldn't ever panic. Besides, it'll *probably* all work out just fine.

In order to prevent panic, start putting together a timeline/task list/whatever it takes to stay organised.

### **2) Put your team together**

You'll want to put together a team with a range of skills. I find something that has worked well is having a core team doing most of the organising, but also getting some other people in to help with little things.

As for your core team, you could look for people who:

- are passionate about food
- are involved with food co-ops or community gardens
- know a thing or two about special dietary requirements
- can cook!
- know about food safety
- have done this kinda thing before
- have skills in excel/spreadsheets.

Not many people think of that last one but it is actually invaluable! Even if your spreadsheeter doesn't know a thing about food, they will make this project so much easier.

Of course, it's unlikely that anyone will have all the skills necessary, but if there's at least one person around you'll probably be right!

### **3) Find other people who can help**

- If you are missing those skills in your core team, make contact early with other people who can help you. Talk to people from food co-ops, community gardens, people from groups like Food Not Bombs, people who have organised similar things in the past. They are likely to be able to help you, and if not, can point you in the right direction.
- If there are people outside your core team helping out, make sure you have a clear plan on what's happening when and who is responsible for what so people don't end up having to deal with extra stuff they didn't say yes to or have capacity for.
- Businesses like restaurants, cafes, organic food shops, artisan bakeries, fruit & veg shops, etc. which present themselves as "community oriented" or "environmentally friendly" may also be good to get onside. I would suggest making contact initially through casual conversation as a customer, telling them about your project, then once you've built rapport and if they seem interested, just ask for what you need. You never know – you may be able to convince them to offer you sponsorship or in-kind donations.

### **4) Create a menu**

- Creating a menu can be done in a variety of ways. If the event is small and there are going to be experienced cooks around who can wing it, it can be a good idea to keep it non-specific, just making sure there's a good variety of ingredients available to use. For larger events (100+ people) it might be better to make it very detailed (including recipes with specific quantities).
- One idea is to think of a "formula" for each meal. For example, at one event, we decided that each lunch would have something fried (e.g. falafel, veggie pattie, etc.), a salad, some kind of sloppy/soupy thing, and bread. And each dinner would have some stew/curry thing, salad, and some kind of grain (rice, millet, buckwheat, etc.). This will depend a lot of the kind of cooking facilities you have, so make sure you find this out!
- It's always easier to do as few options as necessary (like one salad, one fried thing, bread) but when there are more people, it's actually impossible to make enough of one kind of thing to feed them all (physically not enough space in ovens/stoves/etc.), so that's why you'd do more options (and each person gets less of each thing).
- Take the weather into consideration. If it's going to be super cold, people will want hot foods like stews and soups. But if the weather is going to be hot, think about having lots of fresh fruit available. In hot weather, things like veggie patties and salad will go a lot faster than soups.

### ***Dietary requirements***

- In the general population, every 1 in 10 people will have a special dietary requirement, but it seems to be much higher at activist events. If participants register beforehand, make sure there's a question on there about allergies. If you don't have this information then think about the

common dietary requirements (vegetarian, vegan, Halal, Kosher, wheat/gluten-free, peanut/nut allergies, shellfish allergy, lactose-intolerance). Some other dietary requirements that I have commonly come across at enviro-type events include ginger-, garlic-, onion-, and chili-free, soy intolerance, and raw food.

- Think about whether you want to do *whole meals* without the offending ingredient(s), or whether you'll do an *option* without it. Could the offending ingredient be added at the end as a garnish? Or will you need to do separate dishes from the start? If someone has a particularly difficult dietary requirement, it's best to talk to them directly about it. They may be happy to (partly or fully) bring their own food.
- Note that for some people, if the allergen is in the same room, it could be extremely unpleasant or even dangerous for them, so you could consider banning that ingredient from the event altogether, but that's the kind of thing that people need to tell you first, and you'll need to tell all participants first in case folk bring along their own food.

### ***What kind of food???***

There are many factors to consider when deciding what kind of food to have at an event, including practicality, cost, health, inclusivity, political motivations, etc. While food at an event can be quite an inconsequential thing, it can also be highly political as it can promote a particular eating style, (i.e. *vegan food* promotes veganism, *dumpstered food* promotes dumpster diving, *local foods* promote sourcing food locally, etc.).

I can't tell you what's best for your event, but here are some questions I ask myself when thinking about what kind of food to have:

- Do I want to be promoting this eating style? Is it a responsible eating style to promote? Do I have enough information about it to ethically promote it or do I need to attach a disclaimer to it?
- What financial constraints am I under?
- What's practical for meeting special dietary requirements?
- What cooking skills are needed to prepare this kind of food?
- Will this food keep the participants happy? Full? Energised?
- Is the food familiar to the participants or very new? How will this affect participants' comfort levels or sense of inclusion? Will it be thought provoking? Discomforting?
- How will different participants experience the food provided? Whose experiences are you prioritising?
- Do I want to use the catering as an educational opportunity? If so, what is the best way to do that?

### ***Quantities of stuff***

- This is where your spreadsheet skills will be invaluable! Make a spreadsheet

that can do all the calculations necessary for you, so that you can just insert your recipes, type in the number of people, and *magically* it'll tell you how much you need.

In the hospitality industry, it is standard to calculate food items by weight to the gram, percentage amounts to 2 decimal places, and dollar amounts to the cent.

Don't forget that many foods will reduce in volume when cooked so amounts may not be as cost effective as they seem (i.e. mushrooms), and some foods will have a lot of wastage even before cooking (i.e. pumpkins when you peel them) so if you are dealing with large quantities, it's best to test recipes properly, weighing each ingredient as you go.

## 5) Source and order food

- Sourcing and ordering food can be the most daunting task if you've never done it before. If it's a new skill to you it can be extremely time consuming as well, so consider outsourcing this to someone who would find it easy. This is where the contacts you made at steps 2) and 3) will come in handy!
- Making those contacts early is also extremely important because some goods will take a long time to be ordered in and some suppliers will be closed at certain times of the year (especially during summer). Find out the time frame that things need to be ordered in and include that in your own timeline.
- If you are going to take on the sourcing/ordering yourself, think about talking to wholesale suppliers, co-ops, community permaculture gardens, bakeries, growers, stall holders at farmers markets, friends with fruit trees, and more! And talk to them early, because with enough notice, some people/groups may even be able to grow things specifically for your event.
- Some businesses will only offer a wholesale price to businesses with an account with them, so even if you are doing the ordering yourself, it can be an excellent idea to work with a co-op to do that. Remember, it can never hurt to explain your cause and ask for discounts or free stuff.
- There are some things that, if you're on a tight budget, you should never pay for, like lemons and fresh herbs when they're in season (surely someone you know has an abundance of them), sprouts (they're so easy to make) and jam (it's far cheaper to get some people to take on making jam as a little project, encouraging them to use cheap/free fruits, and only reimbursing them for sugar costs).
- Do a call out on your local FreeCycle or LETS (Local Energy Trading Systems) for anything you need. You never know – someone might come through with everything you need!
- Can you do dumpstered food? Well there are a number of things to think about:
  - The condition of the food, and whether it's even possible to make it food safe. Covered in raw meat juice? I'd say not..

- Will the people working in the kitchen be able to handle the dumpstered food properly? Do you have the capacity to ensure this?
- What are the chances of being health inspected? Will you get in trouble if caught?
- Do participants consent to eating dumpstered food?

## 6) Sort out your kitchen

- This is another pretty daunting task, and one that is really good to get someone skilled on board for.
- It's obviously easiest to just use an already existing kitchen if one exists, but this isn't always possible so you may have to set one up in a tent or marquee. If you need to do this, think about what you'll actually need to make the food you want to make (it may be a matter of adjusting your menu to suit the kitchen facilities you have).
- You may need to hire equipment so make sure you budget for this. For smaller events, these costs won't be great, but larger events the cost can be in the thousands.
- For large events, it's a good idea (and often a legal requirement) to consult with the local council about food hygiene/safety. They are usually really helpful and can even point you in the right direction with hiring what you need. (Also, ask them for sponsorship!)
- I can't tell you what equipment you need, but keep in mind that what you might be able to do by hand when cooking for five, will be tedious when cooking for five hundred. So consider getting specialised equipment to help (e.g. a food processor that can slice/grate vegetables, large strainers known as "chinois" in the industry).
- Also remember that if you think you'll need four people to be, for example, chopping vegies at one time, then you'll need at least four good knives and four chopping boards.
- Things that often get forgotten (especially with large events):
  - Storage! Storage space, storage containers, refrigerated storage, dry storage, storage for food, storage for utensils, pots, pans, etc.
  - Paper towel, cling wrap, foil, etc. (I know these things aren't environmentally friendly, but they can be very necessary)
  - Tea towels – how will you wash and dry tea towels?
  - Oven mitts
  - Cleaning products – sponges, cloths, washing detergent, hand sanitiser, brooms, mops, buckets, etc.
  - Masking tape and permanent markers to label stuff
  - A clock for time management!
- If you are borrowing stuff from various places, label them with some

distinctive mark (all my equipment is marked with two fluoro green stripes that I've painted on with nail polish). It works really well when you can just say "everything with the red gaffer tape needs to be returned to \_\_\_\_".

- Set up your kitchen so it's easy for volunteers to find things and to figure out where to put things away, i.e. make lots of labels!

## **7) Arrange the pick up/delivery of EVERYTHING**

- Picking up stuff is something that is really great if you *don't* have to do it, so get in touch with friends with cars/vans early on to ask them to help.
- I've found the most effective way to keep track of this is to put it all into a spreadsheet. This spreadsheet should contain what the thing is, who is going to get it, where they're getting from, contact details, how much it'll cost, what the status is, how to pay, etc. So remember to find out all this information as you go along!
- It's also a good idea to have one person co-ordinating it all to double & triple check that everyone knows what they're doing. Also, call people up to remind them...

## ***Now to your actual event***

### **1) Finding people to do stuff**

#### ***Kitchen Co-ordinators***

- Depending on the size of your event you may be able to do this yourself, but for large events, it can be a good idea to find someone with lots of experience and skills. Consider offering them something in return for their efforts, like free/subsidised registration if your event is usually something paid for.
- For large events, doing food can be extremely draining. While other people get breaks(!) the kitchen crew is generally in the kitchen non-stop, so think about rotating round who's taking care of the meals. It's awesome if the people who co-ordinated the menu planning, ordering, etc. aren't the same people stuck in the kitchen the whole time.
- Breakfast can be easy – if you communicate what needs to be done to a committed group of early risers, they can take care of the rest. And you can roll out of bed at 9am ready to start lunch prep. Lunch and dinner can be more complicated so make sure the people co-ordinating have a good idea of what to do.
- To give you an idea of a way of dividing tasks that worked well, at one event, I took care of dinners, another chef took care of lunches, and the person who had done most of the planning/organising just drifted in and out throughout the day whenever help was needed. This worked well as the drifter was able to ensure continuity throughout the day, while not getting burnt out by having to take on too much responsibility.

- Someone with a professional chef background may be great at cooking/workflow planning, but may not be good at working with volunteers, while someone with a strong background in activism may be great at working with volunteers but not be able to plan very well. In catering at activist events, you really need strong skills in both, so if possible make sure there are people co-ordinating the kitchen who can cover all these skills between them.

## **Volunteers**

- I'll go into further detail below about working with volunteers, but in terms of co-ordinating when people are going to do a “shift”, this is a system that has worked well for large events I've co-ordinated:
  - Have volunteers work in “teams” that each come in for approximately 3 hour shifts. I have found that longer shifts tire people out too much while shorter shifts make continuity difficult.
  - To changeover shifts smoothly, allow for some crossover in starting and ending times, and take into consideration what time meals and breaks are (see below). This system will hopefully mean your whole team won't suddenly disappear on you before new people come in
  - If someone new comes in to volunteer, make sure they have eaten first, and then get someone who has been there the longest (or whoever most needs a break) to teach the new person the job they are doing before they leave. This will allow a smooth transition without you suddenly having to think of five new jobs for people to do at once.

<b>Time</b>	<b>Breakfast team</b>	<b>Lunch prep team</b>	<b>Lunch serving &amp; clean up</b>	<b>Dinner prep</b>	<b>Dinner serving &amp; clean up</b>
<b>6:30-9:30AM</b>	Set up breakfast Serve breakfast Clean up				
<b>9:30AM-12:30PM</b> <i>LUNCH SCHEDULED FOR 12:15PM</i>		(Finish breakfast clean up) Prep lunch Serve lunch			
<b>12:15-3:30PM</b> <i>BREAK SCHEDULED FOR 3:15PM</i>			(Eat lunch first) Continue serving lunch Clean up Start prepping dinner		
<b>3:15-6:30PM</b> <i>DINNER SCHEDULED FOR 6:15PM</i>				Prep dinner Serve dinner at 6:15PM	
<b>6:15-9:30PM</b>					(Eat dinner first) Continue serving dinner Clean up

- The schedule above worked well for a large event (400 people) with quite a strict schedule (workshops happening throughout the day). Having a less rigid system might be better for your event.

## 2) Workflow planning

- This step is more relevant the larger your event is. It basically means thinking about everything that needs to be done, when it needs to be done by, and what order it should be done in.
  - For example, let's say your event starts tomorrow and that you can start prep today. The menu is toast, muesli and fruit for breakfast, potato and leek soup with garlic bread for lunch, and bean and vegie curry with rice and a couscous salad for dinner.

Breakfast doesn't need any prep, but I would make sure that everything is put away neatly and labelled clearly so the breakfast team can find it in the morning.

The potatoes can be washed and peeled today; potatoes oxidise once peeled so make sure you can keep them submerged in water. The leek can also be chopped today; make sure they are kept in a container with a lid. Start soaking the beans tonight.

Tomorrow morning – the soup will take the longest so get started on that early. Crush the garlic and chop some herbs for garlic butter, slice the bread, then spread the garlic butter onto bread before toasting it in the oven.

Seeing as lunch is pretty easy, we can start dinner prep in the morning. Start cooking your beans as soon as you get into the kitchen because they'll take the longest. Apart from that, it's a matter of getting all your vegies chopped – in the right order! So if you want your onions cooked first, chop them first. Carrots take a long time to cook, so do them next. Zucchini won't take as long and either will squash so you can leave them till later.

Closer to dinner, your bean and vegie curry should be well under way, so you can probably start prepping for the next day. But watch the time! How long will rice take to cook? And how long will the water for the couscous salad take to boil? Make sure you don't forget these things...

When you're about to start serving, remember it can take a while to arrange everything – finding utensils for each dish, making labels so people with special dietary requirements know what's good for them, cleaning up, and making last minute salad dressing! We always forget salad dressing...

- Organising everything for a meal *and remembering it* can be pretty tricky. One method I use is to write up everything that needs to be done on a whiteboard (or something) that everyone can see, plus when it needs to be done by. Think flowcharts, or mind maps, or something like that. It's really good for being able to think of tasks for volunteers to do along the way.
- As a general rule, leave plenty of time! It would be fair to say that each



meal takes around 4 hours to prepare, sometimes more, sometimes less depending on what it is. You can never go wrong with leaving more time because you can always start prep for the next meal.

Better than leaving more time, is to actually plan each meal so that all the prep is done well in advance. This is more crucial the larger your event is.

- At events which have a timed schedule (i.e. certain activities starting at certain times), it's crucial that food gets out on time because “yeah, we'll be done in 5 minutes” can easily turn into “we're 10 minutes late, but it's all good” which can turn into “whoops I didn't realise that would take that long”, and suddenly there's a queue of hungry people and the food is half an hour late and the entire program is thrown into disarray! (This is not an exaggeration.) A rule of thumb for timing is that everything will take three times as long as you think it will.
- In terms of work that needs to be done, expect that you will spend 10% of your time cooking, 40% of your time doing prep, and 50% of your time cleaning, so take that into consideration when planning.
- CLEAN AS YOU GO. Believe me, I'm a naturally messy person and hate cleaning. I've tried every approach possible and can assure you that this is the only way to do it. Do dishes before they pile up, wipe down benches, rinse your chopping boards, put things back where they are supposed to be. Seriously.

### 3) Working with volunteers

- Many activists come from a consensus-based, non-hierarchical and/or decentralised-organising background. That has been my background as well but I have also worked in hierarchical/centrally organised kitchens. There are pros and cons to each structure and in co-ordinating kitchens I try to bring together the best of both worlds.

I have found that while a centralised/hierarchical structure is efficient because there's always someone who knows what's going on, it forces some people to do all the shit jobs while others do all the fun jobs. Responsibility isn't shared and there isn't much scope for initiative.

Decentralised/non-hierarchical structures on the other hand shares responsibility and allows people more opportunities to work at the best of their potential. But, I have found that as a new volunteer it can sometimes be difficult to get involved because people already involved don't want to tell me what to do.

- My conclusion is that a *centralised but non-hierarchical* structure is the best way to organise a kitchen – so it's not a *everyone is my minion and I'm bossing them around* thing, but a *I know what's happening in every little part of the kitchen, so when someone asks me what they can do to help, I know exactly what needs to be done and when* thing.

Everything I do when working with volunteers tries to create a fun experience and a sense of achievement. So here are little techniques I've used when co-ordinating the kitchen:

### ***Create a friendly space***

- It may seem obvious, but when people come in, say hello, be friendly, introduce yourself and ask their name. Think of them as a person you'll be friends with by the time their shift is up. Also, introduce volunteers to each other (or get them to introduce themselves).
- If it helps, get everyone (including you) to wear a name tag. It's also super helpful for addressing them by name when asking them to do something.
- I always try to make conversation with people while working in the kitchen. It might seem like it'd be distracting or invasive, but I think that's OK as it makes it more fun and therefore a really important part of working with volunteers.

### ***Create a fun space***

- Keep an eye on interest levels. Doing large quantities of anything can get pretty tedious so tell people they can swap jobs if they are bored.
- Just as important is to keep an eye on energy levels. I always make it clear that if people need a break, they should take one. You can even all take a tea break together if shifts are long.
- Sometimes energy levels of the whole group get really low late at night. If you notice this happening, get more people in to help with the final clean up – many hands make light work!
- There are always shit jobs to be done and as a co-ordinator I make sure that no one person does too much of them. This means I do my fair share of them too.

### ***Create a sense of ownership over the work***

- Instead of saying “Peel and grate these carrots”, I'll say “We're making veggie burgers for dinner tonight, and the recipe is here [show them the recipe]. It says we need 15kgs of grated carrot, so let's get started on this bag, then we'll do the zucchini and beetroot. It needs to be done by 4pm so we have time to make sure they're all cooked.”
  - In the above example, I've tried to create a sense of ownership firstly by explaining how that small task fits into the whole kitchen operation.
  - I've also given an indication of quantity and the time frame in which the task needs to be done. This information is really good to share as it helps keep people focussed.

If you do your best to share this information, sometimes you'll get someone really onto it who will see the job through to the end. Given the opportunity, they might even co-ordinate the whole thing leaving you with one less thing to worry about.

- Something else I do is to get everyone to taste test the food and offer suggestions on what it needs. “More salt? More chilli? Nope it's perfect..”

## ***Respect the unique skills of every person***

- Put yourself into the shoes of a volunteer for a moment and picture this – you turn up to volunteer and after giving you a basic run down of what's happening and introducing you to everyone, the kitchen co-ordinator gives you a job to do. It's a task you find easy as you've done it a million times before but the co-ordinator explains it to you in pedantic detail, stating things that are pretty obvious. How does that make you feel?

Or how about this scenario – you turn up to volunteer somewhere and after giving you a basic run down of what's happening and introducing you to everyone, the kitchen co-ordinator gives you a job to do. You've never done it before but it looks pretty simple and so you say you've got it. The co-ordinator leaves you to it but ten minutes later they come back and seem anxious because you've been doing it wrong. How does that make you feel?

When giving people jobs to do, it can be really tricky finding that balance between explaining thoroughly and not being condescending. How do you get around this? Here are my suggestions:

- Instead of giving someone a job to do and leaving them to it, I would start doing a job *with* them. This way I can get an idea of whether they know what to do. If they aren't quite doing it right, I can explain as we go, offering little bits of advice at a time so it's not an information overload.
- Once they've got it covered, I can get them to show other volunteers how to do it while I move on to other tasks, i.e. create an awesome buddy system!

## ***Create an easy space***

- Create a space that is easy to work in. By this I mean making sure it's always tidy, that things are easy to find, and that it's easy to know where things should go. The volunteer kitchens I run always have lots of labels so it's easy for people to figure out where things go.

## **4) FOOD SAFETY**

- Food safety can be a major issue at these events. My advice is to make sure at least one kitchen co-ordinator knows food safety like the back of their hand(!) and to do things how you'd do them if you were running a commercial operation and knew that the health inspector was going to visit that day...or as much as possible within your limitations.

I use that as a starting point because there are many factors that can decrease your levels of food safety when feeding activists at activist-type events, i.e. kitchen equipment and cleaning facilities, especially in an outdoor kitchen; lack of skills or experience of volunteers; limited storage capacity; general “Oh it'll be fine” attitude... Slacking on the food safety can be very dangerous, as everyone's immune system is different. It might be fine for most people (especially those who are used to dumpstered food),

but not for everyone.

- I could write a whole separate manual on food safety, but there are plenty of resources out there. I will emphasise, however, making sure people wash their hands.

### ***After your event***

- Celebrate! You did it – you just fed a bunch of hungry activists! Thanks to you, the Revolution will not fail. Yay!
- Obviously you'll need to clean up and return equipment, etc. to where you got it from. But something else to think about is what to do if you have leftover food (which you probably will, 'cause no one likes to under-cater). Some options include:
  - Selling it to a local food co-op/business, but you'll have to make sure it's kept food safe.
  - Giving it away to soup kitchens/Food Not Bombs/any local community centre.
  - Selling/giving it away to participants (food for the road!)
  - Auctioning it off to participants as a fundraiser (a good way to recuperate costs).
  - Storing it (might need freezing) until the next event.
  - Leaving it where you were (like, when we held a skillshare camp at a forest blockade site, or when ASEN goes to the Tent Embassy).
- Contact me to let me know if there's anything that I missed in this document, or if there's something you learnt that you reckon would be really useful to include, or if you just want to debrief. It'd be great if this remained a living document, so email me – [jeanette.defoe@gmail.com](mailto:jeanette.defoe@gmail.com)