

BUSINESS STARTUP GUIDE AND WORKBOOK

Catering Guide

Catering

A start guide for getting your own business off the ground — Veteran's Strategic Solutions LLC, Business Model Series

Before You Read This

This guide works anywhere in the United States. Dollar figures are estimates from public sources, not quotes. Food licensing is decided at state and county level and varies more than almost anything else in this series — verify everything here with your own health department. Wherever there is a blank line, write in your own answer.

What This Business Actually Is

You cook food in one place and serve it somewhere else. A wedding, an office lunch, a funeral reception, a company picnic.

The customer is not buying food. They are buying one less thing to worry about on a day that matters. Nobody hires a caterer because they cannot cook. They hire one because they cannot cook and host at the same time.

What this is not: a restaurant. No dining room, no fixed hours, no walk-ins. You know exactly how many people you are feeding, days in advance, and you get paid before or on the day.

Read This Before Anything Else

The most common wrong assumption about starting a food business is that cottage food law will cover you. For catering, it almost certainly will not.

Cottage food laws let you make low-risk, shelf-stable items — baked goods, jams — in your home kitchen and sell them directly to a person. That is what they are for.

The moment you are cooking meals and serving them at somebody else's event, most states put you outside that exemption entirely. Health departments generally require food to be prepared in a licensed commercial kitchen, because home appliances do not meet the temperature control and sanitation standards for volume production.

Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.

The good news is that the route through costs a few hundred dollars a month, not fifty thousand. It is called a commissary kitchen, and Part 2 covers it. Read that before you spend anything.

Honest Gut Check

- Can you cook for eighty people, not eight? Volume cooking is a different skill from cooking well. Timing, holding temperature, and getting everything hot at once is the job.
- Can you work weekends and holidays? That is when events are. Every one of them.
- Can you handle being the reason a wedding goes right or wrong? The stakes feel small until the day.

What the Odds Actually Are

Approximately three out of four new businesses make it through their first year. About half are still running at five years. Roughly one in three make it to ten — figures broadly consistent with U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics business-survival data.

Two honest caveats. Those numbers barely move by trade — federal data shows only a few points between the best and worst industries. And they count businesses with employees on a payroll, so a man working alone is largely not in them.

What is specific to food: margins are thinner than almost anything else in this series. Net profit typically runs 10 to 20 percent after food, labor and overhead. That is not a reason to avoid it. It is a reason to price properly from the first job, because there is no room to absorb a mistake.

What separates the ones who last:

- **A cash cushion.** You buy the food before you get paid. On a large event that is real money out the door weeks ahead.
- **Charging enough.** Food cost has to stay at 28 to 35 percent of what you charge. Caterers who price by what feels fair instead of by the math go out of business politely.
- **Money that repeats.** A wedding is one job. A company that feeds forty people every Thursday is a business.
- **Sticking with it.** Reputation in catering spreads by word of mouth and almost nothing else, and word of mouth is slow before it is fast.

Snapshot

Category	What to Expect
Money to start	Approximately \$15,000 to \$40,000 on the commissary model
Storefront needed	No. A commissary agreement instead
Skill gate	High — volume cooking, not home cooking
License	Health permit, food manager certification, commissary agreement
Time to first job	Six to twelve weeks, mostly licensing
Net margin	10 to 20 percent

Part 1 — Making It a Real Business

Step 1. Call Your County Health Department First, Before Anything

Not the state. The county. They are the ones who inspect you and issue the permit, and they are the only reliable answer.

Ask exactly these:

- Can I prepare catered food in my home kitchen, or do I need a licensed commercial facility? Expect no.
- Do you require a written commissary agreement before you will approve my catering license?
- What food manager certification do you accept, and does my whole staff need it or just me?
- Do you keep a list of approved commissary kitchens in the county? Many do, and it saves weeks.
- Do I need a separate permit for each event, or one annual license? Some jurisdictions require a temporary event permit per event on top of your license.

Write the answers down and get the person's name.

My county requires: _____ Commissary agreement needed: yes / no

Step 2. Get Your Food Manager Certification

Many states require certification through an ANSI-accredited program — ServSafe is the most widely recognized. This is yours personally, not the business's, and you can do it before anything else is in place. It is a prerequisite for most permits.

Step 3. Find and Secure a Commissary Kitchen

See Part 2. You usually cannot get licensed without this, so it comes before the license application, not after.

Step 4. Apply for Your Health Department Permit

Expect an inspection of the commissary and a review of your food handling procedures. Timelines run three to six weeks in most places. Budget a few hundred dollars a year in most areas.

Step 5. Sole Proprietor or LLC

Filing fees run approximately \$35 to \$500 by state, about \$132 on average, plus annual fees from nothing to \$800. Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.

Form the LLC in this business. You are feeding people. An LLC does not replace any permit — it is entirely separate — but the liability separation matters here more than in most trades.

Step 6. Get an EIN — It Is Free

Apply at irs.gov. Takes about five minutes, no cost. Do not pay a service \$50 to \$100 for it.

Step 7. Open a Business Bank Account

Separate from personal, from day one.

Step 8. Insurance, and Get Real Coverage

- **General liability** — the baseline, and most venues will not let you in the door without a certificate.
- **Product liability** — specifically for foodborne illness claims.
- **Liquor liability** — if alcohol is served at all, even if the client supplies it. Check whether your state has dram shop laws that reach caterers.
- **Commercial auto** — you are transporting food in a vehicle for business.

Venues will ask for a certificate of insurance naming them as additional insured. That request is routine and your insurer handles it.

Step 9. Understand What You Owe

Self-employment tax of 15.3% on net business income, plus income tax on top. Pay quarterly if you expect to owe \$1,000 or more in federal tax — April 15, June 15, September 15 and January 15, moving to the next business day when one falls on a weekend or holiday. Pay 100% of last year's total tax split into four and you generally cannot be penalized for underpayment. Set aside 25 to 30 percent of net.

Step 10. Sales Tax

Prepared food is taxable in most states, and catering is often taxed differently from restaurant food. Ask your state revenue department specifically about catering, and about whether service charges and gratuities are taxable. Get it in writing.

Step 11. Liquor

If you plan to serve alcohol that is separate federal, state and local licensing with its own timeline. Do not build it into your first-year plan. Let clients supply their own or hire a licensed bar service.

Part 2 — The Commissary Kitchen

This is the thing that turns catering from a business that needs a large build-out budget into one you can start on a modest one.

A commissary is a licensed commercial kitchen you rent access to — by the hour, by the shift, or monthly. You prep there, store there, and clean there. The health department inspects it, not your house.

Costs run roughly \$400 to \$1,200 a month for regular access, with hourly rates available in many places for occasional use.

Where to Find One

- Ask the health department. Many counties publish a searchable list of approved commissary kitchens specifically to make this easier.
- Purpose-built shared kitchens exist in most metro areas, often with cold and dry storage included.
- Churches, VFW halls, American Legion posts, community centers, schools. Many have licensed kitchens sitting idle six days a week, and some will rent hours cheaply to somebody they know.
- Restaurants with off-hours capacity. A place that closes at nine and opens at eleven has fourteen unused hours.
- A restaurant that is already licensed can sometimes let you cater under its license — so a partnership with an existing operator is sometimes faster than getting licensed yourself. Confirm with the health department that the arrangement is acceptable before relying on it.

What to Nail Down in the Agreement

- Hours you have access, in writing. “Whenever it is free” becomes a problem the first time it is not.
- What storage you get — refrigerated, frozen, dry — and whether it is secure.
- Whether their license covers you or you need your own permit for the space.
- What happens if they fail an inspection. Their violation can shut down your business.
- Notice period. If they can end it with two weeks' notice, you are two weeks from having no kitchen.

Get the commissary agreement before you apply for your license. In many jurisdictions the application will not be accepted without it.

If There Is No Commissary Anywhere Near You

This is a real problem in rural counties, and the guide would be useless if it stopped at “find one.” Work down this list:

- Ask the health inspector directly who else in the county is licensed. They know every licensed kitchen because they inspect all of them. Ask which ones have idle time.
- Churches and fraternal halls. A church kitchen that serves a Sunday meal is often already licensed or easily inspectable. Offer a flat monthly rate and a deep clean after every use.
- Schools and community colleges. Culinary programs have commercial kitchens that sit empty all summer and every evening.
- Senior centers, granges, fire halls, county fairgrounds. All routinely have licensed kitchens.
- A restaurant partnership. Some will let you operate under their license for a share of revenue. Get this in writing and confirm with the health department that the arrangement is acceptable before relying on it.
- Ask what it would take to license a building you can access. A detached, separate kitchen — not the one your family uses — can sometimes be brought up to code for less than you would expect. Ask the inspector what the gap is.
- Change the business rather than the kitchen. If none of this works, cottage-food baking, a food trailer with its own approved plumbing, or a drop-off model built on shelf-stable items may be the version of the food business your county actually allows.

Do not skip to operating from your home kitchen and hoping. A foodborne illness complaint traced to an unlicensed kitchen is the end of the business and possibly worse.

Part 3 — Food Safety, Which Is the Actual Job

Licensing gets you legal. This section keeps people out of the hospital. The numbers below come from the FDA Food Code, which most state and county codes are built on — but a few states differ, so confirm yours with your local health department.

The Danger Zone

41°F to 135°F. Between those two temperatures, bacteria multiply fast enough to make people sick — in some conditions doubling in as little as twenty minutes.

Everything in food safety is about how little time your food spends in that range.

Rule	The Number
Cold holding	41°F or below
Hot holding	135°F or above
Cooling, stage one	135°F down to 70°F within 2 hours
Cooling, stage two	70°F down to 41°F within 4 more hours — 6 hours total
Reheating for hot holding	Rapidly to 165°F, within 2 hours
Maximum time in the danger zone	4 hours cumulative, then discard

Note the word cumulative. The four hours includes prep, transport and service — not just time on the buffet. Food that sat out for an hour during prep has one hour on the clock before it ever leaves your kitchen.

You may see 140°F on older charts. USDA uses that figure for some meat and poultry guidance; the FDA foodservice standard your inspector enforces is 135°F. Some older state codes used 45°F for cold holding; the current FDA standard is 41°F.

Holding Without Equipment — the Four Hour Rule

The Food Code allows holding food without active temperature control for a limited time, which is what makes an outdoor buffet legal. The conditions are strict:

- The food must start at a safe temperature — 41°F or below, or 135°F or above — when it comes off temperature control
- It must be marked with the time it came off control
- Hot food: four hours, then discard. No exceptions, no putting it back in the cooler
- Cold food: up to six hours, provided it never exceeds 70°F

You have to actually monitor and record this. “It was probably fine” is not a defense.

The Practical Rules That Follow From All This

Buy a calibrated probe thermometer and use it. Not the oven dial, not your hand. Temperature at the center of the food.

Check hot and cold holding every two hours, not every four. The discard threshold is four hours; checking at the halfway mark is what lets you fix a problem instead of throwing out the entrée.

Cool in shallow pans, never in the stockpot. A full stockpot of chili will not cool from 135°F to 70°F in two hours no matter what you do. Divide it into shallow pans, use ice baths or ice paddles.

Pre-heat your insulated carriers with hot water for twenty to thirty minutes before loading. A cold carrier pulls heat out of the food instead of holding it in.

Transport is part of the clock. An hour in the truck is an hour in the danger zone unless the food is genuinely held at temperature.

Keep a simple temperature log for every event. Time, item, temperature, initials. If anyone ever gets sick, that log is the difference between an incident and a much bigger problem.

Part 4 — What It Actually Costs to Equip Yourself

Do not overbuy. Rent specialty items for the first year and buy what you use every single event.

Item	Roughly	Note
Chafing dishes, full size	\$40 to \$60 each basic	Buy four to six. Induction and premium run \$200+
Chafer fuel	A few dollars per can	Consumable, budget per event
Full and half food pans	\$4 to \$15 each	You will want about twenty
Insulated food pan carriers (Cambro-style)	\$150 to \$400 each	The single most important purchase. Two minimum
Small food carrier	\$30 to \$80	For short runs
Sheet pans and racks	\$200 to \$400	Speed rack around \$90 to \$200
Coolers, commercial grade	\$150 to \$400	Cold transport

Item	Roughly	Note
Calibrated probe thermometers	\$20 to \$80 each	Buy three. They get lost
Storage containers, food-safe	\$200 to \$400	Cambro-style square containers
Serving utensils, tongs, ladles	\$150 to \$300	
Beverage dispensers and coffee urns	\$100 to \$300 each	
Folding tables, linens, skirting	\$300 to \$800	Or rent
Bus tubs and transport bins	\$100 to \$200	
Hand washing station	\$150 to \$400	Some health departments require one on site
Knives and small wares	\$300 to \$600	
Electric warmer or holding cabinet	\$200 to \$2,000	Buy later, rent early

A realistic starting kit is approximately \$2,000 to \$5,000 for someone doing drop-off and mid-size buffets. That is the equipment line inside the larger \$15,000 to \$40,000 figure, which also covers licensing, insurance, commissary deposits and working capital for food you buy before you get paid.

Buy used. Restaurant supply auctions, closing restaurants and equipment liquidators sell commercial-grade gear at a fraction of new. Chafers and pans last decades.

Rent, do not buy: china, glassware, linens, tents, specialty cooking equipment, anything you would use twice a year. Build the rental cost into the quote.

Part 5 — The Money Math

The Three Percentages

Category	Target	What It Means
Food cost	28 to 35%	Ingredients, as a share of what you charge
Labor	25 to 35%	Including your own time, honestly valued
Overhead	15 to 25%	Commissary, insurance, transport, equipment, licenses
Net profit	10 to 20%	What is actually left

If your food cost is over 35 percent, you are not going to make money. That is the first number to check on every menu you design.

Working Backwards From Food Cost

The formula: food cost divided by 0.30 equals your price.

Ingredients cost you \$9 a head, so you charge \$30 a head.

That \$30 is not profit. Roughly \$9 is food, \$9 is labor, \$6 is overhead, and \$6 is yours before tax.

Per-Person Pricing, for Reference

Published ranges run approximately \$15 to \$30 for casual, \$30 to \$75 mid-range, and \$75 to \$150 or more for upscale. Weddings and corporate work sit at the top; drop-off office lunches at the bottom.

The Two Costs New Caterers Forget

Your own labor. If you do not pay yourself in the numbers, you will discover at year end that you worked forty weekends for nothing.

Waste and over-production. You always make more than the count. Build 10 percent into your food cost or it comes out of profit.

Worked Example — Why the Cheap Job Costs More

Two jobs, same day, same revenue.

Job A: office lunch, 40 people, \$22 a head. Revenue \$880. Food \$260 (about 30 percent of revenue). You and one helper, four hours total including transport. Simple menu, disposable service.

Job B: wedding, 20 people, \$44 a head. Revenue \$880. Food \$290 (about 33 percent of revenue). Setup at two, service at six, breakdown at ten — you and two helpers, eighteen hours between you. Rented china. Two site visits beforehand. Three menu changes.

Same \$880. Job A nets you something. Job B costs you money and a Saturday.

The lesson is not “avoid weddings.” It is that per-person price alone tells you nothing. Price the hours, the staff, the rentals and the site visits, or the impressive-sounding job is the one that hurts.

How to Price a Job “at Cost” Without Losing Money

You will be told to do a first job at cost to build a portfolio. That is good advice and it is routinely done wrong.

At cost means: food, plus staff you pay, plus rentals, plus fuel and consumables. It does NOT mean free.

For a 40-person drop-off, at cost is roughly: \$260 food, \$60 disposables and fuel, \$40 transport. That is \$360 — not zero. Charge that.

What you are giving away is your own labor, and only your own labor. Say so out loud: “I’m doing this one at cost to build my portfolio — you’re covering food and materials, I’m donating my time. Normally this is \$880.” That way the client knows the real number, and you have not set a price you will be held to later.

Never do more than two or three of these, and never do one for a client who can obviously pay.

Part 6 — Contracts, Deposits and Cancellations

In a business where you buy food weeks ahead for an event that can be canceled, the contract is your only protection. Do not run a single job on a handshake.

What Every Contract Needs

- Date, times for setup, service and breakdown, and the exact address
- Guest count, and the deadline for the final count
- The menu, itemized, with substitution policy
- Total price, broken out — food, staff, rentals, delivery, service charge
- Deposit amount and due date
- Balance due date — on or before the event, never after
- Cancellation terms (below)
- What happens if the count changes
- Who supplies what — tables, power, water, ice, trash removal
- Overtime rate if the event runs long

Deposits

Take 50 percent at booking, balance on or before the event day.

A deposit is not a courtesy. You are buying food with your own money weeks in advance, and blocking a date you cannot sell twice. A client who will not put money down is a client who may not be there.

Cancellation Terms That Actually Protect You

Set these at booking and put them in writing:

When They Cancel	What You Keep
More than 30 days out	Deposit refunded, less a small booking fee
14 to 30 days out	Deposit non-refundable
7 to 14 days out	Deposit plus any food already ordered
Under 7 days	Full contract price

The reason the near-date terms are strict: at seven days you have ordered food, scheduled staff and turned down other work. Explain it that way and reasonable clients accept it immediately.

The Final Count Rule

Final guest count due seven days before. After that you can add, but you cannot subtract.

Say this at booking, not when they call to cut twenty people three days out. Said up front it is professional. Said afterwards it is a fight.

Get It Signed

Email is fine. A signature or a written “I agree to these terms” reply is fine. What is not fine is a verbal agreement with somebody planning a wedding, who will remember the conversation differently than you do.

Part 7 — Finding Out Whether Your Area Supports This

Step 1. Search your town plus “catering,” plus “caterer near me,” plus “event catering.” Note review counts.

Step 2. Sort them by what they actually do. Wedding specialists, BBQ, corporate drop-off, one cuisine, upscale plated. Catering is not one market — it is several markets that share a license.

Step 3. Read the one-star reviews of every caterer on the list. The patterns that show up:

- “Ran out of food”
- “Showed up late”
- “Food was cold”
- “Nobody answered my calls in the two weeks before”
- “Looked nothing like the tasting”

All five are reliability failures, not cooking failures. That is the opening. In catering, the operator who answers the phone and shows up on time beats the better cook almost every time.

Step 4. Find out who books the recurring work. Weddings are visible and everybody chases them. The quiet money is elsewhere: corporate offices with weekly meetings, churches, funeral homes, schools and sports leagues, care facilities, real estate offices and dealerships running client events.

Step 5. Check the venues. Call three event venues and ask whether they have a preferred caterer list, what it takes to get on it, and whether they require exclusivity. Getting on one venue's list can be worth more than a year of advertising.

Caterers in my area: _____ Ones doing my style: _____ Venues with preferred lists: _____

The counterintuitive part: do not start with weddings. They are the highest price per head and the reason most people think of catering — which is exactly why they are the most competitive, the most stressful, and the most likely to produce a bad review from a stressed customer. Corporate and institutional work pays less per head, repeats monthly, and nobody cries.

Part 8 — Your First Jobs

- Pick one menu you can execute perfectly at volume. Five to eight items you could cook in your sleep.
- Do one job at cost — priced as Part 5 describes — for a church, a unit function or a community event. Photograph everything.
- Get on one venue's preferred list.
- Call every funeral home in town. Nobody does this and they feed people constantly.

What to Actually Say

Cold call to an office manager: "I'm _____, I run a catering outfit here in town. I know you probably have somebody — I just wanted you on my list in case they're ever booked or you need something last minute. What kind of thing do you usually order?" Then listen. That last question is the whole call.

When somebody asks your price before you know the event: never quote a number. "Depends on the headcount, the menu and whether you need staff on site — give me those three and I'll have a real number tomorrow."

When they say another caterer is cheaper: "They might be right for this one. Ask them whether that includes service staff, setup and breakdown, and what happens if your count goes up." Most cheap quotes are cheap because something is not in them.

When the guest count changes three days out: "My final count deadline was seven days — I can add people, but I've already bought for the original number. Let's add and I'll make sure there's plenty." Firm, and you already told them at booking.

When something goes wrong at the event — and it will — tell the client before they find out. "The chicken is running ten minutes behind, so I'm putting the salad and bread out now." People forgive problems they were warned about.

Part 9 — Pricing

Tier	What It Looks Like
Low	\$15 to \$30 a head. Drop-off, disposables, no staff on site
Mid	\$30 to \$75 a head. Setup, service, chafing dishes, one or two staff
Premium	\$75 to \$150 a head. Plated service, rentals, full staffing

Recommendation: start at drop-off and mid-tier corporate. Low overhead, no service staff to manage, and you find out whether your food and your timing hold up before you are doing it in front of two hundred wedding guests.

Price these separately, always: service staff per person per hour · delivery and setup · rentals · cake cutting, bar service, cleanup.

Part 10 — Money Help for Veterans

VR&E, Chapter 31 — What Is Actually True

The self-employment track is widely advertised as VA funding to start a business. The regulation requires that your service-connected disabilities be severe enough that self-employment is the only reasonably feasible career path for you. It is not a track you simply choose. In 2021, approximately 162 veterans were in it out of more than 80,000 using VR&E overall — a well-documented figure cited in Congressional records on the program.

The long-term services track is different and far more commonly used. It covers vocational school, technical certificates and trade programs with no tuition cap, and can cover tools, equipment and certification exam fees.

The catch: VR&E is an employment program, not an education program. If a counselor determines you can reasonably obtain suitable work with the training you already have, it gets denied. Anything funded must sit inside an approved individualized employment plan developed with your counselor.

Culinary programs and food safety certifications are the kind of vocational training the long-term track can cover, but only if justified as your route to suitable employment. Apply with VA Form 28-1900 and put the question to your counselor. Do not plan around a yes.

Free and reliable to everyone, no rating required: Small Business Development Centers, SCORE mentoring, Veterans Business Outreach Centers.

If you cooked in any capacity in service, say so everywhere. Feeding several hundred people on a schedule with limited equipment is exactly the skill this business runs on, and most civilian caterers have never done it.

Part 11 — The Three Places People Get Stuck, and How to Get Past Them

1. Assuming the Home Kitchen Will Do

It is the natural starting assumption — you can cook, you have a kitchen, cottage food law exists. But catering sits outside that exemption in most of the country, and finding out after you have taken a booking means canceling on a customer or operating illegally at somebody's wedding.

The fix: call the county health department in week one, before you buy anything or promise anyone. The commissary route is affordable and it is the answer almost everyone lands on.

2. Underpricing Because the Food Cost Looks Small

Ingredients for forty people might cost \$260, so \$600 feels like a great deal for everyone. Then you count the shopping, the prep, the drive, the setup, the four hours on site, the breakdown and the cleaning, and you made about nine dollars an hour.

The fix: food cost is 28 to 35 percent of the price, not the price. Use the formula every single time, including for friends.

3. Chasing Weddings First

Weddings are the glamour job and the highest number per head, so they are where everyone points. They are also the most competitive, the most emotionally charged, and the most likely to produce a bad review over something that was not your fault.

The office that orders lunch every Thursday will never make you cry, and over a year it is worth more than two weddings.

The fix: build on corporate, institutional and funeral work. Take weddings once your systems are proven and you can charge properly for the stress.

None of these are reasons not to start. They are the three potholes in the road, and every one of them is avoidable if you know it is coming.

Part 12 — Your First 90 Days

Days	What You Do
1 to 14	Call the county health department. Get the five answers in writing. Start food manager certification.
15 to 30	Find a commissary. Visit three. Get the agreement signed.
31 to 45	Apply for the health permit. Form the LLC. Get insurance quotes.
46 to 60	Build one menu you can execute perfectly. Cost every item out. Buy the starter equipment used.
61 to 75	Do one job at cost. Photograph everything. Collect reviews. Keep a temperature log.
76 to 90	Call every funeral home, church and office manager on your list. Get on one venue's preferred list.

The One Number to Track

Food cost as a percentage of revenue, per job.

Not per month. Per job. Calculate it the day after every event: what you spent on ingredients divided by what you charged.

If it is over 35 percent, that job lost money and you need to know which one and why — the menu, the portioning, the waste, or the price. A caterer who checks this after every job fixes the problem in week three. One who checks at year end finds out after forty jobs.

Job 1: ____% Job 2: ____% Job 3: ____% Running average: ____%

After the first year, switch to: percentage of revenue from repeat clients. One-off events are a treadmill. Accounts are a business.

Where This Goes If It Works

Solo drop-off catering. Corporate lunches, no service staff, no weekends. Predictable, unglamorous, and a genuinely good living.

Full-service events. Weddings, galas, plated dinners. Higher revenue per job, and you are managing people as much as cooking.

A niche you own. BBQ, one cuisine, one type of event. Being the only person in the county who does one thing extremely well beats being the fourth generalist.

A licensed kitchen of your own. Eventually the commissary hours cost more than a space would. That is a good problem and it means the business worked.

The One-Page Version, If You Read Nothing Else

- Call the county health department this week. Not the state. Ask whether you can cook at home (almost certainly no) and whether they keep a list of approved commissary kitchens.
- Get food manager certified. You can start today and it is a prerequisite for nearly everything else.
- Lock a commissary before you apply for the license. The application usually will not be accepted without the agreement.
- Learn four numbers and never forget them. Cold at 41°F, hot at 135°F, four hours cumulative in between, reheat to 165°F.
- Food cost divided by 0.30 is your price. Every time, including for friends.
- Fifty percent deposit at booking, final count seven days out, cancellation terms in writing. No handshakes.
- Start with drop-off corporate work, not weddings.
- Check food cost per job the day after every event. Over 35 percent means that job lost money.

A Last Word

Feeding a large number of people on a fixed schedule with the equipment you were given is something a lot of people find impossible and some of us have simply done. If that is you, you already have the part of this business that cannot be taught.

The rest is paperwork, temperature and arithmetic, and all three are in this document.

This guide is a starting framework, not legal, tax or financial advice. Food licensing, permit and tax requirements vary by state, county and city and change over time — verify every regulatory item with your local health department before you operate. Temperature figures reflect the FDA Food Code; some state and local codes differ, and your inspector enforces the local version. Tax figures reflect federal rules current as of September 2026. Equipment prices, food costs and per-person rates are estimates gathered from public sources, not quotes.

Startup Checklist

Use this checklist to turn the guide into a sequence of actions for your own market and circumstances.

Done	Startup Action	Owner	Target Date
■	Choose the business structure you will use.		
■	Get an EIN and open a separate business bank account.		
■	Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.		
■	Confirm insurance needs, including product and liquor liability, before accepting work.		
■	Complete the local market test described in the core guide.		
■	Build the startup budget and record actual costs.		
■	Set pricing using your own costs and required margin.		
■	Prepare customer terms, estimate and invoice forms.		
■	Launch outreach and record every lead and result.		

Equipment and Budget Worksheet

List only the tools, equipment, supplies, software and services required for the version of the business you plan to launch.

Item	Required / Optional	Estimated Cost	Actual Cost	Supplier / Source

Budget Summary	Amount
Startup total	
Monthly fixed costs	
Working cash reserve	
Total funding needed	

Pricing and Estimate Template

Complete the cost fields with your own numbers. Use the pricing guidance in the core guide for the business-specific method — $\text{food cost} \div 0.30 = \text{price}$.

Estimate Field	Details or Calculation	Amount
Customer and project		
Materials or inventory		
Labor hours and rate		
Equipment or venue		
Travel or delivery		
Subcontractors		
Overhead allocation		
Contingency or risk allowance		
Subtotal		
Applicable tax		
Estimated total		
Deposit and payment schedule		
Estimate expiration date		

Invoice Template

Business Information	Customer Information
Business name:	Customer name:
Address:	Company:
Phone:	Billing address:
Email:	Phone:
Tax ID:	Email:

Invoice Number	Invoice Date	Due Date	Project or Job

Description	Quantity	Rate	Amount

Subtotal	
Tax	
Payments or deposits	
Balance due	

Payment method and terms:

Job Log and Lead Tracker

Record every inquiry, estimate, job and follow-up so the business can be managed from actual results.

Date	Lead / Customer	Source	Need / Job	Estimate	Status	Next Action

Period	Leads	Estimates Sent	Jobs Won	Revenue	Follow-ups Due

Compliance and Safety Page

Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.

Review	Requirement or Safety Point From the Core Guide
■	The moment you are cooking meals and serving them at somebody else's event, most states put you outside the cottage food exemption entirely. Health departments generally require food to be prepared in a licensed commercial kitchen.
■	Check licensing, zoning, and tax rules for your own city and state before starting.
■	Call the county health department, not the state, first. They inspect you and issue the permit, and they are the only reliable answer.
■	Confirm whether a written commissary agreement is required before your catering license will be approved.
■	Confirm whether you need a separate permit for each event or one annual license — some jurisdictions require a temporary event permit per event on top of your license.
■	Secure the commissary agreement before applying for your license. You usually cannot get licensed without it.
■	Expect an inspection of the commissary and a review of your food handling procedures. Timelines run three to six weeks in most places.
■	Filing fees run approximately \$35 to \$500 by state, about \$132 on average, plus annual fees from nothing to \$800.
■	Form the LLC. You are feeding people, and an LLC does not replace any permit — it is entirely separate — but the liability separation matters here more than in most trades.
■	Confirm general liability, product liability (foodborne illness), liquor liability if alcohol is served, and commercial auto coverage before your first event.

■	This guide is a starting framework, not legal, tax or financial advice. Food licensing, permit and tax requirements vary by state, county and city and change over time — verify every regulatory item with your local health department before you operate. Temperature figures reflect the FDA Food Code; some state and local codes differ, and your inspector enforces the local version.
■	Agency or authority contacted: _____
■	Written confirmation or permit saved at: _____
■	Review date: _____ Renewal or recheck date: _____

Launch Readiness

Catering Guide

PLAN	SET UP	PRICE	SELL	TRACK
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Use the worksheets in this guide to record your own numbers, decisions and results.

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