

CHICAGO PLANNER MAGAZINE

2025 Holiday Guide

10 Hottest New Restaurants & Venues in Chicago

Budget-Friendly Hotels

Tipping Etiquette

Balance fair versus excessive tipping
We share who should be getting what and how to
handle the changes in modern tipping culture

20 Catering Options for \$25 or Less

Minority-Owned Businesses You Can Support This Holiday Season

GIFT IDEAS

Creative, local options for holiday gifting

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Table of Contents

01	COVER
03	TABLE OF CONTENTS
04	LETTER FROM THE EDITOR
06	THANK YOU TO OUR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION PARTNERS
08	20 CATERING OPTIONS FOR \$25 OR LESS
11	HOLIDAY DECOR VENDORS
14	HOLIDAY PARTY CHECKLIST
16	HANDLE VENUE & VENDOR CONTRACTS LIKE A PRO
19	EVENT-FRIENDLY BREWERIES & DISTILLERIES
20	FUN EVENT SPOTS IN CHICAGO
22	GIFT IDEAS
24	HOW TO SELECT YOUR HOLIDAY MENU
26	HOW TO SELECT YOUR DRINK MENU
28	TIPPING ETIQUETTE
29	VEGAN & VEGETARIAN CATERING
32	MINORITY-OWNED BUSINESSES TO SUPPORT THIS HOLIDAY SEASONS
34	HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY BOOK A HOTEL ROOM BLOCK
35	BUDGET-FRIENDLY HOTELS
37	10 OF THE HOTTEST NEW RESTAURANTS & VENUES IN CHICAGO
38	TRANSPORTATION & VALET SERVICES
43	WHAT'S COMING UP NEXT



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

If you're reading this, I appreciate you.

Having a business isn't an easy feat, and deciding to relaunch Chicago Planner Magazine after the COVID pandemic means that this time, I knew in my heart there was one clear choice for the future: coming back bigger, better, and stronger than ever. But for all of the late nights and early mornings, none of it would mean anything if you didn't read it.

It is my hope that you continue to find useful resources and ideas through our research, collaborative work, and continued curiosity about the creative capacity of events.

I love this industry so much! Some of the best people in my life, I've found through this industry, including my husband! It is my greatest desire that you feel the passion we have for this industry through our content and features.

All of us here at Chicago Planner Magazine believe in building community, and we hope you will stay with us through this journey.

The goal of the Holiday Guide is to give you an easy-access pass to planning your holiday party, whether you are an experienced professional or a novice who was told, "Guess who is planning the holiday party this year - it's you, kid!"

This guide is a one-stop shop, comprised of a compilation of my 15 years of events and industry knowledge, along with resources and references about everything from what to know about contracting and negotiating with vendors, to the hottest new restaurants in the city. And this Guide is just a slice of what we are planning for 2026!

I owe a huge thank-you to my ever-growing team, and also to my family and friends who tolerate my business-related chatter ad nauseam. I'm beyond thankful to all of our Industry Association Partners, whose choice to work with us is an appreciated vote of confidence. I, of course, have to thank all of our advertisers, sponsors, and other supporters, without whom we really wouldn't be here.

To all of you, I thank you. You've not only made my dreams come true, but you are also helping us build a media outlet that showcases the often-unappreciated power of our industry to the entire world.

Wishing you a happy holiday season,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jessica Dalka". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "J" and "D".

Owner & Founder of Chicago Planner Magazine

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THANK YOU TO OUR INDUSTRY ASSOCIATION PARTNERS

At Chicago Planner Magazine, one of our cornerstone principles is building community and fostering meaningful connections across Chicago's vibrant hospitality, events, and business industries. The work we do, including producing our 2025 Holiday Guide, is greatly amplified by the incredible partners who share our passion for supporting the people, venues, and organizations that make this city extraordinary.

We are honored to collaborate with associations whose leadership and contributions extend far beyond their members, shaping the growth and success of Chicago's business and events community. This year, we are especially grateful to work alongside The Executives' Club of Chicago, ILEA Chicago Chapter, HSMIA Chicago Chapter, NACE Chicago Chapter, National Concierge Association, Chicago Chapter, and Next Gen Event Collective, Chicago Chapter.

These organizations are not only leaders in their respective industries but also advocates for progress, innovation, and connection. Their support of our 2025 Holiday Guide, and their willingness to share it with their audiences, expands our impact and allows us to bring planners, venues, and vendors together in more powerful ways.

We are deeply grateful to our partners for their trust and collaboration. Together, we are helping make Chicago one of the most dynamic destinations for hospitality and events in the world.



Executives' Club of Chicago



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*International Live Events Association,
Greater Chicago Chapter*



HSMIA Chicago
*Hospitality Sales & Marketing
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20 CATERING OPTIONS FOR \$25 OR LESS

Need some ideas for affordable holiday catering? Check out these twenty tasty options!

Alonti

Offering customizable buffets and boxed meals, Alonti's holiday menus feature entrées like Chicken Tequila Pasta and Vegetarian Enchiladas to stay comfortably within budget.

Big Star Tacos

Bring Big Star's festive taco bar to your gathering, complete with tortillas, fillings, toppings, and sides for a fun, casual holiday vibe.

Beyond Catering

Offering seasonal, creative menus, Beyond Catering delivers elevated holiday spreads designed with budget-friendly flexibility. (Women-owned)

Bombay Eats

Fresh Indian-inspired wraps and bowls with bold flavors, available individually or platter-style, with no minimum order required. (Minority-owned)

Brazilian Bowl Grill

Affordable Brazilian-inspired catering featuring flavorful rice bowls, roasted proteins, and fresh toppings—perfect for hearty holiday lunches. (Black-owned)

Café Trinidad

Caribbean-inspired bowls, salads, and entrées infused with bold island flavors, perfect for adding variety to holiday menus. (Black-owned)

Corner Bakery

Catering classics done right: sandwich trays, pasta platters, salads, and boxed meals priced perfectly for festive group dining.

Fatso Hard Kitchen

Southern-style comfort food catering with hearty salads, mains, and customizable trays ideal for festive gatherings. (Minority-owned)

The Fat Shallot

Elevated sandwich catering with inventive flavors like truffle BLTs, grilled cheese, and sesame fries—perfect for stylish holiday spreads. (Women-owned)

Goddess & the Baker/Grocer

Goddess & the Baker offers pastry platters, coffee boxes, and breakfast trays, or get delicious boxed lunches and catering from Goddess & Grocer. (Women-owned)



20 CATERING OPTIONS FOR \$25 OR LESS *Continued*

Hannah's Bretzel

Upscale sandwich catering featuring organic ingredients, European-inspired flavors, and signature pretzel breads.

Jimmy John's

Party platters and boxed sandwiches make Jimmy John's a simple, affordable choice for holiday lunches.

Kuma's Catering

Famous for burgers, Kuma's offers customizable slider trays with beef, chicken, veggie, and Impossible options.

Labriola Café & Bakery

Artisan catering featuring boxed sandwiches, pasta salads, breakfast platters, and pastries with an upscale touch.

Manny's Deli

Iconic Chicago deli offering customizable trays of sandwiches, meats, and sides to suit holiday gatherings

Nicole Jordan Catering

Restaurant-quality meals designed for both intimate and large events, Nicole Jordan delivers flavorful holiday catering tailored to budget needs. (Black-owned, Women-owned)

Portillo's

A Chicago classic serving Italian beef, pastas, chopped salads, and sandwiches—ideal for large, festive group dining.

Potbelly's

Known for hearty sandwich trays, fresh salads, and boxed meals that stay within budget.

Saigon Sisters

Vietnamese-inspired boxed lunches and trays with fresh, bold flavors for unique and festive holiday menus. (Women-owned)

Sweet Baby Ray's Catering

Award-winning BBQ catering featuring ribs, pulled pork, and Southern-inspired sides that are perfect for holiday parties.

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Holiday Decor Vendors

Don't wait until the last minute! Make sure you are planning for holiday decor at your event. We've categorized some great decor options in Chicago to simplify your search!

Furniture, Linen & Lounge Rentals

1440 Event Design – Westmont, IL

Full-service event environments, scenic fabrication, and custom furniture builds.

AFR Event Rentals – Elk Grove Village, IL

Modern lounge furniture, bars, tables, and curated event furnishings.

Anew Vintage Rentals – Berwyn, IL

Vintage and boho-inspired furniture, décor, and props.

Arcana Vintage Rentals – Chicago, IL

Vintage furniture, tabletops, and accessories for events.

BBJ La Tavola – Chicago, IL

Luxury linens, runners, chargers, and accessories.

CORT Events – Chicago, IL

Chic furniture, branded décor, and staging for corporate and social events.

Dish & Décor Vintage Rental – Chicago, IL

Vintage tabletop, glassware, and barware rentals.

Dreamful Event Rentals – Northbrook, IL

Faux floral centerpieces, shimmer walls, and décor rentals.

Elegant Presentations (EP Rentals) – St. Charles, IL

Linens, dance floors, tabletops, and décor accessories.

The Festive Frog – Chicago, IL

Vintage and contemporary tabletop and lounge rentals.

Hall's Rental Service – Niles, IL

Party rentals including draping, tabletops, and furnishings.

House of Rental – Skokie, IL

Pipe & drape systems, shimmer walls, and event staging.

Quest Events – Chicago, IL

Soft goods, scenic elements, and specialty drapery rentals.

Tablescapes Event Rentals – Chicago, IL

Premium tabletop, linen, and furniture rentals.

Ultimate Rental Services – Romeoville, IL

Pipe and drape, linens, backdrops, and event décor items.



Floral Design

A Stem Above – Chicago, IL

Elegant floral design integrated with fabrics and lighting.

Ashland Addison Events – Chicago, IL

Event florals paired with stylish décor.

Botanicals Design Studio – Chicago, IL

Contemporary event florals and installations with creative décor styling.

Cornelia McNamara Flowers – Chicago, IL

Luxury, seasonal floral designs and event installations.

Fleur, Inc. – Chicago, IL

Bespoke florals and immersive floral environments.

Life In Bloom – Chicago, IL

Boutique floral artistry for luxury events.

Phillip's Flowers & Events – Multiple Chicagoland Locations

Full-service florals for galas, and special events.

Pistil & Vine – Chicago, IL

Sculptural, art-driven floral designs and décor accents.

Pollen Floral Design – Chicago, IL

Eco-conscious, seasonal floral installations and event styling.

Stems Chicago – Chicago, IL

Custom floral artistry for modern weddings and events.

Virginia Wolff, Inc. – Chicago, IL

Unique and stunning floral designs, and linen rentals.

Design Production

Alpha-Lit Chicago – Chicago, IL

Giant marquee letters, numbers, and illuminated signage.

A Perfect Event – Chicago, IL

Event styling with floral and décor expertise.

Awesome Balloon Creations – Chicago, IL

Custom balloon arches, garlands, and interactive installations.

Chicago Flower Wall – Chicago, IL

Silk flower walls, LED backdrops, and photo-ready installations.

Chicago Sweet Carts Rentals – Chicago, IL

Shimmer walls, sequin backdrops, and custom display carts.

Expressive Structures – Chicago, IL

Custom backdrops and displays

HMR Designs – Chicago, IL

Full-service design, scenic fabrication, floral artistry, and lighting.

Kehoe Designs – Chicago, IL

Luxury design house offering custom fabrication, floral, and production.

Kesh Events – Chicago, IL

Luxury floral design, and event styling.

LED Marquee Chicago – Chicago, IL

LED and neon marquee letters for modern event styling.

Yanni Design Studio (YDS) – Wheeling, IL

High-end floral, décor, and full-scale event production.



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HOLIDAY PARTY CHECKLIST

The holiday season is one of the busiest times of the year for corporate events and social celebrations alike. Whether you're planning your first holiday party or you've done this for years, the key is clarity and preparation. Start with the experience you want to create. Is it an intimate dinner for your team, a polished cocktail reception for clients, or a lively celebration for partners? Defining your vision early helps every decision, from venue to entertainment, stay focused and cohesive.

Budget with Intention

Once you have a vision, set a realistic budget to bring it to life. Decide where you want to invest. Maybe it's an elevated menu, memorable entertainment, or standout décor, and then determine where to simplify. Break the budget into categories like venue, catering, entertainment, décor, staffing, and A/V. Track estimated versus actual costs to stay on target and avoid surprises. A clear plan helps you prioritize what matters most.

Choose the Best Venue

Your venue sets the tone and shapes the guest experience. During site visits, look beyond appearance and ask:

- Is there convenient parking or valet service?
- Are entrances and restrooms fully accessible?
- What technical capabilities exist for music, lighting, and presentations?
- Are there restrictions on décor, outside catering, or alcohol?

Take photos and videos during walkthroughs to visualize layouts and finalize design details later.

Partner with the Right Vendors

The right partners make planning smoother, and bring your event to life. When vetting vendors, ask about their experience with holiday events, review portfolios or references, and confirm what's included in their pricing. Establishing expectations early ensures fewer surprises later.

Design an Exceptional Guest Experience

A great holiday party is one where guests feel considered from the moment they arrive. Ensure that check-in is seamless, provide clear signage, and create comfortable spaces for mingling. Gather dietary preferences in advance, and add experiences like photo stations, interactive activations, or customized gifts to make your event memorable.

Managing Technology and A/V Needs

Don't just assume your venue has a microphone readily available for you to use. Confirm what A/V equipment is accessible to you, if there is a fee, and know what you might need to bring in through an additional vendor. Test sound systems, microphones, Wi-Fi, and lighting ahead of time. If your event involves presentations or live entertainment, plan to have a technician on-site.

Day of Planning

Share a detailed run-of-show with vendors and your team, including arrival times, setup schedules, and program flow. If possible, do a site tour with vendors ahead of time, and confirm layouts, décor, tech and arrival times.

Post-Event Tasks

After your event, thank your vendors, partners, and guests. Reconcile invoices and paperwork promptly, gather guest feedback, and save all of your planning details to make sure next year's planning is easier and more efficient.

HOLIDAY PARTY CHECKLIST

PRE-PLANNING

- ☐ Define event goals and purpose
- ☐ Set total budget and allocate to key areas
- ☐ Choose a date and time
- ☐ Create a guest list

VENUE

- ☐ Research and shortlist venues
- ☐ Schedule site visits
- ☐ Confirm guest capacity
- ☐ Ask about parking and accessibility
- ☐ Review A/V and tech capabilities
- ☐ Understand food, beverage, and décor policies
- ☐ Sign contract and secure insurance if needed

VENDORS

- ☐ Select catering or F&B provider
- ☐ Book entertainment (DJ, band, photo booth)
- ☐ Hire photographer and/or videographer
- ☐ Arrange décor and floral design
- ☐ Secure transportation/valet if needed
- ☐ Ask each vendor about pricing, experience, communication, and contingency plans

VENDORS

- ☐ Create a detailed planning timeline
- ☐ Design and send invitations
- ☐ Track RSVPs
- ☐ Note dietary preferences or accessibility requests

NOTES

DÉCOR

- ☐ Choose an event theme or style
- ☐ Finalize linens, centerpieces, and lighting
- ☐ Incorporate brand elements subtly
- ☐ Set up photo backdrops or interactive décor

GUEST EXPERIENCE

- ☐ Arrange coat check and registration table
- ☐ Set up signage and directional guides
- ☐ Plan activities or entertainment touches
- ☐ Prepare thank-you gifts or branded swag

TECHNICAL SETUP

- ☐ Confirm required A/V equipment
- ☐ Assign on-site tech support
- ☐ Test Wi-Fi, sound, and lighting
- ☐ Prepare backup equipment

EVENT-DAY CHECKLIST

- ☐ Final walkthrough with vendors and venue staff
- ☐ Distribute run-of-show document to your team
- ☐ Confirm deliveries, signage, and guest seating
- ☐ Set up check-in and guest flow areas
- ☐ Do a last-minute visual sweep before doors open

POST-EVENT

- ☐ Send thank-you emails to guests and vendors
- ☐ Collect feedback from attendees
- ☐ Reconcile budget and finalize payments
- ☐ Save notes, contacts, and timelines for future events

Handle Venue & Vendor Contracts Like a Pro

Behind every successful event are agreements that shape budgets, timelines, and expectations. The décor, menus, and experiences may dazzle guests, but contracts quietly define how much you spend, what is included, and where flexibility exists. Planners who thrive know two things: how to read the fine print and how to work collaboratively with venues and vendors to secure the best outcomes. Understanding these terms is not just about avoiding surprises, it is about building stronger relationships, protecting client budgets, and delivering seamless events.

Key Venue & Vendor Terms to Know

Contracts vary, but certain terms appear almost everywhere. Knowing what they mean, and where you have leverage, gives you confidence and control.

Food and Beverage Minimums

Venues often require a minimum spend on food and drinks, regardless of guest attendance. Taxes, gratuities, and service fees usually do not count toward this minimum. Always confirm what is included and ask for an all-in total upfront to avoid surprises.

Guaranteed Guest Counts

Most venues and caterers require a final headcount days or weeks before your event, and you will pay for that number whether everyone attends or not. If you are uncertain, provide a slightly lower guarantee. It is easier to add meals later than absorb the cost of no-shows.

Attrition and Cancellation

Hotel room blocks and larger venues often include attrition clauses, which require you to pay for a percentage of unused rooms or space if your numbers fall short. Negotiate these percentages early, as reducing a 90% obligation to 70% can significantly lower risk. Cancellation policies work the same way, so note deadlines, ask about partial refunds, and set reminders as soon as you sign.

Cutoff Dates and Deposit Schedules

Deadlines control nearly every detail, including catering confirmations, hotel blocks, A/V setups, and guest lists. Missing a cutoff can lead to higher rates, limited options, or lost perks. Review deposit schedules closely and align payment dates with your client's timelines to avoid funding gaps.

Service Fees, Gratuities, and Taxes

Quotes often look appealing until extra costs surface later. Service charges, commonly 20% or more, are not the same as gratuities, and taxes are usually excluded as well. Request a detailed, all-inclusive estimate upfront so your budget reflects the true total.

Liability and Insurance

Liability clauses define who is responsible when something goes wrong, from property damage to accidents involving guests or vendors. Confirm what the venue's policy covers and collect insurance certificates from every vendor to ensure everyone is protected.



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Handle Venue & Vendor Contracts Like a Pro Continued

Negotiate with Confidence

Approaching negotiations with a collaborative mindset helps build more positive, lasting relationships. The following strategies will help you keep your conversations results-focused and productive.

Clarify Your Priorities

Before negotiations begin, decide what matters most: reduced costs, added perks, relaxed deadlines, or flexibility with vendors. Knowing your priorities allows you to focus on the areas that make the greatest impact.

Leverage Market Knowledge

Understanding competitor pricing and seasonal demand strengthens your position. When you know what similar venues or vendors are offering, you can negotiate from an informed perspective and identify areas where flexibility exists.

Seek Added Value

Negotiation is not just about lowering costs. Ask about upgrades or extras that enhance the event without increasing the budget, such as upgraded linens, complimentary décor elements, waived setup fees, or extended rental hours. These concessions often cost vendors little but make a big difference for your client.

Bundle Services Strategically

If a venue or vendor provides multiple services, explore package deals. Bundling catering, A/V, and décor under one provider can streamline logistics and create savings while strengthening your partnership.

Address Attrition and Cancellation Early

These terms can significantly impact your bottom line, so negotiate them before signing. Vendors are typically more flexible upfront than once commitments are finalized.

Always Get It in Writing

Whatever you agree upon, document it. Updated contracts or email confirmations prevent misunderstandings and protect everyone involved.



Quick Reference Checklist

Use this checklist to review every venue or vendor agreement.

Before You Sign

- ☐ Confirm minimums and what is included
- ☐ Review attrition and negotiate where possible
- ☐ Understand cancellation terms and deadlines
- ☐ Verify cutoff dates for guest counts, catering, and services

Budget and Payments

- ☐ Request an all-in price with taxes, fees, and tips included
- ☐ Align deposit schedules with client payments
- ☐ Confirm service fees vs. gratuities, as they are often separate

Vendors and Services

- ☐ Ask about exclusive vendor requirements
- ☐ Get approval in writing for outside vendors
- ☐ Review any preferred vendor lists for hidden perks

Liability and Insurance

- ☐ Request vendor insurance certificates
- ☐ Verify who is responsible for damages or accidents

Final Double-Check

- ☐ Set reminders for every cutoff date
- ☐ Keep a master contract folder
- ☐ Confirm all negotiated perks are in writing



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EVENT-FRIENDLY BREWERIES & DISTILLERIES

Begyle Brewing

Community-favorite taproom with a neighborhood vibe and rotating beers. Casual, friendly, and easy for group hangouts. Private events: Large group reservations up to 50. Shared room only, not a private event venue.

CH Distillery

Home of Malört and CH spirits, offering craft cocktails and customizable menus via on-site Jōtō Sushi. Private events: Typically 10–100 guests; options include partial buyout 45–75, dining room 20, and full buyout up to 225 standing. Tours and tastings available.

Crushed by Giants

Downtown brewpub with house beers, burgers, and pizzas—steps from Michigan Ave. Private events: Full buyout listed at 117 seated; contact for standing capacities and configurations.

ERIS Brewery & Cider House

Inspired by the Greek goddess of Chaos, ERIS offers unconventional, and unique beers and ciders. Private events: spaces for 20 to 250 people.

Forbidden Root

Chicago's first botanic brewery. Elevated brewpub fare with creative, nature-inspired beers. Private events: Semi-private and private options; up to 175 standing.

Industry Ales

Chef-driven brewpub with multiple levels, modern A/V, and a speakeasy-style lounge. Private events: 15–250 guests overall. Each level supports up to 125 seated / 250 reception; Mill Room speakeasy up to 60.

Journeyman Distillery

Valparaiso, IN (The American Factory)
Massive historic complex with distillery, brewery, restaurant, and multiple event halls.
Private events: Facility accommodates 25–1,200.

Three Oaks, MI (The Featherbone Factory)
Location: Three Oaks, Michigan
Rustic-industrial destination with dramatic halls and handcrafted details.
Private events: Warren Hall up to 550 for a cocktail reception or 300 seated.

KOVAL Distillery

Pioneering craft distillery with a modern tasting room and seasonal patio.
Private events: Tasting Room 91 indoor, up to 241 including patio. Suitable for rentals, classes, and tastings.

North Shore Distillery

Description: Chic suburban distillery with a cocktail bar and flexible event setup.
Private events: Meeting/event max around 120; intimate tastings to larger celebrations available.

Revolution Brewing

Chicago's largest independent brewery with a barrel-lined taproom. BYO food allowed; group reservations and private tours available.
Private events: Taproom up to 250 for a cocktail reception.

Wolf Point Distilling

Craft distillery with a cozy tasting room and cocktail program; private event inquiries welcomed.

FUN EVENT SPOTS IN CHICAGO

Exciting, indoor fun for a memorable holiday party, these options highlight some of Chicago's most entertaining event spots.

AceBounce

A ping-pong-centric bar in River North, AceBounce combines table tennis, beer pong, and shuffleboard with elevated bar food.

Bad Axe Throwing

Located in Chicago's West Loop, Bad Axe brings an edgy twist to group events with its warehouse-style venue and expert-guided axe throwing experiences.

Electric Shuffle

Located in River North, Electric Shuffle is a 7,000-sq-ft shuffleboard venue blending retro vibes with next-level tech.

Five Iron Golf

Located in Lincoln Park, The Loop and River North, Five Iron offers high-tech golf simulators, a full-service bar, chef-inspired fare, and curated music in a lively, modern space.

Headquarters Beercade

Treat your guests to vintage arcade and pinball games set to free play, a craft beer and cocktail menu, and eye-catching design. It's a great choice for a high-impact, low-stakes get together in River North.

iFly

iFLY Indoor Skydiving offers an unforgettable, adrenaline-pumping experience that takes team building and group events to new heights — literally! With locations in Chicago, Rosemont and Naperville, iFLY gives guests the thrill of skydiving in a safe, state-of-the-art indoor wind tunnel.



Lucky Strike

High-energy entertainment, upscale bowling, and vibrant nightlife together in one dynamic venue. Locations in Streeterville, Wrigleyville, and Chicago Suburbs.

Punchbowl Social

Guests can enjoy bowling, arcade games, karaoke, ping pong, and more—making it easy to blend business with fun. Located in the heart of the West Loop, this 30,000-square-foot venue offers a vibrant setting for corporate events, social gatherings, and private parties.

Puttery

Located in West Loop, Puttery turns minigolf into an immersive event. Featuring two courses with tablet scoring and four cocktail bars, the venue offers an elevated menu and lively music.

Puttshack

Puttshack offers upscale 9-hole, interactive mini golf with digital scoring, themed drinks, and a classy menu.

Seven Ten Social

Located in Hyde Park, experience vintage charm with modern flair, making it a standout venue for casual group outings.

Spin

A ping-pong bar concept with communal tables, casual vibes, and a solid drinks/food menu.

WhirlyBall

Whirlyball combines bumper cars, lacrosse paddles, and basketball hoops into an unforgettable team sport experience.

Meet ILEA.

We are the planners and the producers. The caterers. The decorators.
The venues. The entertainers. The florists. The lighting designers.
The marketers. The photographers.
The connectors. The imaginers. The creators.
The magicians. The moment makers.

#WeAreILEA

What to Expect:



Tips & Tricks: Discover the best practices for networking in the event industry.



Meet the Experts: Get valuable insights from event industry veterans.



Networking Opportunities: Connect with professionals who share your passion.

We are THE Global
Community for
Creative Event
Profesionals.

Attend one of our events and discover what being an ILEA member can do for you.

GIFT IDEAS

Offer thoughtful, locally-curated gifts this year. From eco-friendly and sustainable options to luxury items, these places will allow you to create holiday gifts that will delight all of your guests.



Boutique Boxes & Personalized Keepsakes

Foursided Card + Gift

Quirky cards, Chicago-centric art, and unique finds to add local personality to your baskets.

Komoda

A chic River West boutique offering candles, stationery, and self-care products, perfect for curated gift sets.

Smitten Boutique

Luxury stationery, premium packaging, and elevated corporate gifting services that make an impression.

Stellar Story

Curate a gift box with unique and luxurious items from around the world, from this women-owned business. CPM Recommended

Fun, Quirky, and Chicago-Centric Gifts

Hey, I Thought of You

This women-owned establishment is whimsical with memorable, boutique-style gifts and home goods.

Paper & Pencil

Chic, colorful office supplies and accessories that make practical gifting stylish.

Transit Tees

Chicago-inspired apparel, prints, and playful designs that celebrate the city's culture.

An Urban General Store

Eclectic and unexpected treasures perfect for assembling personality-packed baskets.

Handcrafted & Personalized

Baobei

Personalized, handcrafted beaded bracelets ideal for team recognition or client appreciation.

Dear Thistle

Unique resin jewelry, trays, and décor pieces that feel thoughtful.

Emaloe's Thingys

Playful, handmade clay jewelry perfect for adding creative flair.

Sequins & Lace Design

Handmade greeting cards, stickers, and stationery that add heartfelt finishing touches to your gifts.

Luxury Lifestyle Gifts

Alice & Wonder

Chicago-branded apparel and accessories perfect for stylish, city-loving clients from a women-owned business.

FELT

A Logan Square boutique featuring luxe women's fashion and accessories for high-end, personalized gifting.

Milk Handmade

Thoughtful, sustainably-sourced, artisan pieces and handmade candles ideal for eco-conscious executives.

Steel Petal Press

Witty stationery, journals, and self-care kits balance fun with function from this women-owned spot.

Winifred Grace

Elegant jewelry and home décor designed for timeless, sophisticated gifts.

Meaningful & Diverse Local Finds

B Collective

This Latina-owned boutique features curated greenery, home goods, and small-batch accessories.

Candle Castle & Co

Luxe, small-batch candles with elegant packaging add sophistication to any holiday gift. (Women-Owned)

Espacio 3628

Features handcrafted art, jewelry, and textiles from immigrant artisans, Latin-owned.

Woman Made Gallery

Contemporary, feminist-inspired artwork and artisan goods for creative-minded clients. (Women-Owned)

Sustainable Gifting

Audrey Marcella Design

Eco-friendly organic cotton totes and makeup bags that elevate branded corporate bundles.

Neighborly

Locally made, sustainably sourced products celebrating Chicago craftsmanship.

Packed With Purpose

Eco-conscious, purpose-driven bundles designed to make an impact. CPM Recommended

Sweet & Savory Treats

Garrett's Popcorn

A Chicago classic that everyone loves!

Rugby Champagne

Celebrate success with festive, small-batch champagne sourced from women-led vintners. (Black women owned)

Vinoteca Wine Sets

Hand-selected wines from Latino vineyards make for elevated, memorable gifting. (Latina owned)

Vosges Haut-Chocolat

Indulgent truffles and exotic flavors, beautifully packaged and ethically sourced. (Women owned) A CPM Favorite!



How to Select Your Holiday Menu

You don't need to be a foodie to pick out this year's holiday meal. From budgeting to dietary needs, this guide will help you every step of the way, so everyone knows you're a pro!

Budgeting

The easiest way to understand what you can select from is to figure out your per person budget. Take your total budget and subtract roughly 35% to account for taxes, fees and extras. In Chicago, taxes and fees can range from 20-35%, but it's a good idea to plan for a smaller per person budget – you can usually make upgrades later. After you've determined how much you have after taxes and fees, divide your remaining amount by your anticipated guest count. To stay within budget, estimate the higher end of your guest count (so if you're thinking 75-100 people, base your budget on 100 people). Divide your remaining budget after taxes and fees by your guest count to get your per person price. If you know you are dealing with a more strict budget, it's better to account for the highest taxes and largest guest count to ensure you don't go over. If you end up with extra, you can always reallocate it.

Figure Out Your Per Person Food Budget

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Total Budget		Total Budget x Taxes & Fee Percentage: btwn .20 to .35		Remaining Budget
<input type="text"/>	÷	<input type="text"/>	=	<input type="text"/>
Remaining Budget		Total Guest Count		Per Person Budget

Guaranteed Guest Count

Be aware that restaurants, venues and caterers require a guarantee guest count, which is the number of people you are obligated to pay for, regardless of who shows. While you want to account for your full group budget-wise, do your best to provide as accurate of a number as you can to avoid paying for people who are not in attendance.

Menu Styles

The first place to start is by determining what food layout is appropriate for your event. It's good to have a variety of options, but to decide how you do that, you have to determine how the food will be served. Is this a brunch, lunch, cocktail event or dinner? Be aware that the time of your event will strongly impact people's expectations and if your budget can not support the appropriate event, change it. People will be upset if they plan to come to dinner and end up with just a few hors d'oeuvres and a glass of wine.

Brunch & Lunch

Brunch and lunch parties are a great option for the more budget-friendly planner. Buffet or plated meals are appropriate, and this is a great opportunity to incorporate a fun juice bar or an upscale coffee and tea station. Many places opt for a nice lunch, and then let employees enjoy the rest of the day off.

If you are providing alcohol of any kind during the day, do not require employees to return to work.

Cocktail Reception

A cocktail event is expected to have less food and plenty of drinks. Offering beer and wine only is appropriate if you do not wish to include liquor (either for budget reasons or company policy). Hors d'oeuvres or appetizers are expected. You can do a mix of passed apps or a station. Depending on how long the event is, a mix is nice such as a cheese, meat and vegetable platters set out with hot appetizers being passed. You can also do a nice chip and

How to Select Your Holiday Menu Continued

You don't need to be a foodie to pick out this year's holiday meal. From budgeting to dietary needs, this guide will help you every step of the way, so everyone knows you're a pro!

Menu Styles Continued

dip station – get creative!

You want to avoid having a cocktail party overlap too heavily with dinner hour. A cocktail reception should be 2-3 hours between 3pm-7pm. If this event is expected to precede dinner, a 6 or 6:30pm end time is recommended since 6-9pm in the U.S. are considered standard dinner hours. If you anticipate guests will be hungry upon arrival, go heavier on appetizers to keep people satiated, and to ensure that people have enough to eat, especially when alcohol is being served.

Dinner

Dinner holiday parties are often the most elaborate that include entertainment, and decor. Dinners usually require a larger budget, and can be anywhere from 3-6 hours, depending on the activities, such as an initial cocktail hour, staff awards or presentations, end-of-the-night dancing.

Dietary Needs

If possible, ask your attendees about dietary restrictions ahead of time. Ideally when selecting your menu, you want to automatically include a variety of options that cover some of the more common dietary restrictions such as vegetarian, dairy-free, nut-free, and gluten-free foods. If you really want to be prepared, include vegan options, and pre-order a few entrees since vegan meals often cover a lot of allergy restrictions. Most places need a few days notice or more to provide vegan and specialty options. If you order it ahead of time, you will be ready for any guests who may not have informed you of their needs. It's a good idea to shoot for no less than 1 vegan meal per 50 guests. If you know you have a more health conscious or vegetarian crowd, up that number to as much as 1 per 25 guests.

If a dietary request is religious-based, your venue or restaurant must allow an outside vendor to provide this meal, if the establishment themselves is not able to adhere to the requirements needed to accurately prepare it.

Dietary requests that are religious-based such as Halal and Kosher meals, will most likely require an outside vendor to provide them. These diets are specific, and the restaurant,

and caterers know this. Depending on the location they may charge you a "plating" fee, but all venues and vendors who can not provide religious meals must allow you to bring outside food to accommodate your guest(s). Many places already have contacts in line for these types of requests and can organize this for you, or will work with you on coordinating a delivery, but you must be prepared to give several days, up to a few weeks notice to allow both the place where you are hosting your event, and the company providing the meal enough time to prepare your specialty meal, especially around holiday season when everyone is busy.

How to order and provide variety

Appetizers & Hors d'Oeuvres

It's important not to have too repetitive of a menu. If you're having a steak dinner, steak bites and steak tartare is excessive to have for the appetizers. Instead do a nice mix of vegetarian, fish and meats, if possible. Consider cheese, fruit and meat displays, or even chips and dip.

First Course

A vegetarian first course not only keeps things lighter and simpler, but it also ensures you aren't leaving out any guests. If guests may select on-site, then of course mix it up. For items like soups, you should always check whether the broth is vegetable-based before assuming it is vegan or vegetarian – many vegetable soups include chicken stock, and not all vegetarian items are vegan – keep an eye out for milk and cheese. For salads, it's good to have dressing, cheese, nuts or meat items on the side.

Entrée

For most places where you are selected a limited menu that your guests will then get to choose from on-site, standard options are between chicken (poultry), fish (seafood), pork (white meat), and steak or lamb (red meat). In general, men tend to eat more red meat than women, however there are more religious/dietary restrictions with steak and pork. If you have limited options, we recommend selecting chicken, fish and steak entrées. If possible, include a vegetarian option on the main course. For buffets, the same variety is encouraged.

Dessert

Decide from the heart! But a mix of chocolate, pastry and fruit-based options are usually a good idea.

HOW TO SELECT YOUR DRINK MENU

How do you pick the right drinks for your Holiday Party? There can be so many different options, and it may be hard to decide what makes the most sense for your budget. In this article we explore different options for various types of events, to help you make the best selections for your group.

Start with Your Budget

Before starting on any of the fun stuff, you have to know how much you have to spend on the bar. Tax, gratuity and other potential fees will be added to the tab, so in Chicago, estimate that amount up to 30% – even go as high as 35% to account for potential extras, which could include specialty orders on-site, or additional guests.

Divide the remaining budget by your guest count. For example, if you have \$3000 total as your total bar tab, for a group of 50 people, after assuming 35% for fees, you would have \$1950 for the bar. Divided by 50 guests that gives you a total of \$39 per person for your event. From there you can pick beverages within your budget.

Drink Packages vs. On Consumption

Both drink packages and on consumption bars (also known as open bars) have their pros and cons. Drink packages are great because they bundle drink options for a set price over a certain period of time and therefore are great for managing your budget. Drink packages ensure you do not go over a certain amount per person, however if people don't end up drinking as much as you expect, you could really overspend. For example, if you were anticipating that everyone would have 3–5 drinks, but in reality most had 1 or 2, you would have saved money with an open bar. On the other hand, on consumption means that you are charged individually for each drink, which can lead to the opposite problem, and cause you to end up over budget. So how do you decide? Look at the price per drink, and compare it to your average per person spend (based on the budget system above). Then ask yourself if you have a more conservative crowd, or more of a party crowd. From there, determine what wiggle room you may have, and make the most sensible decision. Keep in mind that if you do decide to go on consumption, you can let the restaurant know if you have a total bar tab limit, or ask for certain items to be restricted (aka, only drinks under \$15, etc.) to help control the total amount spent.

Selecting Wine

It's perfectly fine to select one red and one white for the evening, and it's usually good not to offer more than 2 red and 2 white if you don't want people to order directly off of the menu. Two tends to be the sweet spot, particularly if you offer one for cocktail hour, but then provide a second wine with dinner that may pair better with the meal. Lighter wines are recommended for cocktails, and fuller-bodied wines should accompany the meal. For reds, Pinot Noir is great for cocktail hour followed by Cabernet for dinner. Meanwhile a Sauvignon Blanc is a great white wine option for cocktails and is commonly followed by Chardonnay with dinner. Rosés are also great to add to the mix, and are appropriate for both the main meal and cocktail hour.

Selecting Beer

There are so many beers and craft breweries in Chicago and the Midwest, so if you're looking for a great selection of beers, here are some tips for making your selections:

Lager, Hops/IPA + Something Else

Light beers and hoppy beers tend to be the most popular. Something light like Stella or Goose Island's 312 Wheat beer are classics that most people enjoy. Then go for something with hops like an IPA (India Pale Ale). From there you can be a little more creative, and play to the crowd. Ciders are nice to add for those who may not beer or wine, or you could go with a malt-style beer or a stout if you have crowd who likes heavier beers. Depending on the number of options you have you can work with the restaurant or caterer on what they find are the most popular beers and provide both light, dark and seasonal options.





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Tipping Etiquette

Tipping fatigue is real. Many Americans feel overwhelmed by the post-pandemic, expanded tipping expectations, however people still want to tip the correct people fairly. At events, avoid putting guests on the spot by working with vendors in advance, and communicate whether tip jars or other requests for gratuities by staff are acceptable. Ensure gratuity is accounted for in your budget, and confirm exactly what your contracts cover. By setting clear expectations, you'll skip the guilt, stay within budget, and have a smooth guest experience.

Return to tradition, then apply it to events

Traditional etiquette centers tipping on personal service. At sit-down dining, 15 to 20 percent is customary for servers, bartenders typically receive one to two dollars per drink or 15 to 20 percent of the tab, valet is a few dollars per car, and restroom attendants receive a small cash tip. For counter service, tipping is discretionary.

Understand Service Charges vs Tips

Many event contracts include a service charge. A service charge is not the same as a tip, it is a mandatory fee that belongs to the business. Ask where it goes, and whether staff receive separate gratuities, then decide if you want to add a true tip for service.

Caterer and banquet team

Check your contract first. If gratuity is not already included, a host tip of 15 to 20 percent of food and beverage, distributed to the service team, is standard. If a percentage fee is listed as a service charge, clarify whether any of it reaches staff before adding more.

Bartenders

If the caterer's or venue's fee already covers them, you can close the jar and consider the team covered. If not, plan a pooled gratuity of 15 to 20 percent of the bar bill or one to two dollars per drink equivalent. Many hosts prefer to tip the team directly so guests are not asked at the bar.

Valet and coat check

Hosts often cover these so guests never need cash. Budget about two to five dollars per car for valet, and one to five dollars per item for coat check, provided to the team lead to distribute.

Restroom attendants

If present, provide small bills for the team, roughly one to three dollars per guest interaction or an agreed lump sum at the end of the night.

Transportation

For limousines and private cars, 15 to 20 percent is customary unless already included. Rideshare drivers are typically tipped 10 to 20 percent. For charter or shuttle buses, tip when the driver assists with luggage or provides extra service, otherwise follow your contract.

Delivery and setup crews

For heavy, time-consuming drop-offs, such as rentals or décor installs, a discretionary tip for the crew, often ten to fifty dollars per person, is common in wedding and event practice. Confirm headcount with your venue or planner and prepare labeled envelopes.

Creative vendors and owners

Photographers, DJs, planners, florists, and company owners are not automatically tipped in corporate or holiday settings. Tips remain optional and are best reserved for exceptional service, since many of these professionals set their own rates. If you do tip, use a modest flat amount or a small percentage, and avoid duplicating any contractual fees.



VEGAN & VEGETARIAN CATERING

Annapurna Simply Vegetarian

Chicago's longest-standing vegetarian restaurant and caterer (since 1982), specializing in Indian vegetarian fare such as thali specials, live panipuri, and chole bhature—perfect for weddings, corporate events, and social celebrations.

Big Delicious Planet

Renowned for being named the “Greenest Caterer in America,” this woman-owned, LGBTQIA+-affirming caterer combines luxury, sustainable, farm-to-table cuisine with events set in an urban farm or chic industrial space in West Town. Creative seasonal menus leverage produce from their own urban farm.

Bloom Plant Based Kitchen

An upscale Wicker Park restaurant offering globally inspired plant-based dishes using seasonal ingredients. Known for elegant, creative catering ideal for intimate dinners, celebrations, and corporate events

Fancy Plants Catering

Chef-driven upscale plant-based catering with inventive dishes such as vegan sushi and “sesame snow.” Ideal for events seeking elegant plant-based fare.

Kale My Name

Award-winning vegan spot known for comforting plant-based brunch dishes. Offers modern, hearty fare for casual events like holiday parties or brunch receptions.

Kitchen 17

A Lakeview staple offering 100% vegan comfort food including deep-dish pizza, noodle dishes, cauliflower wings, and gluten-free options. Excellent for buffet-style events or pizza parties.

Libby's Catering

Offers vegetarian-friendly comfort cuisine such as mac & cheese, greens, and biscuits. Popular for holidays, family gatherings, and community events.

Native Foods Café

A well-known vegan fast-casual chain, originating in Chicago. Recognized for approachable, crowd-pleasing plant-based classics.

SmackDab

A Rogers Park brunch favorite offering bold, vegetarian-forward catering for meetings, retreats, team lunches, and events. Menu includes breakfast sandwiches, wraps, salads, and gluten-free/vegan options.

Soul Vegan Catering / Soul Veg City

Chicago's go-to for plant-based soul food offering hearty favorites like mac & cheese, BBQ seitan, and collard greens. Ideal for large soulful celebrations.

SteMartaen Vegan Catering

A vegetarian-friendly mobile food truck and caterer, celebrated for dairy-, soy-, and gluten-free vegan cheeses, mac & cheese, and creative comfort-food items.

Vegan Plate Chicago

Local vegan catering service based in Lincoln Park offering a wide range of plant-based entrées and appetizers that are perfect for your next gathering.

Veggie House

Affordable vegetarian-friendly catering specializing in Chinese and Asian-inspired menus. Ideal for budget-conscious events.



Live Your Healthiest Life

What is SolFlo Life?

At 42, founder Tami Herbst was diagnosed with cancer. Choosing to heal naturally — after witnessing a succession of illnesses in her family — she turned her journey into a path of deep transformation. Through travel, time in nature, and learning to become her own advocate, she discovered the power of holistic healing and self-connection. From this journey, SolFlo Life was born: an urban sanctuary in Wicker Park where guests can pause, recalibrate, and reconnect with their body and soul. Every gathering is more than an event — it's a meaningful experience of nourishment, alignment, and elevated connection.

The Ideal Holiday Experience

Rentals & Retreats

Host your next gathering in a space that radiates calm and connection. With lush, nature-inspired design and a turnkey setup, SolFlo Life offers a luxurious yet intimate atmosphere for celebrations, team retreats, and wellness-focused events. Every detail is curated to create memorable, high-vibe experiences for your guests.

What SolFlo Life Offers

The Energy Room

Daily frequency-based healing sessions featuring the EE System and vibro-acoustic sound lounge in a soothing sensory environment.

Sound & Guided Journeys

Immersive solo and group retreats designed for release, realignment, and rejuvenation of mind, body, and spirit.

Nature-Based Products

Plant-based culinary offerings, Living Libations personal care, herbal elixirs, essential oils, and curated ritual toolkits to support wellbeing.



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HSMAI Chicago **Events** unite hospitality professionals through networking meetings, seminars, and panel discussions. Become a **Sponsor** and boost your brand's visibility, gain public recognition, and build valuable connections with our flexible options that help you fit your business goals.



MINORITY-OWNED BUSINESSES TO SUPPORT THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

The holidays are about community, so in addition to gathering together to celebrate, you can be intentional about who you select to help you orchestrate a wonderful experience for your event. We've compiled a list of minority-owned businesses to make it easy for you to select venues and vendors that support Chicago area minority-owned businesses

Alhambra Palace — Venue/Restaurant

Lavish Middle Eastern palace setting with multiple rooms and large capacities, great for full buyouts and corporate fêtes. Middle Eastern-owned.

Batter & Berries — Restaurant/Catering

Beloved brunch spot with catering; Black- and woman-owned leadership, consistently praised by locals. Black- & woman-owned.

Bronzeville Winery — Restaurant & Catering

Stylish, DJ-friendly space; explicitly Black- and woman-owned and closed Mon-Tue for private events. Black- & woman-owned.

Brown Sugar Bakery — Bakery/Desserts

Iconic South Side cakes from James Beard-recognized owner Stephanie Hart; perfect for dessert tables. Black woman-owned.

Daisy's Po-Boy & Tavern — Restaurant

Casual, New Orleans-inspired spot with catering and private events; strong buzz and reviews. Black-owned.

Garifuna Flava — Restaurant/Catering

Afro-Indigenous Belizean cuisine with robust corporate catering options and media accolades. Black-owned.

HaiSous Vietnamese Kitchen — Restaurant

Awarded Vietnamese dining by Thai & Danielle Dang; Bib-level acclaim and group-friendly menus. Asian-owned.

Justice of the Pies — Bakery/Desserts

Maya-Camille Broussard's nationally celebrated pies for dessert bars and gifts. Black woman-owned

La Luna — Restaurant

Pilsen favorite with dedicated private event spaces. Latin owned.

Lexington Betty Smokehouse — Restaurant/Catering

Chef Dominique Leach (Food Network champ) serves standout BBQ with catering options. Black, LGBTQ+ and woman-owned.

Luella's Southern Kitchen — Restaurant/Catering

Chef Darnell Reed's Michelin-recognized Southern comfort with catering. Black-owned.

Mott St — Restaurant

Chef Edward Kim's acclaimed Asian-American kitchen; handles buyouts and groups. Asian-owned.

Minority-owned businesses to support this holiday season – continued

Mustard Seed Kitchen — Catering/Takeout

Erick Williams' South Loop concept features a dedicated catering menu featuring Southern, Mexican, American and Italian foods. Black-owned.

Norman's Bistro — Restaurant

Community fixture by Norman Bolden with banquet options; warm hospitality and live-music vibes. Black-owned.

Peach's Restaurant — Restaurant/Catering

Bronzeville brunch classic that also caters—great for breakfast-for-lunch holiday spreads. Black-owned.

Pearl's Place — Restaurant/Catering

South Side institution with full-service catering and buffets; perfect for homestyle holiday menus. Black-owned.

Pour Souls Cocktail Catering — Mobile Bar/Cocktail Services

Cocktail catering with a Wicker Park storefront for classes and small events. Black-owned.

Room 43 — Venue

Bi-level event venue long rooted in Bronzeville/Kenwood's Black community; hosts weddings and corporate events. Black-owned.

Southside Blooms — Florist

Impact-driven floral studio from Chicago Eco House; stylish arrangements that also create jobs. Black-founded

Sunda New Asian — Restaurant

Billy Dec's sleek River North & West Loop venues include private dining rooms and event menus. Asian-owned.

Tandoor Char House — Restaurant/Catering

Family-run Indian spot noted by Choose Chicago as Minority-Owned; popular for group orders. Asian Indian-owned.

Tanta Chicago — Restaurant

The acclaimed Peruvian staple from Acurio's group features multiple private-event options. Latin-owned.

Virtue Restaurant & Bar — Restaurant

This James Beard-winning restaurant from Chef Erick Williams delivers elevated Southern cuisine; ideal for premium holiday dinners or buyouts. Black-owned.

Virginia Wolff Inc — Florals & Decor

This highly-rated floral design boutique, based in Chicago, offers lush arrangements, and rentals that make an impactful visual statement. Women and Latin owned.

How to Successfully Book Hotel Room Blocks

Booking a hotel room block can streamline guest accommodations and enhance the overall event experience — but it's not always straightforward. Between understanding room night calculations, choosing the right block type, and negotiating amenities, there are key details that can make or break your success. With some strategy and early planning, you can secure the best rates, avoid unexpected costs, and create a seamless experience for your guests.

Understand the Two Types of Room Blocks

Planner-Booked Room Block

The planner or organizer books all rooms on behalf of guests and manages payment through a master account. In this case, collect guest names in advance, including anyone sharing a room. Hotels require this information for check-ins, and having both names on file avoids issues if one guest arrives before the other.

Guest-Booked Room Block

Here, you secure a discounted group rate, and guests book their own rooms using a code or link. While this requires less coordination, be aware of the financial responsibility: if you commit to 10 rooms but only eight are reserved, you're obligated to pay for the remaining two. Companies often handle unused rooms by extending them to staff or VIPs.

Once your block is secured, remove barriers for attendees by sharing a direct booking link or code. Make sure to clearly communicate rates, amenities, and deadlines in your invitations and follow-ups. Remind guests of the cut-off date to ensure they reserve in time. The simpler the process, the faster your block fills, and the less financial risk you carry.

How “Room Nights” Are Calculated

In a hotel room block, a room night equals one room for one night. For example: 30 room nights can be 30 rooms for one night, 15 rooms for two nights, or 10 rooms for three nights. It doesn't matter if the same guest stays multiple nights, they are counted separately. Knowing how many nights you will need lets the hotel provide you with the correct quote.

Know Your Contractual Obligations

Before signing a contract, make sure you fully understand the terms and what you're agreeing to.

- **Attrition clauses** outline your obligation to fill a certain percentage of your block. For example, if your contract requires 90% but you only book 70%, you will owe the difference for unused rooms. If possible, negotiate a lower percentage upfront.
 - **Cut-off dates** are the deadlines when unbooked rooms are released back into the hotel's inventory. Missing the cut-off could mean losing your discounted rate or even paying penalties, so mark these dates carefully.
 - **Deposit schedules:** Understand when payments are due and avoid penalties, fees or even the cancellation of rooms.
- Being aware of these details helps you avoid surprises and ensures you maximize the benefits of your negotiated agreement.

Start Early to Lock in the Best Rates

Room blocks can be secured months in advance, especially during busy seasons or during major conventions. Booking early gives you:

- Better availability and a wider range of room types
- Lower rates before seasonal increases
- Stronger negotiating power for perks like breakfast or suite upgrades

Hotels typically require a minimum of 10 room nights for group blocks, give or take. Larger requests, like 50 or 100 nights, offer more flexibility, but also require earlier outreach.

Negotiate Beyond the Rate

Discounts matter, but the real value often lies in the extras.

Hotels want to keep guests on property, so pairing accommodations with event bookings gives you leverage.

To understand where you may be able to negotiate benefits:

- Check for citywide events that could drive up rates or limit availability.
- Request upgrades like complimentary VIP suites, welcome amenities, or breakfast vouchers, especially for larger blocks.
- Bundle lodging with events if you're also booking meeting rooms or receptions on-site. Hotels are more inclined to offer better discounts or upgrades if you're hosting multiple parts of your event with them.

The more your event contributes to the hotel's overall revenue, the better your negotiating position. But as a planner, it's important to balance on-premise and off-premise activities for your guests. While you do want to secure the best pricing, you want your guests to be able to experience exciting spaces and fun activities throughout the city.



Budget-Friendly Hotels

We all love a fancy hotel, but for the cost-conscious customer, having budget-friendly options that still provide quality is key. Here is a list of budget-friendly options in Chicago that will keep your boss and your guests happy!

AC Hotel by Marriott Chicago Downtown (River North) – modern, tidy, walkable to Mag Mile; typically good value.

Aloft Chicago Downtown River North – simple rooms, lively neighborhood, reliable housekeeping.

City Suites Hotel (Lakeview) – boutique basics near the Red/Brown Lines; known for cleanliness.

Courtyard by Marriott Chicago Downtown/River North – clean, comfortable, central.

Embassy Suites Chicago Downtown Magnificent Mile – big bang for the buck with breakfast.

Fairfield Inn & Suites Chicago Downtown/Magnificent Mile – dependable and neat, near a valuable location.

Hampton Inn & Suites Chicago Downtown (River North) – very clean, breakfast included.

Hampton Inn Chicago Downtown/Magnificent Mile – straightforward stay, clean rooms. The **North Loop/Michigan Ave** location is also tidy, with compact rooms in a great location.

Hilton Garden Inn Chicago Central Loop – newer feel, spotless common areas. The **Downtown/Magnificent Mile** location is clean, practical, and features an indoor pool. The **Downtown Riverwalk** location is known for cleanliness.

Homewood Suites by Hilton Chicago Downtown (River North) – suites w/ kitchenette. **South Loop** location known for being quiet, clean, good space for the price.

Hyatt Place Chicago/Downtown – The Loop – tidy, roomy, breakfast options; solid value.

Hyatt Place Chicago Medical/University District – clean, updated, good South/West Side access.

La Quinta Inn & Suites by Wyndham Chicago Downtown (Loop) – straightforward, clean, free breakfast.

Moxy Chicago Downtown (River North) – compact, spotless rooms; no-frills vibe.

Ohio House Motel (River North) – retro, super-clean, free parking, overall great value.

Residence Inn Chicago Downtown/Loop – spacious, immaculate suites w/ kitchens; breakfast available.

Residence Inn by Marriott Chicago Downtown/River North – clean, roomy suites and a good value.

voco Chicago Downtown – Riverwalk (IHG) – modern, very clean, river views; good deals off-peak.

Willows Hotel (Lincoln Park) – classic, tidy, residential area; solid budget pick.



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10 of the Hottest New Restaurants & Venues in Chicago

If you want to get into any of these spots for your holiday party, you better book it now.



Adalina Prime (Fulton Market)

Pictured above. Opened September 2, 2025. This bold, design-forward steakhouse sets a new standard for upscale dining. It features inventive dishes like mapo-infused tomatoes and caviar-topped chicken nuggets. Private dining: Up to 120.

Allium (West Loop)

Opening late September 2025, Allium is one of Chicago's most anticipated new venues, from BluePlate catering. With a sleek, minimalist aesthetic, the venue includes an incredible outdoor rooftop area, ideal for exclusive private events.

The Alston (Gold Coast / One Chicago)

Launched May 30, 2025, The Alston blends Chicago's carnivore heritage with French nouvelle elegance. The decor evokes 1920s Paris salons and London supper clubs. Private dining: Accommodates over 400 with a full buyout.

Ithaki Estiatorio (Greektown)

Opened August 29, 2025, Ithaki revitalizes Greektown with pristine imported seafood, and an expansive Greek wine program. Mykonos-inspired vibes make it a fun yet elegant location for your next dinner.

Lao Der (Old Irving Park)

Opened August 2025, Lao Der introduces Chicago to vibrant Laotian street food with bold dishes like sai ua moo sausage, lemongrass-marinated skewers, and tum Thai papaya salad.

Little Lark (Avondale)

Opened August 2025, Little Lark brings Roman and Neapolitan-style pizzas to a chic, lively setting with a warm neighborhood vibe. Private dining: Up to 40 guests

Midōsuji (Chicago Athletic Club)

Opened September 5, 2025, Midōsuji offers an ultra-exclusive eight-seat omakase experience that blends Japanese precision with French technique. With just two seatings nightly, this is a destination for intimate, high-end dining.

North Center Prime (North Center)

Opened Summer 2025, North Center Prime is a sophisticated neighborhood steakhouse featuring wet-aged steaks, fresh seafood, and indulgent sides in a warm, polished setting. Private dining: Full buyouts available for up to 168 guests.

Ox Bar & Hearth (Lincoln Park)

Set to open Fall 2025, Ox Bar & Hearth specializes in wood-fired Midwestern comfort food in a rustic-chic setting.

Trino (West Loop)

Opened late summer 2025, Trino reimagines the steakhouse with bold Latin American influences, from crab tostadas and huitlacoche bordelaise to inventive grilled specialties.

Private dining: Up to 60 guests across semi-private spaces.



TRANSPORTATION & VALET SERVICES

Get to where you need to go this holiday season! We've compiled a list of transportation and valet services to make sure your group can arrive in style.

Charter Buses & Limos

AAA Chicago Limo

Sedans, SUVs, limos, airport and event transfers. Ideal for airport transfers. CPM recommended!

Aries Charter Transportation

coaches, minibuses, trolleys, group logistics.

BusBank

Charter services for large group transportation: coach, school and mini buses, and sprinter vans.

Chicago Charter Bus Company

minibuses and full-size coaches for events.

Infinity Transportation

A modern fleet with Wi-Fi, outlets, restrooms.

M&M Buses

Vans, minibuses, and coaches for all sized groups.

National Charter Bus Chicago

18 to 56 passenger rentals, amenities available.

Signature Transportation Group

Executive and large-group transport, sedans through motorcoaches. A CPM favorite!

Windy City Limousine & Bus

Black cars through motorcoaches, large-scale events.

Trolleys

The Barrel Run, Barrel Bus

This fun, barrel-shaped trolley offers private charters.

Chicago Trolley

Private trolley, mini charter, and coach options

Cloud 9 Trolley

Signature white trolleys offer a fresh and clean experience.

Premier Trolley Group

Large, well-kept trolley fleet with modern amenities.

Second City Trolley

Maya-Camille Broussard's nationally celebrated pies for dessert bars and gifts. Black woman-owned

Valet Services

Five Star Valet

Premium valet for restaurants, venues, private events.

Gold Star Valet

Upscale valet parking and parking management.

Heat Valet Parking

Valet services plus vehicle care and luxury transport.

LAZ Parking

Hospitality and hotel valet programs in Chicago.

V.I.P. Valet Services, Inc.

Established 1995, full-service valet and event support.
CPM Recommended.

Here are a few things to think about when you're considering transportation options for your group.

- ☐ Determine if you need shuttle service which is continual, back and forth pick up to/from your destinations.
- ☐ Will anyone be speaking to or directing the group during the drive? Consider asking about a microphone.
- ☐ Confirm
- ☐ Ask about parking and accessibility
- ☐ Review A/V and tech capabilities
- ☐ Understand food, beverage, and décor policies
- ☐ Sign contract and secure insurance if needed



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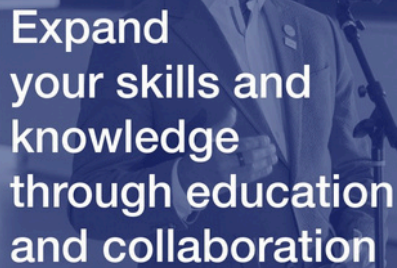
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