

This note is one of a series placed in the Clerks' Almanac by the Livery Committee. Most are written by its chairman, of whom you may read more at the foot of the [Contact page](#). They are intended to be of guidance to livery clerks, especially new ones, or those seeking advice on a particular topic. They are not prescriptive, and how individual companies choose to conduct their affairs is, of course, entirely up to them.

## City Caterers at Livery Halls

Formal catering for livery events does not come cheap, and generates quite a bit of debate, amongst clerks, diners, and maybe the caterers themselves. But whilst things are never perfect, City catering is provided in a competitive market place, and companies without their own hall are free to dine wherever they wish (including at venues which are not livery halls).

This note is primarily aimed at the peripatetic liveries, and tries to explain to their new clerks (and others) how the system works. Hall owning companies are welcome to comment.

The livery halls (which are listed at <http://www.liverycompanies.info/a-z-list-of-companies/livery-halls-2>) broadly fall into four categories for catering purposes:

- Those not generally available for outside or commercial hire. (eg Girdlers')
- Those that are, and which use their own in house caterers. (eg Merchant Taylors')
- Halls which give an exclusive contract to one tied caterer, who a hirer **MUST** use. (eg Mansion House)
- Halls which have a List of approved caterers, and hirers are free to choose their preference from the List. (eg Guildhall)

Once upon a time, there was a category where a hirer could provide their own caterer, but I think no hall any longer permits this.

**The financial arrangements** between the Livery Hall and their approved caterers will be commercially sensitive, but will impact on the charge the caterer makes to a potential hirer. So for example, some caterers may be required to pay a percentage of their invoice to the hall owner, and this may be reflected in the price charged to the user. But those that do not will have to cover their costs in other ways, maybe by a higher hall charge. There is little the hirer can do about this, other than be aware.

The hirer will wish, at an early stage, to both reserve the date (suggest at least 12 months in advance), and get a handle on the cost so that they can set the advertised ticket price. There will be many elements to the ticket cost, and the two of immediate concern are the Hall Hire charge, and the Catering cost (food and wine), including the *Out Mess* (of which more below).

Confusingly, some companies will invoice the Hall charge separately from the caterer's bill, whilst others will lump it all in together. More confusingly, some livery halls state that the hall hire charge is VAT free. A few caterers absorb the hall hire

fee element into a flat per head rate for the meal. Each of these systems has its pros and cons, and most caterers are unlikely to wish or be able to change their approach. So the client simply needs to be aware of the separate possible elements of the cost, which are VATable, and what is included.

**Flowers, music, photography, printing, company guests**, are items that will not be included, but all these are outside the scope of this note.

Items not to forget (and to check with the Hall or Caterer) are additional decorative silverware, candelabra, loving cups etc, cloak room staff, PA, AV, and the aforementioned Out Mess.

### **Catering cost.**

The caterer is likely to offer a choice of menus, and a choice of prices (which will almost invariably be quoted without the addition of VAT). Most will allow a mix & match approach, so eg starter from Menu A and pud from Menu C. Better caterers will allow the client to make their own menu choice, even if it is not on the original offered quote. Few City caterers are especially proud of their wine cellar offerings, but hopefully you'll get what you pay for from their list (to source wines from elsewhere, see *Corkage* below).

Nowadays three course dinners are the norm. As the main costs to the caterer are labour, not the food, the removal of a fourth course won't have a huge impact on the cost, but it will on the timings. Time can be the clerk's enemy at a formal livery dinner (see also guidance on Speeches in this folder).

Occasionally, at less formal dinners, the host may consider replacing the starter with canapés during the reception.

**Special diets.** City caterers are very good at dealing with these, and of course need to be told in advance. *Dietary requirements* does not mean pandering to fussy eaters, or their extravagant tastes! Just health allergies, or religious custom.

### **Wines & Corkage**

Bearing in mind the quality and cost of wines provided by caterers, liveries may prefer to provide their own. Almost inevitably, the caterer will then charge corkage. Infuriating though this is to many, the poor old caterer has got to make his money somehow, and there will certainly be a hefty mark-up on his wines. So if he doesn't get that, he's got to raise the money in some other way (aside from still providing glasses, waitresses to fill and serve them, and washing them up afterwards. Corkage may be negotiable – be clear whether the charge is per bottle or per head.

Random thoughts:

Do you want champagne or sparkling wine during the reception?

Water/soft drinks? Bottled, or jugs of tap water? (bear in mind that nowadays many do not drink alcohol, but will be paying an element of their ticket price to cover other people's booze. They deserve a nice drink too!)

Do you really need port after dinner? Even though many (most?) do not drink it, the answer is probably still yes. But should the caterer charge all diners for port?

Brandy?

Stirrup Cup? (again, time is the enemy).

### **Out Mess**

It is the custom of the City livery halls (and at Mansion House etc to which all of the above applies) that the “senior” staff on duty (beadle, footmen, MC, musician etc etc) are properly fed, in the so-called Out Mess.

At Mansion House, two out messes are provided – senior and junior, at different prices per head. The numbers in each are pre-ordained.

Many curse this practice (which can add significant cost for the hirer), but that’s how it is. It may be negotiable at some venues (not MH), and a brave clerk may choose to put his foot down. But a wise clerk will also wish to keep the staff happy and on side!

### **Approved Caterers**

Those approved by Guildhall provide a good list of those active in this market, but is not a comprehensive list of every City caterer. The list is available elsewhere in this folder. The newly enhanced Livery Companies Database (due October 2015) will aim to clearly show the preferred caterer in each of the livery halls.

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Was this note helpful? Do you have comment? Email [nrpullman@btinternet.com](mailto:nrpullman@btinternet.com)