

## Buffet Design 101

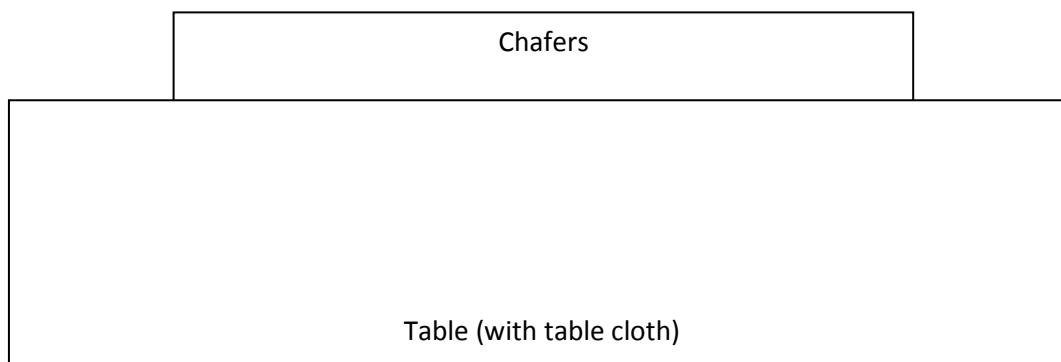
Building Wow into a buffet is easy! It's more science than art. With a few design principles, you can build a buffet that makes your guests stare and say Wow!

### First step, the Foundation

Because I used a building metaphor, you're probably thinking, "yeah, yeah, the table, obviously, is the foundation," and have already started to scan the next paragraph, maybe even moved ahead to the next section. But Wait! You'll be rewarded for your patience...

You are right, the foundation is the table. (I know, you told me so.) But it's also the chafers. When you line up four chafers on a table, it becomes a little, well you know, blocky—boring.

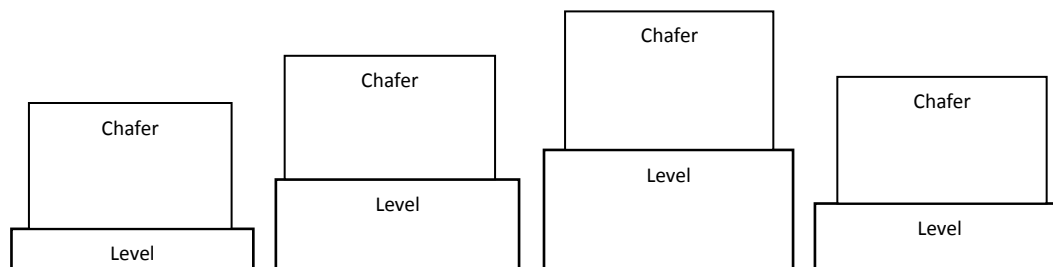
Why? Chafers are heavy, not only physically, but visually. Their visual "weight" can trick the eyes into seeing the table and the chafers as one unit: the foundation.



You need to free the chafers from the bounds of their heavy "weight" by introducing levels.

### Levels?

Adding levels on a Foundation is like adding floors to a building. It creates an interesting roof line.



The levels, usually platforms made from wood, can be whatever height you desire: a foot or a few inches. The only key is to ensure that they look visually exciting, and not busy. To do that you'll need some math.

But don't panic, we're not talking long algebraic equations, just a little fraction or decimal action, and some addition.

First, there will be only four heights. Any more variation will just make the display cluttered.

Then decide on the tallest level you want. Let's say a foot, for the ease of calculation. Now you need to figure out the other heights.

First Level= 12 inches

Second Level= half of 12 inches plus an inch = 7 inches

Third Level = third of 12 inches plus an inch = 5 inches

Fourth Level = fourth of 12 inches plus an inch = 4 inches

Why the extra inch? To create that random but not random design. True randomness is clutter. But patterned chaos is exciting.

It's a brain thing.

To make sense of the visual world, the mind has to organize what it sees into patterns. You recognize cousin Bob's face, because your mind recognizes the visual pattern of cousin Bob's face.

Furthermore, in the back of our brains, the cogs are constantly spinning, doing math. It's how we move around in our environment. Math prevents us from bumping into table legs, or spilling glasses of milk. If our movements were completely dependent on visual cues, the blind would never be able to use a cane to navigate unfamiliar places.

So as we move through our environment, the brain searches for patterns while constantly humming out fractions... The keyboard is half the distance from me and my monitor. My glass is a third of the distance from my mouse... But life isn't filled with perfect equations. The truth is my keyboard is *almost* half the distance between me and my monitor; and the glass is really *a little over* a third of the distance to my mouse.

How does this relate to the levels? Your mind sees a pattern of heights. At first glance, the levels look like perfect fractions. Then brain does the math and realizes the levels are almost perfect fractions. It had figured out the pattern of adding one inch to each fraction. To the mind, this little detour is exciting.

That's why organized chaos is so important to design. You want that brain to get excited; make it stand up (metaphorically) and take notice.

But what if you want the highest level to be shorter than a foot? Do you still add an inch? No. But it's best to keep the scale proportional by breaking up the foot by simple fractions of half, quarter, three-quarters, even a third (but then you're truly in decimal country—Yee-ha).

If you want the highest level to be half a foot; then add a half of an inch.

First Level= 6 inches

Second Level = half of 6 inches plus a half inch = 3.5 inches

Third Level = third of 6 plus a half inch = 2.5 inches

Fourth Level = fourth of 6 inches plus a half inch = 2 inches

If you want the highest level to be a quarter of a foot; then add a quarter of an inch.

First Level= 3 inches

Second Level = half of 3 inches plus a quarter of an inch = 1.75 inch

Third Level = third of 3 inches plus a quarter of an inch = 1.25 inch

Fourth Level = fourth of 3 inches plus a quarter of an inch = 1 inch

I think you get the idea. If you divide the foot into segments, also divide the inch into the proportional segments, and then add the inch segment to the foot segment for your level height. Phew!

Now that the math is done, it's time to create The Look. Let your inner *fashionista* talk. Is your style elaborate or simple? Your answer will determine what kind of design you need: under or over.

*Under* means: the level slips under the table cloth. It's the easiest and cheapest way to dress up a table. Made out of cheap plywood, the level slips under the rental linen.

To add a little extra elegance, drape a second accent cloth over the rental linen and then tuck, gather and swoop across the levels. The accent doesn't need to be a formal table cloth; it can be some beautiful yardage you discovered.

For example, at a wedding you might want some tulle, for a ball some sparkling diaphanous material or for a barbeque a fun casual print—something different than the commonly used red checks.

*Over* means: the levels are on top of the table cloth. This option is for designers that like simple lines. For example, an elegant antique wood table draped simply with a striped runner has no place to hide a plain plywood box. But the box doesn't have to remain plain—give it a makeover. Decorate it with mirror, tile, metal or expensive wood. Or have a craftsman build mini elegant tables. The only limit is your budget and time.

## The Mountain Landscape

I've told you how to make levels, and why to make levels, but now you need to know how to arrange levels. You need to make a mountain landscape.

Look at the above example (page one). Like a large mountain, notice there is a peak and several plateaus that flow away from the center. Your gaze is automatically drawn to the highest chafer, before traveling down the slope to other chafers.

From a distance, the height will give the buffet table a presence. Just like the mountain it imitates. It's suddenly something interesting on the horizon after the long drive through Nebraska.

Not that I recommend scaling your chafers to fit the Rockies' soaring heights. Setting the chafers too high will make the display visually "heavy". Besides, the chafers will not be the only height on the buffet. There will also be display platforms that raise the decorations from obscurity behind the chafers.

## Display Platforms?

What are they, levels? And if they are levels, why not call them levels?

Well they're not level. Or at least not exactly. They have the same *why*, but they differ on the *what*.

Levels are made to hold chafers; they're large and sturdy. Display platforms are small and can be made out of inexpensive repurposed objects like upside down vases, glass blocks, florist foam studded with greenery, stacked items like books or even large cans.

Or, if your pocketbook is weighing you down, you can build something more elaborate that mimics the levels in style, or can be stacked behind the chafers to create multiple heights.

Oh, and they differ from the Levels in one more way, they soften corners.

Consider, couch pillows. Why are they there? They don't really add to the sitting pleasure. Most people toss them aside when they sit down. So why even have the pesky little fellows?

Oddly enough, the small poofy squares soften up the edges of a rectangular couch, and make it more inviting. Corners look uncomfortable—sharp. But curves, they're soft visually, reminding us that it's impossible to get a cut from a ball; paper, boxes, knives—yes, but balls—no. Bruises on the other hand, are easily distributed in a dodge ball game.

But back to pillows. What does this have to do with buffets?

Curves are more inviting than corners; and you want buffets to be inviting. But chafers tend to have corners. Yes, there are round chafers, but because of their load capacity, most events use rectangles because they hold a heck of a lot more food.

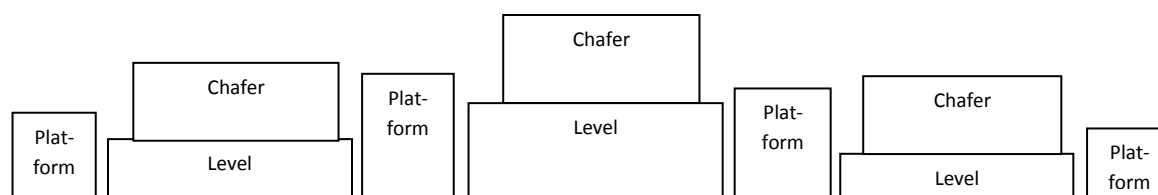
So you have a lot of corners, and because most pillows are flammable and look too bizarre on a buffet, you need to soften the corners with half steps, up or down. Sounds complicated, but it's really not. You set a platform between two chafers so that its height is approximately between half the tallest chafer, yet lower than the chafer beside it.

What?

I'll break it down further.

- 1) Put your platform (whatever it is) in between two chafers.
- 2) Compare the platform to the taller of the two chafers: is it about half the height? No, try another platform.
- 3) If yes, the platform is half the height of the taller chafer, now ask yourself if it's the same height of the smaller chafer beside it? If no, you're done. If yes, try another platform.

There will be a little trial and error, but the idea is to create multiple levels that flow easily into each other, eliminating any deep dark unwelcoming corners.



Oh, one more thing, place the platforms toward the back or behind the chafers. It keeps the decorations splatter-free, and leaves plenty of room for menu descriptions and utensils.

## Doing the Pretty, Pretty

The platforms are in place, it's time now to add the pretty décor. This is where the softening really starts to happen. But, and there seems to always be a but, there are four elements to keep in mind: Themes, Zig-Zag, Lighting, and Nooks and Crannies.

To start, **Themes**, this should be easy, right?

No. And Yes. The biggest mistake people make about picking a theme is not being specific enough. It's a wedding buffet, and you decide on a theme; romance. But what kind of romance is it? Sexy or sentimental? Sunny afternoon or wee hours in the morning? Daisies or roses? Simple or ornate? You get the idea. So how do you narrow down the possibilities?

Imagine a scene, as if you're viewing a movie, photo or painting, that best describes your theme. Now think up a title, and don't worry about being clever, consider it a bookmark... A spring garden wedding in the morning; an evening wedding in a gothic castle; an afternoon wedding in an art deco delight during the fall.

You get the picture.

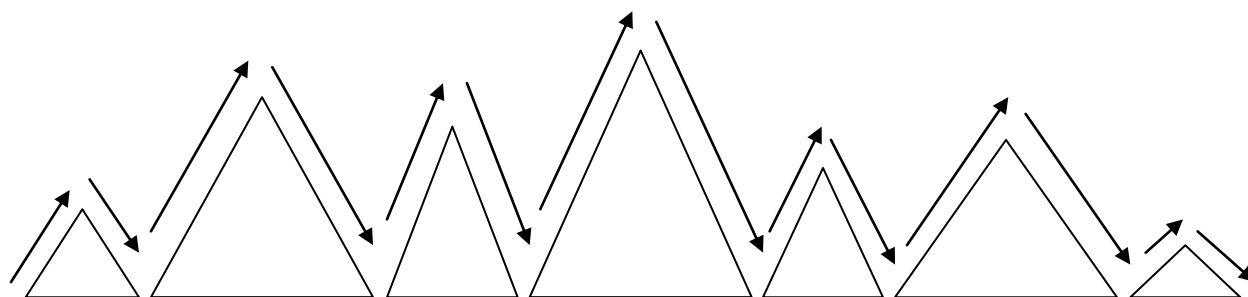
Then comes the fun part, go buy things; anything that will fit the image in your head. Pick out a palette of colors. If this part always overwhelms you, stick with one main color, two accent colors and what I call the *dab*; a surprise of color that is used very sparingly. A small dab used here, here, and there, is all that's needed.

Plus, remember to follow the mountain landscape ideal when you arrange your decorations. Pick out the largest items and place them toward the peak, and then build smaller and smaller steps away from the center. And of course don't forget the **Zig-Zaging**.

Huh? What's this about Zig-Zaging? I mention it twice, and I don't explain it.

No need for alarm, I'll explain it now. It's just another design trick. It's a way to get the eye to move across a display. It's easy breezy.

First you need to flatten your display, visually, not with a sledge hammer. Then imagine the chafers and platforms as triangles. The bases of the triangles are on the table. The pinnacles represent the height of the platforms and chafers. See the zig-zag? Is your gaze hovering for a millisecond at the apex of the triangle before racing down the side like a sled on a steep hill? Then at the bottom, did your gaze automatically climb back up?



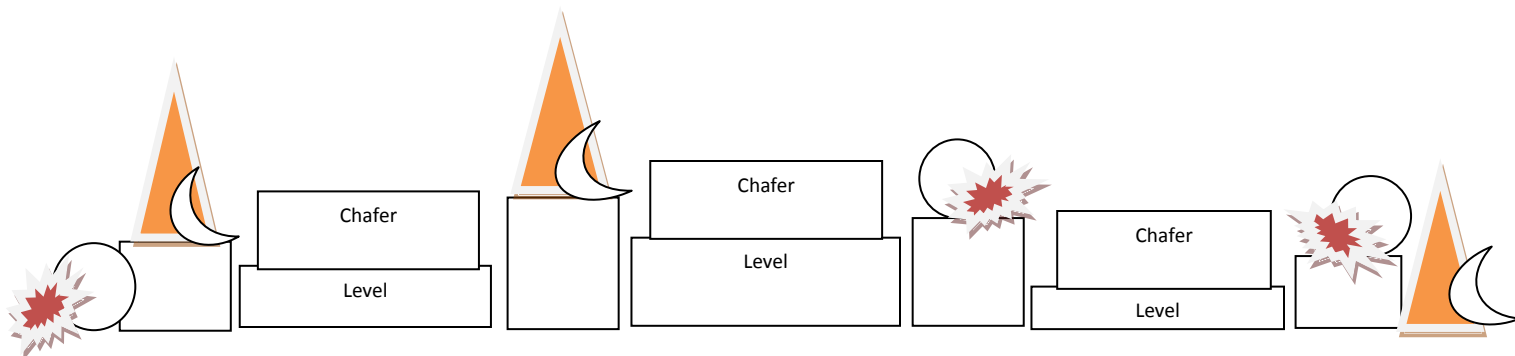
Cool, right? Our brains love to follow a line. Putting a zig-zag in your design creates a sense of motion, gives it energy, and makes it unpredictable. Once again, our friend *organized chaos* directs the flow.

But chafers really don't have points. So to keep the gaze moving, you'll need to use color and light. This is where your dab of color comes in handy.

Only using it three times, set the dab at the base of the first platform, on top of the second highest platform, and on top of the last platform. Our brains will unconsciously connect the dots, and swath across the display with interest.

And if you're wondering the reason why I did not use the dab on the base, top and base; the answer is symmetry, the seductive siren of the left brain. Remember, organized chaos is that itch the left brain can't scratch; making your design edgy—dynamic. If you stick with symmetry, the left brain will file the pattern into deep storage where all the hums- drums remain buried.

Now repeat the zig-zag with any illumination you might have, like lanterns, but shift it a little. This time put the lights on top of the first platform, on top of the highest platform, and then at the base of the last platform.



However, technically, it's always best to arrange the largest items first, then lanterns (if they aren't the largest item, followed by the other knick-knacks and greenery you have, and finished with **dabs** and votives.

Why? Because the eyes are always drawn to the largest points, that's why they're called focal points. Everything that surrounds the focal points is just an accent. But remember, although dabs and votives are considered accents, when properly placed they will create movement.

Of course **Light** does more than just draw attention, it illuminates—adds atmosphere. Sub-consciously it represents hope and prosperity. Realistically, it brightens up dark alcoves and cave-like chambers.

Obviously, the simplest way to illuminate is putting candles on your display. Use a mix of various sized pillars on the platforms along the back with a few tea lights peeping in and out of corners.

The downsize... fire. You have to be extremely careful when using open flames. All candle flames have to be completely encased in glass votives or lanterns; and should be placed at the very back, out of range. You don't want Aunt Ginny's wrap to catch fire when she reaches for bread.

However, if fire is a real concern, or if the venue doesn't allow candles, LEDs are an excellent substitution. Snuggle them into your decorations. Set them in colored lanterns. Using LEDs has lots of advantages. They run cold, so no worries about melted greenery. They don't leave a waxy mess in your Hurricanes. And they illuminate for hours. No snuff outs by the time you serve desserts. Yet one of the biggest benefits is being able to light the **Nook and Crannies**; the small dark holes created when you start layer decoration on and around the platforms.

As you build up your display, little dark holes will appear; gaps between the platform, décor and chafer—or nook and crannies. Don't worry about them. When you're done putting all the large and medium objects on your buffet, it will be time to fill the nook and crannies with pieces of greenery; or a lot of smaller simpler objects like balls or river stone; and a few votives.

Without over thinking it, quickly tuck and stuff each large hole, leaving the smaller ones empty. A little peek through gives a display a sense of space or dimension. Plus it's that organized chaos thing again. I know I keep nattering on about it, but it is truly the key to a successful design. That and the golden numbers three, five and seven.

## The Magic of Odds

Across centuries and cultures, the magic of odds has fascinated mankind; popping into religion, math and art. Odd numbers, especially the number three, is like candy to the brain. Three satisfies the left brain's love affair with prime numbers, and the right brain's passion for asymmetry. It's a Gestalt hat trick.

So feed the minds of your audience. Group everything using odds. Besides three, five works well, and depending on the size of the display, so does seven. Any more objects d'art and it will look like a jumble sale.

But it can get a heck of a lot more complicated, and in turn, more interesting.

Keep in mind that the brain likes to group in prime numbers. Think of all the to-do lists you have made in your life. There are always three, five or seven items. Four and eight just feel wrong. As if there are not enough or too many items.

The same is true when you try to memorize anything. Three facts are just perfect. The fourth always seems to draw a blank. Take phone numbers, most people remember the first three digits individually, but the last two they group into larger numbers.

Take the phone number 123-4569, it's easier to memorize if you break it down as one, two, three, forty-five, sixty-nine. Funky, eh?

The brain made seven digits into three units. The first three digits have become one unit (123), the second unit is (forty-five), and the third unit is (sixty-nine). Three items are much easier to remember than seven. Letting the brain create relationship between objects makes things memorable. And you want your buffet to be memorable.

So use that Gestalt in your displays. How? Again, it's probably best to show you.

Below are three dabs of color, five lanterns and seven bobs. Already without arranging I have some lovely odd numbers in my basket. But that's not enough, I want to group the items even further, or said differently; break the larger groups into a smaller size, the magic three.

Let me explain.

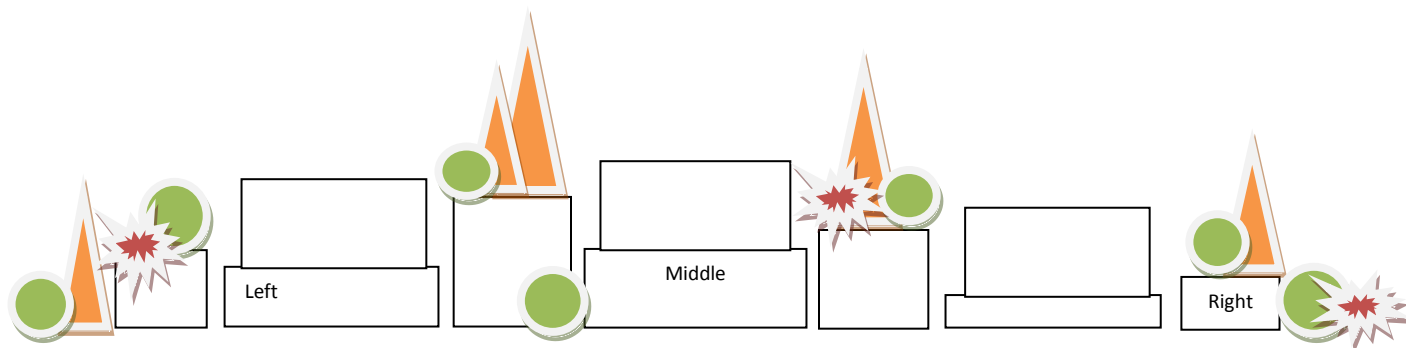
First when you go shopping for these bits and pieces, keep in mind, for the most part, this rule of thumb:

- For dabs of color: buy three
- For lanterns: buy five, but divide the group into two large and three mediums.

- For accent knickknacks: buy seven, but divide the group into three mediums and four smalls.

Now arrange them:

- 1) Arrange platforms to follow the mountain landscape.
- 2) Add lanterns. Arrange them by following the mountain landscape.
- 3) Add bobs. This is where the Zig-Zag and grouping are needed. Don't worry, it seems like a lot of steps, but it's easier than it looks. It's all about the grouping.
  - a. Divide the table into three sections: left, middle and right.
  - b. Divide the bobs into three groups. Two (A) sets with the combination of small and medium; and one (B) set with the combination of two smalls and a medium.
  - c. Pair up the sets with sections. Left with A. Right with A. Middle with B.
  - d. Put a medium bob on the left platform and a small bob on the table. Try to put something taller between them.
  - e. Repeat for the right side, but switch sizes. The medium bob on the table, the small bob on the platform. Try to keep something taller between them.
  - f. Keeping the zig-zag in mind, arrange the bobs on in the middle. Notice I put a medium size bob on the table in front of the platform. This creates a small dip or zig-zag in the center of the table. It forces the gaze to look down at the table, instead of just skimming across the top. I also choose the larger size bob because of its visual weight. Like a sinker on a fishing line, it pulls the eyes down.
- 4) Lastly the dabs. Again you want the gaze to bounce across the buffet, connecting the dabs of color together like dots-to-dots, so zig-zag. Remember this tricks the guest into scanning the entire buffet.



## Garland

This step is optional. It really depends on your personal style. Are you a minimalist? Simple and elegant. Or the lush layered type? Rich and textured.

If you are the lush layered type, this buffet might seem too sparse. If that's the case, drizzle on a little pizzazz with unusual Garland: string of beads, diaphanous material or seasonal artificial greenery.

Similar to icing a cake, create swirls and swooshes across the fondant. The trick is to loosely hold the garland above the buffet; going left to right; weaving in and out and around the platforms and chafer; let the garland slowly slip from your hands, dripping onto the buffet and curling across the table cloth and decorations.

However, for such agility, the garland has to be flexible—almost slippery. If your garland is too stiff it won't cooperate. You'll knock the bobs and dabs onto the floor. There might even be some cross words spoken.

So if your garland is too stiff to maneuver, just put it on before you dress the display with the bobs and dabs. And if you discovered this too late, your bobs are already on the floor, my sympathy. We've all been there. The only solution is to take the last men standing off the buffet, and start, at least not from scratch, but from the middle.

## Do the Unexpected

Use unusual or non-traditional objects on the buffet as platform, displays or even vehicles to hold food. That spark of imagination will make your buffet stand out from your competitors. Every guest at your event is a potential customer. And what a way to wow them!

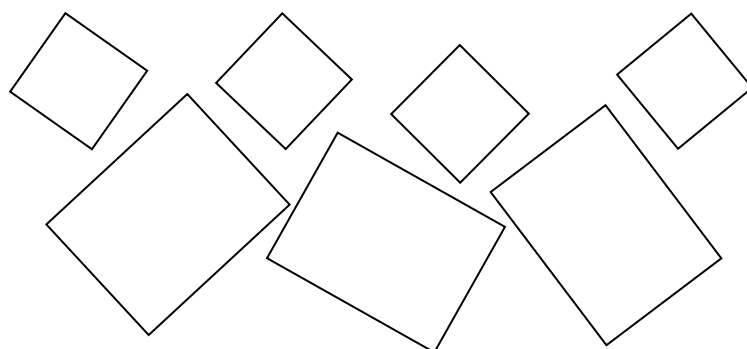
But what exactly do I mean?

Let's say you're doing a fall theme buffet. Add unique touches like setting a bowl in a large halved gourd; or using canning jars for condiments; the tines of a pitchfork made into a shelf, a small bushel basket to hold roll-ups, planks of distressed "barn" wood to make platforms; decorative pumpkins hollowed out for anything; a large clear box filled with small decorative gourds to use as a level for desserts; a football skin wrapped around a bowl; mums pressed between glass plates; fall branches to hold menu descriptions; corn husks napkin rings; maize stacked like a log cabin to hold platters; dried apple faces to garnish plates... You get the idea.

## What about Dessert?

Don't worry. It's a piece of cake. Take the above buffet design and tweak it.

Without the chafers, you have a little more freedom of angles. Still line up the levels to the mountain landscape ideal, but angle them a bit and create, you know it, a zig-zag. Then set the platforms in all the corners or vees, and huddle them together. Below is a top view of what I'm saying.



After scooching the platforms and levels close, set down the lanterns, bobs, dabs, and garland. Also, a dessert buffet is a great place to exhibit those unique items that will wow your guests. Without the chafers blocking the space behind the levels, curiosities on the table will be seen.

## What's in a Name?

Everything, nothing...

Unhelpful, I know. What can I say? I've got my Buddha on. But to clarify, what I mean is the menu items displayed mean nothing and everything.

Okay, still a little vague. Try this, for the most part; names of dishes are really unhelpful. What is steak Diane? What's in a Cobb salad? Is this vegetable dish vegan? Or just vegetarian?

Food signs on buffets tend to make two mistakes. One, you can't see the sign, and two, you still don't know what's in the dish.

First I'll tackle point number one; the position of the sign. Putting it in front is not good enough. Unless it's pointing up, the guests have to do leg squats to see it. Or pick it up, and I don't know what it is, but people never can put things back where they belong. Later you'll find your chicken parmesan sign in front of the salad. Sigh.

So raise those signs so they are closer to the food and tilt them just a wee bit back.

If you use frames, make the flap/leg on the back shorter by scoring. Set the frames on the platforms or if there is room, the chafers. Or use plant hangers or wire to hang the frames from the chafers. Or even make a stand that can hold the frame.

Then again, you can abandon frames and just use unusual stationary on table stands. Or better yet have an artist create a cool wire stands that hold a menu card. Or make a sculpture of forks or trinkets that match your theme. Or use stained glass, beads, metals, tiles, clay, or feathers if that's your scene. Just pick a material and hire an artist.

However if that's too pricey, go to a home décor center, look around for home accent you can use. A tall pillar candle holder with a ball resting on the top would make a great menu holder. Merely slice a slit on the top of the ball, and voila, instant card holder. Heck, use anything: fake fruit, ornate boxes, even pinecones. If it can hold a card, it will work.

Now about the wording... Don't just list the menu item. Talk about the sauce. Feature the special ingredients. Mention the danger zones like garlic, onions, peanuts and bacon. Note on the bottom if it's vegetarian or vegan. Talk it up as if you are in person describing the dish to a guest. Make it sumptuous.

We're very susceptible creatures, easily influenced by outside moods. If the menu card sounds delicious and upbeat, that mood will rub onto us. Suddenly the usual buffet seems like an exciting culinary experience. The guest will be very glad to be there. With little effort, you have made a Happening.

### **That's it Folks**

I'm sure I've forgotten a few things here and there. Isn't that always the case? But I hope I've fired you up, and stretched your mind, so you can blow people away with your genius. Over the many years I have been designing displays I learned it doesn't take a lot of bling to stir up the spectacular, just a few design principles and systems. Now go make me proud!