

Catering FAQ (v1 Dec2016)

1. What is a catering operation?

Defined by the Washington State Retail Food Code¹ (Food Code), a catering operation is, “a person who contracts with a client to prepare a specific menu and amount of food in an approved food establishment for service to the client’s guests or customers at a different location.” Any catering operation serving food within Thurston County must obtain either a food establishment permit or a temporary permit from this office. A catering food establishment permit is valid for contacted public and private events. A temporary food permit is required for caterers that want to sell food on a per order basis (vending). A catering operation does not include:

- Food ordered as take-out or delivery from the permitted food establishment that prepared the food, where the food is given to the consumer for self-service.
- A potluck event is defined by the Food Code, “a potluck means an event where people are gathered to share food, people attending the event are expected to bring food to share, there is no compensation provided for people bringing food to the event, there is no charge for any food or beverage provided at the event, and the event is not conducted for commercial purposes.”
- Food that is prepared and offered for free distribution by a donated food distributing organization to feed the needy. If you are a new donated food distributing organization, please contact our office for more information.

2. How do I become a permitted caterer in Thurston County?

To become a permitted caterer in Thurston County please submit a food establishment application and a catering supplemental application to the Thurston County Environmental Health Division (website address below²). There is a \$260.00 submittal fee due with all food establishment applications. Your application will be reviewed by your routine inspector, at which time any follow-up questions will be asked. The initial submittal fee will cover the first hour of review time, any additional review time will be billed at the rate of \$260.00/hour. After review, an approval letter will be sent that includes conditions of your catering permit. Permitted caterers are subject to unannounced inspections at either the commissary or event locations throughout the year.

3. Is my catering permit sufficient for temporary food events?

No. Public temporary food events require a temporary food permit that can be obtained by submitting a temporary food establishment application (website address below²). These permits are only valid for the temporary event specified in the application. The key difference between a caterer and temporary food establishment is the prior order or contract. If a permitted caterer wants to sell food at a public event on a per order basis (vending), a temporary food establishment permit is required.

¹ Chapter 246-215 Washington Administrative Code (WAC)

² www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehfood

4. Can I use my home kitchen as a commissary?

No. A home kitchen cannot be approved as a commissary.

5. I am a private chef. Do I need a catering permit?

Private chefs that do all food preparation at a client's residence for the client's consumption do not need to obtain a catering permit. However, if you prepare food at a separate location from the home or client residence you will need to obtain a catering permit.

6. Do all my employees need to have a food worker card at a catered event?

Yes. All employees at a catered event must have a valid food worker card. Only temporary events allow for a single individual with a valid food worker card.

7. As a caterer, are we allowed to operate multiple catered events at the same time?

Yes, provided you have adequate equipment to meet the needs of multiple catered events. You will need to provide details about your multiple sets of catering equipment to support these activities.

8. Do I need to work out of an approved facility?

Yes. As part of an approved plan, all caterers need a commissary kitchen/facility to provide food storage, food preparation, ware washing facilities, and equipment storage.

9. I have facilities and a catering permit in another county in Washington. What permits do I need to cater events in Thurston County?

Caterers in other counties can cater in Thurston County, however, they must first submit either a temporary food establishment application for a single event, or a multiple temporary food establishment application for multiple catered events.

10. What am I allowed to do with food that is left over from the event? Can I leave it with my customer or donate it to the food bank/charity?

Leftover potentially hazardous food (PHF's) that has been maintained under appropriate temperature control can be left with the customer or donated to a food bank/charity.

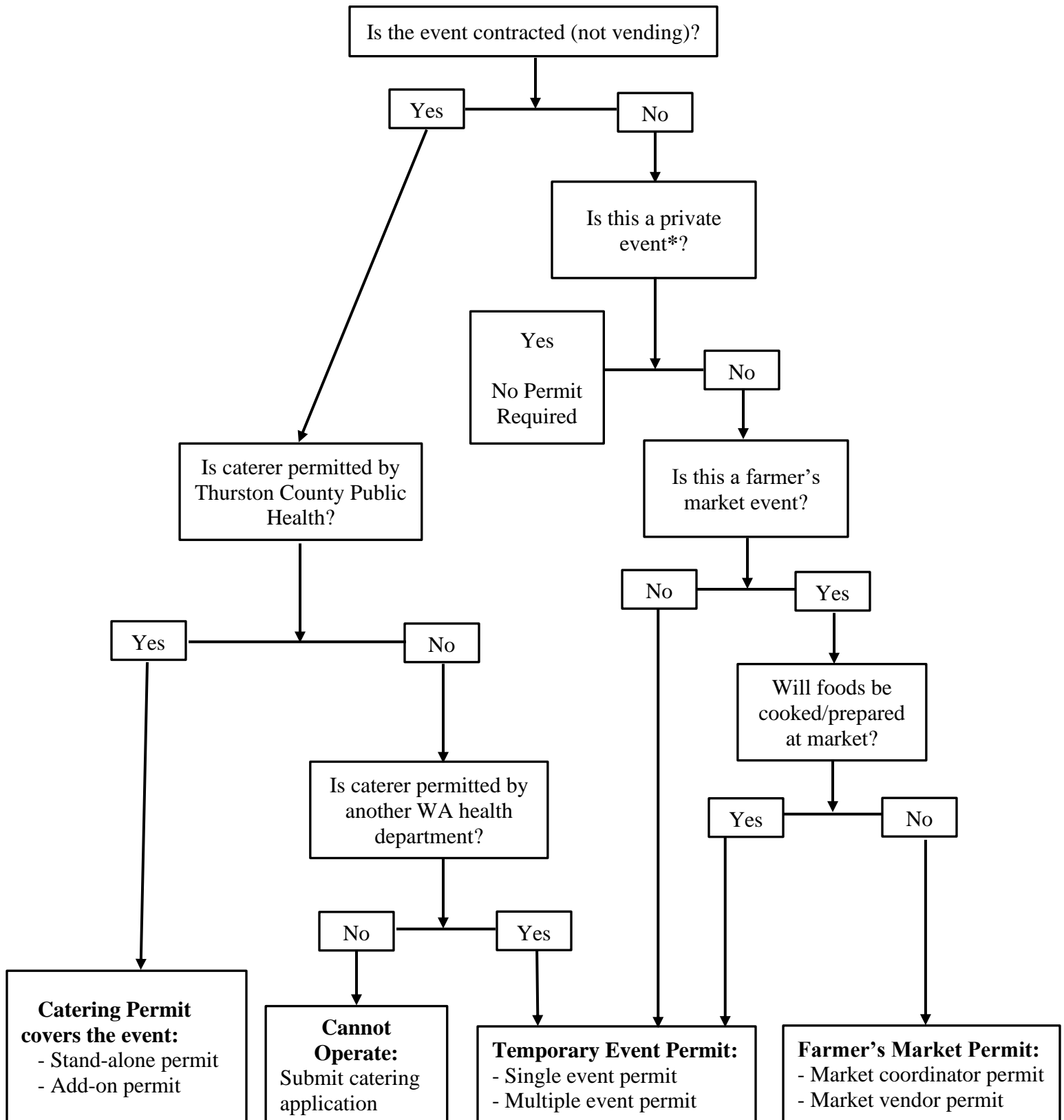
11. My catering menu changes based on the season and/or the needs of my client. What do I need to do to change my catering menu?

Your menu is reviewed and approved as an example of the types of cooking processes and equipment you use. Generally, we want to know if you are adding equipment or new cooking processes to your operation. For example: adding vacuum packing, adding sushi, or making your own sausage. You do not need to let us know you are serving your usual proteins with a seasonal vegetable. When in doubt, please contact your inspector for clarification.

Catering Contract / Temporary Vending Decision Chart

Contracted: having a written contract to provide a set amount of food to a set location at a set time.

Vending: selling individual servings of food



***Note:** The Food Code defines a private event as, “a private gathering limited to members and guests of members of a family, organization, or club, where the event is not open to the general public, and where food is provided without compensation.”