

HOT SEAT

Culinary diva's growth cooking



KITCHEN COUTURE : Culinary Capers Catering owner Debra Lykkemark brings a decidedly female style to her \$6 million dollar catering company

By Victor Chew Wong **those moments...**

In 1986 when it started, it was the smallest corporate and social caterer in Vancouver. In the 21 years since, Debra Lykkemark has nurtured Culinary Capers Catering into the biggest in Western Canada with revenues last year of \$6 million.

In this interview with *The Office Journal*, Lykkemark talks about her early challenges, victories and how women do business differently than men.

What were you doing before you started Culinary Capers?

I was a waitress and a bartender for many years in Calgary. I moved to Vancouver and worked at Il Giardino as a waitress and as a cocktail waitress at a place called Viva's. Eventually I decided that I wanted to have my own restaurant and went to Dubrulle Culinary School the first year it was open.

I finished that and apprenticed for two years. I apprenticed at the Pan Pacific. Then I convinced my girlfriend who owned the Amorous Oyster and another girlfriend to start a catering division called the Amorous Oyster Catering Company, which was independent, but we worked out of the Amorous Oyster's kitchen. After six months we moved to our own location in a coffee shop we leased on Broadway and became Culinary Capers Catering.

We've just grown since then and moved four times.

What were the early years like?

They were tough. The first four years it was me, my partner Linda and a few employees working in the day-to-day operation of the coffee shop and the catering. Linda and I always wrote ourselves pay cheques, but we couldn't always cash them.

I think every business owner has had

those moments... Everyone told me it would take five years before you are successful and making a profit. I didn't believe them. I thought, "They just don't work hard enough." Well, guess what, it took us five years. By that time Linda had gotten married, had a baby, separated, and decided to move back to England as her father was very ill. Our other partner Sue had bought a grocery store in Whistler Village, so she moved up there. We decided that I would buy them out.

Why were the first five years so tough?

For the first five years we were really on a shoe-string budget. We had the coffee shop and we were busy working there every day. To grow we needed to spend more time working on how to grow the catering side of the business.

The beauty about catering is that every party you cater is a marketing opportunity. If you do a great job at a party, the guests will call you when they need a caterer. We did experience growth that way, but it wasn't as fast as I wanted it to be.

We didn't have any marketing strategy beyond that. I went into this without a business plan. I was clueless. I probably wouldn't have done it if I had a business plan because I would have scared the hell out of myself.

After five years, my husband quit his job down in the States and came up here and decided to take a year off. About six months into it, he was getting bored and he decided to come and help me at work. He really enjoyed it and said, "I'd like to work with you." I said, "That's great, except I can't pay you and I don't know what

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Staffing is greatest hurdle

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you can do because you don't cook and you won't serve."

He decided he wanted to do marketing for the company. He figured if he did marketing for the company he could get it big enough so that he could create himself a job. He created a corporate menu brochure for the company, which I never had before, and started going door-to-door with it downtown. He went through every office building downtown. This really paid off and the company started to grow very quickly.

So you had a clear division of labour?

Yes, we had to; otherwise, we would have killed each other.

It's essentially a family business then?

I'm the sole owner, but Michael works in the business as a managing partner.

Your revenues have gone from \$500,000 in 1991 to more than \$6 million in 2006. Some businesses keep their revenues close to the vest. Why don't you have a problem with making it public?

I don't know why you would want to hide it. I think it's something to be proud of: what we've accomplished as a team. We are aggressively looking forward because we've got 2010 coming up and in order to handle the business that's going to come our way, we need to stop thinking like a small business.

It also gives women a little bit of inspiration. We started by throwing in \$5,000 each 20 years ago and now it's a \$6 million company. It's kind of a fun concept to get your head around. I had no idea it would get this big. My goal was to be the best. By doing that we became the biggest in Western Canada for this type of catering.

Do women and men do business differently?

Women are more nurturing. There's a lot of female energy in this business. We have about 70 percent women in our business right now (there are currently 60 full-time and 100 part-time staff at Culinary Capers).

I believe it is a little more difficult for women to get going in business and to be taken seriously by banks and investors.

Why do you think that is?

A lot of times, if you're a young woman, they're probably thinking that she's going to get tired of this in a couple of years and go and have babies. Thanks to all the women who have been successful at being an entrepreneur and raising a family, I believe that these perceptions are not as prevalent as they were twenty years ago.

In the last 15 years there's been an incredible growth of women starting businesses and moving up the corporate ladder. Is this something you've

noticed in your day-to-day dealings?

For sure. In the organizations I'm involved in, we're seeing a lot more women entrepreneurs. I'm a member of EO (Entrepreneurs' Organization) and our female membership is growing and you have to own a company that is doing a minimum of \$1 million dollars in sales and employs 10 people to qualify.

In the catering business there's always been a strong group of women. I've been meeting some incredible women through another organization called the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs. I've met women who own construction companies and concrete companies and businesses that you would typically think would be a man's company.

Has this recent demographic shift changed the way you do business?

We have always dealt with a lot of women because they seem to be the ones who come to us for the food. Usually it's the women who are doing the ordering. One thing we have done is to make it as easy as possible to order, because if they are career women and if they have families to look after, they are really, really busy.

We try to make it a one-stop shop. We can supply florals, décor, invitations, food and event planning. We strive to make the process they have to go through as easy, swift and professional as possible, so we don't waste any of their time. We'll source venues for clients and take care of all the event details if that is what they need.

Was it a conscious decision to have so many women on staff or was it just the way it worked out?

It wasn't a conscious decision. I think women take this industry a little more seriously as a career. For a lot of guys it might be a stop along the way. Even in the kitchen in cooking, I think a lot of male chefs don't realize how exciting being a caterer is compared to being in a restaurant where you're stuck with the same menu, the same theme, the same food, the same number of seats every day. We're going to different locations all the time. We're catering for four people or 4,000. It's very challenging, very fun and very creative.

What's the wildest event you've worked in your 20 years of working this business?

The craziest thing I've done was one of those "Oh shit" moments when I thought, "Oh boy, maybe I've bitten off more than I can chew here."

We bid on BC-Canada Place in Torino, Italy to do the catering there. I've catered in other places – down in the States, in different parts of Canada – but I've never been over to Europe.

We won the contract and when we went over we had eight confirmed jobs for the government and 10 others for different firms from BC. By the time we left Torino,

we had done 42 events in three weeks.

The first event was for the opening of the House and it was supposed to be for 80 people. We flew over with three days to get ready with a small crew because we didn't need that many people. We got stuck in Chicago so that left us with two days, which was still fine to get ready for 80 people. By the time we landed in Italy, the party had gone up to 400 people. That was scary.

We had two days to pull it all together. Do all the prep, do all the shopping. Some of our equipment got lost. We didn't have enough staff to do a party of 400 there and no time to recruit. I had some friends coming in from England and France and I put them to work.

We bumped into a girl in the market buying food and she helped us interpret with the shopkeepers. It turned out she was an exchange student and I asked her if she wanted to work for us at the Olympics and she said, "Yes." She called eight of her school friends and they came and worked the parties. That was the catering gods coming to the rescue!

What's the largest event you've done?

It was a party for 4,500 people for the NHL All-Star Game when it was held in Vancouver. The biggest job we had done prior to that was about 500. It was a wildly challenging, wonderful event and the client was thrilled with the job we did. That really put us on the map in the local community as someone who could cater really big events.

And what was the most fun event you've done?

We did a tsunami relief party at a client's home. For entertainment they had the Bare Naked Ladies performing, Sarah McLachlan, Robin Williams, Chantal Kreviazuk and Rod Stewart. It was an amazing night. They raised \$1.75 million through ticket sales to the event and donations.

You've won a lot of awards, is there one that stands out above others?

I've been in *Profit Magazine's* Top 100 Women Entrepreneurs in Canada for four years in a row; I enjoy it because I'm slowly climbing up. I want to get to number one, but I don't think there's a hope in hell of that unless I live to be 95 and can still cater. For 2006 I came in at number 79.

What's your biggest challenge right now?

Our biggest challenge right now is human resources. We are ramping up for our busy season, the economy is hot, our business is growing and there is a labour shortage. We are fortunate that we have an excellent reputation and a happy, vibrant work environment which helps us attract great people, but even with that we find we must be constantly recruiting to fill all

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"The craziest thing I've done was one of those 'Oh shit' moments when I thought, 'Oh boy, maybe I've bitten off more than I can chew.'"



PHOTO: John Watson

THE SISTERHOOD: 70 percent of Culinary Capers staff is female. Here, Debra Lykemark speaks with executive chef Margaret Chisholm

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Advice for newbies: spend on marketing

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the new positions created by our growth.

What is your vision for the business?

My long-term vision is getting us ready for 2010. We are steadily growing at about 20 percent a year. It's an exciting amount of growth without being too overwhelming. My focus in the business is getting all of our infrastructure in place because by the time we get to 2010 we're going to be around a \$10 million company, but I think there's going to be an additional \$5 million around the Olympics so we're going to take a big leap there.

I want to get all the management and systems in place for that. We're going to have to do some renovations and expansion to our building, which we bought last year. We also want to go to Beijing to cater at the BC Canada Pavilion during the 2008 Summer Olympic Games.

We're working on the request for proposal for that right now. It's a bidding process and I don't know if we're going to get it, but I think we've got a good chance because of our experience catering at BC Canada Place dur-

ing the 2006 Winter Olympics.

What does your typical client look like?

We have a few different groupings of clients. A large part of our clientele is corporate; which is divided between corporate drop off and corporate full service.

For full-service corporate catering, in addition to the food we would supply service staff and possibly other services such as floral, décor and event planning. These clients often spin off into becoming social clients as well.

We divide social catering into two categories as well. We do a lot of drop-off for social clients who are having small parties or a holiday meal and do not need staff. Then there is the full-service social catering, which would be events such as weddings, birthday parties, memorials or dinner parties where we would supply the client with staff and possibly floral, décor and event planning.

Then there's the large fundraisers like the sitdown dinner for 550 for the Surrey Mayor's Dinner and large gala events for incentive groups and conferences visiting Vancouver.

Can you identify any single event at that five-year mark that led to the big jump?

It was the marketing. It was actually having the brochure and having somebody out there selling the business, rather than just waiting for the phone to ring. We were being proactive. It was something I wish I had done prior to that, but it's hard when you don't have any money, to bite the bullet, to print the material and hire someone to do that.

It's one piece of advice that I would say to anyone starting a business: have a marketing plan and have some money put aside for it because it will really help get you going.

What are you reading right now?

I'm crazy about motivational books. I don't read fluffy books. I just read an incredible one called *The Success Principles* by Jack Canfield. It's quite thick, but if you read just one motivational book, this is the one. It takes every motivational tool and does a chapter on it. ■