



## **Cutting Edge Catering**

### **Serving up the Next Big Thing in a food-crazed world**

*By Janice Kennedy, Ottawa Citizen*

When Erin Clatney's assistant took ill last month, Clatney did the only thing she could possibly do, in the circumstances. She rolled up her sleeves and made 2,800 fancy hors d'oeuvres. Over three days. By herself.

Potato bites with pancetta and crème fraiches, shrimp on sugarcane, crostini with chevre avocado, spicy crab cakes with...2,800 of them.

The 32-year old founder of DISH Catering, one of Ottawa's newest entries in an increasingly competitive field, had three weekend social events depending on her, and she wasn't going to let a minor details like the mass production of hors d'oeuvres get in the way.

Clatney and DISH have been part of the Ottawa food-service scene for less than a year. But there's no shortage of demand for her services. In a matter of months, Clatney has gone from serving appreciative friends great food and lots of enthusiasm — to registering her business, setting up shop in a renovated commercial kitchen space, and taking out the huge requisite liability insurance that she says is her single biggest business expense.

Now, with full-time assistance (most of the time) of a graduate of the Stratford Chef School, she shows up at gatherings large and small in venues across the city — at least two events per week — serving up an approach that emphasizes fun and combines it with food that is contemporary and stylish.

Seems like a good fit for someone who grew up around food (her father owned a restaurant in downtown Toronto), who started cooking at the age of 10 and who admits, simply, "I love feeding people."

DISH Catering

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Clatney says she's never followed a recipe in her life, although she does admit to being inspired by her neighbour Richard Nigro (of Juniper Kitchen and Wine Bar) and her friend Stephen Beckta (of Beckta Dining and Wine, Ottawa's hottest new restaurant). Whatever the source of her inspiration, she lets her imagination wander freely across the culinary landscape, creating menus based on the seasons and personal whim.

Food should not be intimidating, she believes, and she likes to incorporate an element of fun. SO shell sever soup — perhaps a pear-and-sweet-potato — in shot glasses. She'll remodel old-fashioned comfort food, giving it a sly presentation. When she catered a Privy Council party, for example, she served her updated beer-battered fish and chips in a twist on the traditional: instead of wrapping it in newspaper, she served mini-cups of it in the newsprint pages of Frank magazine. And the chips were made from Peruvian Blue sweet potatoes and Yukon Gold potatoes.

Costs range across the spectrum. For cocktail events, she usually charges \$12 to \$20 per person, the higher amount being for higher-end fare, perhaps with organic food. For a five-course DISH dinner, you can expect to pay anywhere from \$22 a person (for a summary meal that might start with a gazpacho made from heirloom tomatoes and include greens with slow-roasted yellow beets and goat cheese) to \$55. The pricier meal might feature little delights such as Parmesan custards with anchovy dressing and palate cleansing sorbet to set off autumnal smoked venison in chili crepes and sumptuous piece of Canadian beef tenderloin with mini-Yorkshire puddings.

Clatney still remembers the feeling she had a year ago at the end of her first official catering job. It was a holiday party and she had served 40 people a variety of such edible delights as grilled tiger shrimp on raspberry chipotle tasting spoons and lemongrass skewers with Thai chicken and mango cilantro dip. The reviews had been glowing. She didn't even mind having to plow the evening's profits into a car repair bill for the bumper she mangles on the way home.

"It was perfect, and I was in a happy space. It really was a not work." She hesitates — and then says it anyway. "I've had that feeling when I've given birth."

For today's generations of caterers, that motivation is half the fun. You can look for all kinds of complex core psychology, but it's actually very simple, Clatney says.

"Catering is just a great way to make happy."

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