



FOOD FOR A CAUSE

Ottawa Art Gallery fundraiser brings chefs together to the joy of foodies

Like so many arts groups, cuts in government funding have forced galleries to look elsewhere for money to pay for exhibits, youth and student programs, panel discussions and tours.

How to do this? The Ottawa Art Gallery has decided to go the popular silent auction route. More than 45 regional artists are producing pieces for the event and donating a majority of the purchase price to the gallery. But even if you aren't looking to pick up a new painting this week, you can support this worthy cause by buying a ticket and enjoying a night of fabulous food and funky cocktails.

The tickets are \$60 in advance (\$30 of which tax deductible). At first, that may seem a hefty price just to get you through the door, but consider that your ticket also includes an open wine and beer bar, a specially-concocted martini for the event, and hors d'oeuvres and a dessert bar from more than 15 of the city's finest restaurants.

To cater an event like this — the gallery is selling 400 tickets — would cost upwards of \$20,000 and that's before buying any alcohol. If the gallery had that kind of money, it wouldn't need to have a fundraiser. The only way to realize this event is for restaurants to donate their time and food, and for someone with restaurant experience to volunteer to organize it. Enter Erin Clatney, owner of DISH Catering.

Clatney, whose success in the less than three years that she's been operating is remarkable, first organized the food for the event last year when the previous coordinator unexpectedly declined.

"I felt it was an honour, even if it was a volunteer position," says Clatney.

An honour to be asked, possibly, but taking it on was also a big risk. Clatney had never been to the event, she had only a few months to organize it and she had some big changes

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in mind. If the event went off smoothly, a few patrons may remember her company's name and possibly even book DISH for a future event. But if there were problems Clatney would jeopardize her newly-minted reputation.

She charged ahead anyway. One of the major changes she made was to switch the food service from buffet to almost entirely passed hors d'oeuvres. This would allow the food to be served gradually over the evening, ensuring those who came late still got fed. But she was only able to do this because Moonlight Event Services donated serving staff to actually pass the food around and explain what it was and who made it.

She also approached upscale restaurants to participate, convincing them to donate to the cause.

"I'm eager," laughs Clatney. "I wanted to turn it up a notch and the board was receptive to that."

It worked. Last year's event raised \$61,000, \$20,000 increase over the previous year's take. She spent at least 100 hours on the project and agreed to do it again this year. She claims it's "fun", although I'm not sure that's how I'd characterize cramming more than a dozen chefs and restaurant owners into a small gallery room, each creating their special tidbit without a kitchen.

"I think it's fabulous to get all these great chefs in one room, working for a shared mission," says Clatney, who truly seems to relish the vent. "There's a creative outlet that's inspiring. You take it from nothing, and then it's something."

Others must share her joy, because they are each donating 400 hors d'oeuvres to the event. The restaurants contributing to JUXT@pose including Juniper, Les Fougères, Beckta Dining and Wine, Luxe Bistor, and Savana Café. Epicuria is putting out a spread of desserts, Urban Pear is offering up a local goat cheese with prosciutto, topped with candied rhubarb and pear compote. The new Elgin Street Freehouse will make a veal with spinach on Parmesan crostini with a radish mignonette, while the NAC Le Café will be retuning with its popular hand-rolled sushi station.

As for Clatney, DISH is providing Margarita Popsicles and a Kobe beef and prawn bento box. She says she'll keep helping at the event unless she comes to a point that it has become stale and someone new is needed "to breathe new life into it."

In the meantime, she isn't bothered by the time it's taking up, or surprised at the willingness of others to help out.

"People love donating their time," she says. "I think as humans we need that. It gets addictive."

And that's something we could all get hooked on.

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