



## MOBILE MORSELS

### Today's caterer will comply with any request—even lowering a meal into a ravine

*By Andre Lariveire, Food Services and Hospitality Magazine*

As caterers of custom-tailored food extravaganzas, caterers have come a long way from the days when all they had to worry about was providing tasty, hot food at a specific location.

Whether it's a chef-led cooking class for six, breakfast for 60 in the great Canadian wilderness, or an elaborately detailed theme party for 600, today's dynamic caterer is up for the challenge.

Despite economic turbulence, the past few years have seen the development of a new level of maturity in off-premise catering. On the client side, media-inspired culinary awareness and a greater appreciation of food have resulted in a demand for sophisticated food experiences. In response, caterers and the companies that support them have collaborated to improve on the design, preparation and presentation of mobile needs.

Meet four catering companies that not only exemplify this uncompromising commitment to success, they do their own way

Erin Clatney's 15 years of front-and-back-of-house experience in pubs and fine dining restaurants around Southern Ontario was the only solid foundation of her catering venture.

"I had no business plan, nor did I sit down to map this out," says Clatney, DISH's president and owner.

When a friend enlisted Clatney's catering services for a single event, Clatney underpriced her services. "I lost my shirt," she declares. Fortunately, that first cheap even snowballed into a bona fide business. "I'm the accidental caterer," she laughs. Beyond great word-of-mouth marketing, she credits positive press coverage for a critical boost. "If the media dub you the 'new hot thing', it can carry you for a while."

DISH Catering

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Based in a 1,200-sq-ft. commercial kitchen in Ottawa's gourmet-centric neighborhood of Westboro, DISH specialized in high-end catering for dinner parties, weddings and other events, employs two full-time chefs, as well as a sommelier and an event planner, both on a contract basis. The company projects sales of \$250,000 in 2004, based on an average of two to three events per week.

With the intent to specialize in on-site cooking, Clatney invested her first year's profits in equipment: four induction cooktops. A 15-ft.-by-15-ft. walk-in cooler, carry-alls and vehicles. "Having the cooks [at the event venue] makes it more dynamic and adds another dimension people rarely get at a restaurant, unless they have a chef's table," she explains.

Clatney accompanies her team to every event and has developed an exclusive staff of freelance servers that "have the knowledge, a connection with food and are able to present it in a way that tantalizes guests," she says. DISH's scrumptious menus highlight local, seasonal and mostly organic foods. "We know local suppliers and producers personally and can describe how the products are grown or raised, which makes a difference to clients of highend catering.

Her most requested events are for stand-up cocktail/dinner parties with 12- to 15-course tasting menus, most paired with wines, including popular bites of duck, squab and game meats. "IO encourage people to order foods they wouldn't prepare at home, and we ensure it's presented in way that encourages everyone to try it," Clatney explains. Coping with fad diets is a hassle, she says, though her team always puts extra effort into organic and vegetarian dishes 'because guest appreciate it and most hosts are willing to reward it."

Clatney has added event planning and personalized services which have been hits with clients. "For example, we'll order wine on consignment and offer clients the opportunity to reserve cases of desired bottles to make their event that much more exclusive."

As she juggles the growth of her small business with her family life and three young children, Clatney is determined to make sure the quality of DISH's food and service never wavers. "[Though] demand is high, we're limiting the number of events we take on to maintain quality of our food and also of our personal relationships," she says. "We don't intend to mass-produce or dilute our personal on-site attention."

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