

Enterprise

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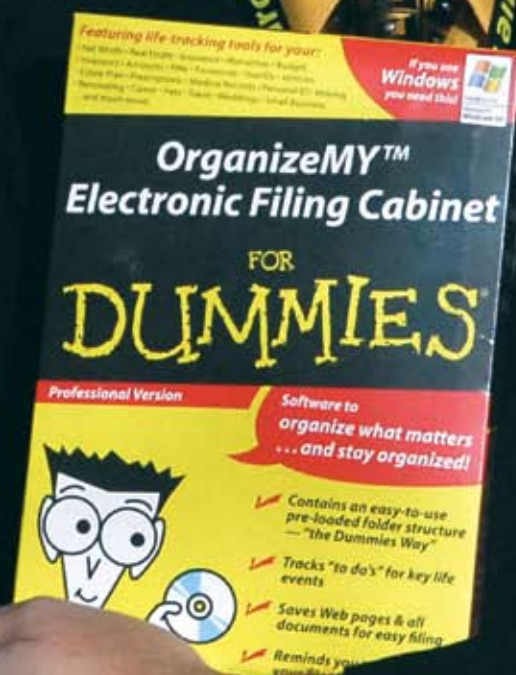
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COOKING UP A NEW BUSINESS

BY FELECHIA BRODIE

Can you really make a living doing what you love? It sounds like a dream, but Michelle Zimmer has made it come true. She left a successful career as an environmental engineer in Vancouver to launch a professional catering company called Wild Serendipity Foods in Saskatoon. Her love of good food has translated into a healthy business and nomination for a major regional business award.

Michelle spent 10 years working in a corporate environment. A self-described “foodie”, she always noticed the food



at business events and lunches, along with what worked and what didn't. Building on that experience, Michelle discovered her niche market: corporate catering.

Corporate clients fit Michelle's marketing plan in several ways. She understands their needs; they have the budget for professional catering and they keep regu-

lar business hours—important to a young mother running a new business. Wild Serendipity Foods caters to some of the largest companies in town and has quickly developed a reputation for remarkable quality and beautiful presentation.

A talent for presentation also helps Michelle differentiate her business in an extremely competitive market. First, there's the business name. “I always knew I had to use the word ‘serendipity’ if I ever had my own business. Sometimes people don't know how to spell it, but they always remember it.” An impressionistic VanGogh-style sunflower is her trademark logo and a casual, unique style marks her product packaging and commercial kitchen. Fresh green walls, garden furniture and old-world candelabras set a comfortable stage for her popular cooking classes. Wild Serendipity Foods has a distinctive “look and feel” that customers remember.

Michelle's style is strongly inspired by the ten years she spent in Vancouver and Victoria. With food trends two or three years ahead of other areas, Vancouver's influence had Michelle cooking on the freshest edge of West Coast style. “I don't think that will change now that I live in Saskatoon,” says Michelle. “I regularly research emerging food trends, including new products featured at the annual Fancy Foods Show in San Francisco. I read new cookbooks like novels and watch the Food Network like sports fans watch ESPN.” Michelle's brand builds on her reputation for delivering prepared food that isn't readily available locally. It leaves local foodies hungry for more.

Common wisdom says you need the right “connections” to break into the market and Michelle found ways to create them. “I didn't know many people in Saskatoon's corporate world and I worried about how to set up a corporate catering business when I didn't have the connections. The Farmer's Market changed all that. People who bought my food on Saturday hired me when they went back to the office on Monday, or recommended me to their friends. In a few months I was very busy. By Christmas I was so busy that I had to re-focus the business, or risk losing the standards I had set for quality and presentation and I wasn't willing to do that.”

Not a natural extrovert, Michelle developed a more outgoing character she could slip into while selling products at the Farmer's Market or leading a cooking class. She also used the time she spent with customers to learn more about their likes and dislikes and what they were missing in the local food scene. That led to changes in the business as well. “I started offering more vegetarian and vegan menu choices in response to what customers were asking for. And I took the time to meet with catering client and find out everything I could about their event. Then I would design a customized menu to fit.”

Coming years could see an expansion of Wild Serendipity Foods into the commercial retail market. Michelle currently sells “designer” mustards and special condiments that she'd like to see on national supermarket shelves. With the success she's had at setting and achieving goals you know she'll hit any target in her sites. For more information, visit her website: www.wildserendipity.com. **E**

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