

BUSINESS

Work Is Her Success Secret

Wilson caters to the whims of her customers

by Sheila Schmitz

THERE are no secrets to business success. It takes work.

"I don't know how I've survived this long," said caterer Dorothy Wilson, 32. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that for the past five years she has worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day. She admits to lately taking off about two days a month. "The bigger you get, the harder it is to continue to meet the demand and take good care of your customers."

That's the other non-secret about smart business: take care of the customers. It's a rule Wilson has woven into her growing catering company, which, in response to an oft-ringing phone, has relocated to a 2,000 square-foot headquarters in the Old



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GREG PIO

Sash Mill. Prior to last June she held forth in a Live Oak kitchen with a fourth of the working space she has now.

Before that she was in restaurant management in Hawaii. But "I had no chance to play with food," she said. She later found other people also interested in food, and they found themselves in the kitchen. Soon people began asking Wilson and her staff to help with their parties. Impressed guests asked them to help at more get-togethers. Before she knew it, Wilson was knee-deep in parties. So she went into the business.

Now she's hip-deep in them. Last year Dorothy Wilson Caterers gave 360 parties, sometimes four in a weekend, serving a total of 2,000 people. "People in Santa Cruz have been good to me," she said. "I still have my

first customers. That makes me feel good."

So does the not-so-simple act of feeding people. "I used to ask myself, 'why am I doing this? I'm tired, my back hurts, this is nuts...' but then we'd get the food laid out, and people would come in and ooh and ahh, and I knew I'd do it again. There's something about feeding people. The phone keeps ringing, and as long as people want me to work for them, I don't think I could ever say no."

So the phone rings a lot. Often the person at the end of the line asks Wilson about her available menus. But the customized menus are limited only by the imaginations of her and her clients. And, of course, her client's available funds. "If we've never done something before, we research it. We practice it until we get it right." Then she sends the questioner a proposal based on the phone conversation, and later they meet at the future party site. There they go through what is needed, from tables and chairs to "china, flowers, umbrellas and dancing elephants."

When everything is pinned down Wilson and her six full-timers begin work on things such as gravlax a la Francaise; fettucini with wild mushrooms; lemon sorbet; breast of chicken with raspberry sauce; breast of quail; wild duck; chestnut puree in onion; campagnon rolls, Italian rum cake and cordials.

"Chef Wendy Rosner makes the food taste good," said Wilson. "Artistic director Nancy Butler makes it beautiful." A whole, fresh salmon may get a covering of light green cucumber "scales." Steamed pea pods form a trailing tail on a clay-form peacock on another table. The whole team is after a refreshing, classy look. Lots of color. Lots of flowers. No ice statues here. And no fish molds "with aspic all over them," Wilson says. "I hate that stuff."

Dorothy Wilson's come a ways since her start five years ago as Dorothy Wilson, caterer. Where will she be in another five years?

"I'll be calling from the French Riviera, asking how it's going at (kitchen) number 2." •

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