

Gumption, grit build catering business

By Francine Brevetti | Business Writer

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MAYBE IT WAS the five older brothers. Or maybe it was the ducks. Whatever it was in Oakland caterer Barbara Llewellyn's childhood that honed her skills into a sharp crystal, she took to the challenge well.

The youngest in the Mayo family that raised ducks and chickens in Cape Cod, Mass., Llewellyn grew up helping her mother in the family's affiliated catering business, while her brothers supported the father's duck farm enterprise. Meanwhile, Llewellyn fended off the bullying of five older roughhousing males.

"The very first thing my parents had me making was frosting and then chocolate chip Toll House cookies" — at about age 12, Llewellyn recalled. "At the end of 10 years, I was doing the accounting, payroll and working in sales on catering contracts."

Today, the Orinda resident runs a successful catering business from Oakland with a combination of elegance and grit. She's the kind of person you could throw into an alien environment and she'll end up with the prize. Her education was in art, but she couldn't find a job teaching art, which was her original plan.

"So I did the one thing I knew," she said, "which of course was the hospitality business."

Llewellyn went to a local eatery to make salads and pastries and wait on tables. From then on, she had a succession of jobs exposing her to all the varieties of food service — from running the kitchen of a retirement residence to a large coffee shop at a Hyatt hotel, and as chef of a West

Palm Beach resort. She has managed the dining room of a country club as well as managed housekeeping for of a country club as well as managed housekeeping for a large hotel.

She had married and was raising two children when she gave up working outside the home 20 years ago. And then casually, as portentous things often happen, someone asked her if she would help them with their party.

"It was just a domino effect," she said, and it has been a succession of clients ever since. She formed her business, Barbara Llewellyn Catering & Event Planning, in 1986 in her Orinda home.

"The first year I made about \$5,000," Llewellyn said. "I was amazed I could do that while raising two children. I was doing it all by myself for the first four years in my house."

She finally had to move out of her house and find another kitchen, still making sure to keep active in the lives of her two sons and their school events.

Fifteen years ago, she rented a corner of the kitchen of chef Andre Mercier, who formerly owned Mirassou, a local restaurant. Seven years ago, she bought that building on 25th Street in Oakland and recently bought the warehouse across the road.

"Leveraged up to the hilt," she quipped with a broad smile.

Not that she's frightened. She'll take on dragons.

A few years ago, when Dr. and Mrs. David Lawrence had yet to build out their retirement home in Geyserville, they asked Llewellyn to cater their daughter Jennifer's wedding there. There was no building. There were no utilities, no water, no plumbing.

"Barbara was phenomenal. She brought in generators, drinking water and portable toilets," David Lawrence said. "We had tents and arranged lighting and outdoor cooking and we had a live band. It was a totally out-of-door experience.

"Barbara is always on an even keel and has a can-do attitude."

The high point of her career, Llewellyn reckons, was her experience preparing the wedding reception for former Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown and his bride, Anne Gust.

Llewellyn was away on vacation when she heard that Brown had announced his engagement. By long-distance, she instructed her staff to pitch their business, but they never got a response. Upon her return, the mayor and his fiancée were attending a large public function that Llewellyn was catering; she made sure to waylay them in the kitchen and regale them with canapes. Llewellyn's famed cuisine and salesmanship got the job.

Twenty years after that first party arranged from her kitchen, she racked up \$3 million in sales in 2006. A year ago, she hired a director of operations so she could involve herself more in sales and marketing.

Her new thrust in business is the rental of furniture and all the accoutrements of an entertainment experience. This is what the 25th Street warehouse is for.

"Her warehouse can be transformed into an elegant dining room," said longtime client Jennifer Wilson, a Lafayette-based financial planner.

Wilson sponsors a monthly luncheon or dinner for her women's business group. Llewellyn is always the caterer, and the quality of her table has drawn new members to Wilson's group, the financial planner said.

Among her clients have been Bechtel Corp., Boston Scientific Corp., Chevron Corp., Muscular Dystrophy Association and the Marin and Orinda film festivals.

The San Francisco Business Times cited her firm as being among the 100 largest women-owned businesses in the Bay Area in 2006 and among the 100 fastest-growing private companies in the Bay Area the same year.



BARBARA LLEWELLYN is celebrating the 20th anniversary of her Oakland business, Barbara Llewellyn Catering & Event Planning. (LAURA ODA - Staff)