

## BUSINESS

### Creative menus cater to fine taste for mom with sense of adventure

**WOMEN**

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A decade after emigrating from Israel alone and eager for adventure, Leah Spiegel walked into Dean & DeLuca's, the upscale Manhattan gourmet specialty food store and took a look at the pastries. "I can do that, and I can do that for less," thought the North Brunswick resident said. So she went out and got business cards made up and then telephoned Dean & DeLuca's. "I make pastries and pies," Spiegel said. "Can I do something for you?" To her great surprise, Spiegel was invited to bring in some of her desserts. "I couldn't believe my ears," she said. "They wanted a sample I was dancing in the streets of New York City." It was a poppy seed bread that launched Spiegel's gourmet catering company. Her first order, for 30 small braids, brought in a cool \$180 and marked the beginning of a lengthy relationship with Dean & DeLuca's. It also enabled her to fulfill a dream: "I am a mother and I wanted to find a way to make a go of having some work, but not like 9 to 5," she said. "And I loved cooking and baking." Today, four years later, Spiegel no longer delivers desserts to food boutiques like Dean & DeLuca's. "It was too much wear and tear," she said. She recalled the early morning treks across the Hudson with her children in the back seat and cakes in the trunk of her 1985 grey Oldsmobile. Delivering four cakes here, a bunch of pastries there after cooking throughout the night to deliver them fresh "was very hard," she said. Also, "I am not more of a baker than a cook. I like to do both those things."

Today, Spiegel's business has evolved from "Leah's Cakes" to "Catering by Leah," a home-based gourmet foods and desserts maker. Her customers are no longer food boutiques, but home and office clients. "She's very inventive with the kinds of things she puts together," said LaurieBeth Goldman, a member of the Middlesex chapter of the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners (NJAWBO), where Spiegel serves on the board and gets many of her customers. "Her food is always a surprise and it's always terrific." Spiegel says she uses no artificial ingredients, bakes with butter, prepares everything from scratch, including the bread used to make finger sandwiches and tomato sauce that goes into her entrees and hors d'oeuvres. "This is where the taste is," she said. "Give me a mix and I get intimidated. But give me four and butter and I know what to do with them. I'll make a nice pie out of it. This is how I grew up. I still stick to it because I think it is a better way."

By deliberately keeping her company small with no em-

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— Leah Spiegel

ployees, Spiegel can change the focus of her business at any time, stay home with her children, work when she wants and not when she doesn't. She even gets to take annual family vacations, something unheard of for many entrepreneurs.

Spiegel said revenues from the business are sufficient for her to live on, and — if she struggled — to send her children, Stephanie, 7, and Zachary, 5, to college. "I would be able to live and have a car, but not this house," she said. "This house," with its \$2,000 monthly mortgage payment, "is courtesy of my husband, Ed."

Spiegel said caterers with large commercial kitchens and staff "make a lot of money" — over \$300,000 annually, "I work only by myself."

Catering is a highly competitive business. Nationwide, the National Restaurant Association in Washington listed 6,114 caterers in 1993, the latest year data was available.

In the New Brunswick area telephone directory, 115 caterers are listed in the Yellow Pages — from Quick Cheeks, which prepare sandwiches on a platter, to Double D Caterers in Old Bridge, which specializes in home-made salads, hot and cold buffets and elegant Venetian dessert carts. Hotels, restaurants, delis and fast-food establishments also cater.

"In a way, they are all my competition, and in a way they are not," said Spiegel. "Mine is not a mass-produced product. Everybody does things a little differently."

No figures could be obtained on how many catering firms are owned by women, or how many caterers are part of New Jersey's 12,000 food establishments.

Spiegel said she encountered some obstacles developing the business. "It's kind of hard to make a go of a business, especially a food business, when you have two little kids," she said. "Food is very time consuming and labor intensive. Kids are time consuming and labor intensive too."

"I feel I need to be with them as much as I can," she said. "I really feel children deserve the best, at least from one of their parents."

There are many times, Spiegel says, when she cooks throughout the night and delivers early the next morning. "If I need to do a job, I don't go to sleep 100%," she said.

Spiegel said she must be prepared for almost anything because it is impossible to know how big the next order will be or when it will come in.

"Retail is like that," she said. "It's hard, but I am a good detail person and I plan very carefully. You'll never catch me without 60 pounds of butter in the house. I am always ready."

When a big job comes in, Spiegel's adrenalin starts to



PHOTO BY CAROL RAY

"When I got off the plane from Israel, I thought a nickel was more than a dime because it was bigger," said Leah Spiegel, who quickly learned the monetary ropes and now operates a gourmet catering business in North Brunswick.

pump. "It goes up, up, up, and when the job is over it goes down, down, down," she said. Then, like other entrepreneurs, when the party is over, she frets "am I ever going to get another job, or was this it?"

The catering business is cyclical, which may make certain types of entrepreneurs uneasy, according to Spiegel. "I go nuts around November and December," and stay busy every major holiday, including the Jewish holidays, she said. But in the spring, people's thoughts turn from party parties to "bathing suits" — that they have to fit into them in the summer.

During slow periods, "I relax and look back, and forward and plan," she said.

Spiegel does not advertise her business. She did once, and got a poor response. "No ad in the paper will do justice to the kind of food I make and the kind of enthusiasm I have about food," she said. "Would you hire somebody from the Yellow Pages?"

Aside from getting referrals through NJAWBO, new business often comes as a result of word-of-mouth endorsements from satisfied clients. "In order to break into certain circles, I can't call and say 'I am doing a wonderful job, hire me,'" she said. "Anybody can say that. It needs to be that I did something for their neighbors, their friends, their family. They will, in turn, hire me for themselves."

Spiegel graduated from high school in Haifa, Israel. She earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from Tel Aviv University in 1978.

She arrived at Kennedy Airport in 1981 alone, eager for adventure and clutching some telephone numbers of distant acquaintances in New York and Philadelphia.

But instead of adventure, she found a teaching job in East Brunswick. "I taught every year the same class," she said. "I can't stand it. I must have something new and different and a new challenge. And look, I got it here!"

Creating and operating a business satisfied Spiegel's natural yearning for excitement, diversity, risk taking and the chance to be inventive.

When her mother visits America, Spiegel said people ask her if she taught her daughter everything she knows about cooking. But as a child growing up in Israel, Spiegel said her mother never let her near the kitchen, fearing she might get dirty.

Spiegel said her mother constantly lectured her to stop playing with her food. Now, "playing with food is what I do" for a living, she said.

Spiegel's menus reflect that creativity. She makes pumpkin boursin cheese-cake with pecans; cranberry walnut tart; caramel pecan apple upside down pie, sage and three-cheese focaccia bread; endive-filled Italian caponata with eggplant, tomatoes, onion and olives; Greek pizza topped with shrimp, feta cheese, black balsamio olives, and green and red peppers.

On the day of her interview, Spiegel has prepared baked lamb with risotto, garlic and plum tomato; and red kidney beans ground with garlic, parsley and other spices.

It was in high school home economics classes that Spiegel discovered her love of cooking. Once in business for herself, she learned to price her products using formulas found in catering books.

Spiegel invested only about \$2,500 to start her business, buying pots and pans, ingredients, gadgets, chafing dishes, food processors, a commercial refrigerator. She earned a profit the second year of her business.

"I grew up to be very domesticated," Spiegel said. "I am now 45 and I still love doing those things. I do change the way women did them 80 years ago. This is how I express myself."

Spiegel does not know what her business will look like in the future. But "I see myself doing food for the rest of my life," she said. "I see a lot of catering, a lot of references and a lot of happy clients and repeat customers."

PAGE 2