



FoodHub in the News

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By Diane Dietz

Chefs Seek out a Niche

Many are trying to find a way to cook on their own terms instead of being tied to restaurants

After seven years, Jessie Tennant grew weary of all the things she couldn't control at her Monroe Street Cafe deli and bottle shop in Eugene.

Daily sales were feast or famine.

"It's like maybe somebody will walk through the door this hour; maybe the (help) didn't give away a free beer; maybe a bottle of wine didn't fall off the shelf," she said.

So in March, Tennant shut the restaurant in favor of expanding a sideline — catering pre-made sandwiches to neighborhood markets, hospital cafeterias and college eateries.

Now, Tennant makes 1,300 sandwiches a week on her own schedule and to her own exacting standards.

She buys bread that's organic, produced locally and baked in a wood-fired oven, from Hideaway Bakery. She slices her own meat and cheeses, cracks her own eggs, shuns additives.

"We can make fat sandwiches that are like the joy of the day," she said.

She's an example of chefs locally and nationally who are breaking the bounds of regular restaurant work to find a new niche where they can work creatively with food and customers — on their own terms.

The trend is manifest in such big cities as Los Angeles, Boston and Seattle in the form of pop-up restaurants, in which up-and-coming chefs commandeer the night hours at ordinary sandwich or coffee shops to cook and serve five-course meals for a few days or a week — and then shut down.

These experimental "pop-up" restaurants — along with food carts — were identified as the top trend of 2011 by the 1,500 voting chefs of the National Restaurant Association.

Coming home to Creswell

The closest Lane County comes to a pop-up restaurant, so far, are the five-times-a-year barn dinners offered at a Creswell homestead by chef Heidi Tunnell.

Tunnell trained for 2½ years at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America at Hyde Park, N.Y., after which she spent two seasons as a chef to the stars at the Cannes Film Festival, catering at a beach pavilion and at movie releases and parties.

Tunnell developed world class culinary skills, and then?

“And then you go to Creswell,” she said.

Tunnell’s decision to practice her arts in the tiny town 14 miles south of Eugene isn’t quite as odd as it sounds initially. Her great--grandparents settled in Creswell 60 years ago; Tunnell herself is a 2000 graduate of Sheldon High School.

An apple pie recipe she developed while she was a senior was her ticket to the Hyde Park culinary school and it fetched her a \$7,500 scholarship.

Back in Creswell, Tunnell started catering private dinner parties and baking and selling breads. She renovated an old town church to create a 2,000-square-foot kitchen and also a large dining and meeting area.

She also made a late 1800s barn into a dining room and commenced to serve periodic barn dinners, which she builds around a featured wine and seasonally available foods. The price is \$75 a plate.

“It’s on our own terms,” Tunnell said.

This form of catering gives Tunnell the freedom to innovate, she said. “A lot of catering is platters and pre-set menus.”

But chefs like her who base menus on the ripening of fruits and vegetables have to be flexible.

For each meal, she orders from a long list of area farmers, for example fingerling potatoes from Ruby and Amber’s Organic Oasis in Dorena, cherries from SLO Farm on Seavey Loop and whole-wheat flour from Camas Country Mill in Eugene. She adjusts the menu when a crop is not quite ripe or ready on the day of the meal.

Some customers require extra creativity.

Nike asked for an American--style barbecue for a gathering of executives from around the globe during the USA Outdoor Track & Field Championships in June in Eugene, Tunnell said.

The catering company served its handmade sausages wrapped in dough — a gourmet version of pigs in a blanket.

For a wedding dinner for a Newman's Fish Co. family member, she prepared wild salmon and grilled chicken with fresh-made ricotta cheese and grilled carrot salad.

"You see a lot more people want a more local, authentic experience for their event," Tunnell said.

Seventeen of about 35 Lane County caterers, including Tunnell, are on the Willamette Farm & Food Coalition's list of companies providing locally sourced foods. "There's a growing clientele," coalition executive director Lynne Fessenden said.

Tunnell's other endeavors: She started a family-style dinner held the third Thursday of each month, which costs \$15 to \$18 a person. Drinks, appetizers or desserts are extra.

"The Thursday night dinners, we just like to have fun with," Tunnell said. "It's our night to play restaurant."

On Tuesdays, the catering company sells loaves of bread and features a limited menu of soups and entrees for lunch and dinner.

The catering company normally employs about a dozen people and it maintains a list of temporary workers hired for big events.

"I started it all by myself," Tunnell said. "And even up until two years ago, it was just myself. I finally brought in someone to help me with the baking. That's why it's kind of strange now, I look up and think, 'What are all these employees doing here?'"

Catering allows Tunnell to set limits. For weddings, for example, she tries to avoid those with guest lists exceeding 200.

And this year, she canceled barn dinners in July and August because her first child is due in early August. (The dinners resume on Sept. 17 with wood-fired paella and Oct. 1 with a whole roasted pig.)

"Say you want to go on vacation, you could say 'OK, I'm going to go on vacation — from here to here' (on the calendar) — and just not book any events. When you're in a restaurant you can't do that.

"You have a little bit more control over your life — or feel like you have control over your life. I don't, but I like to feel like I do."

Giving it a shot

Robin Brown-Wood is another local chef finding her niche. She started ALMA Catering last fall after spending 20 years in her early life working for caterers in Ohio.

"I thought, 'I'm going to give it a shot for myself.' I love to cook, so for me it's not work."

Brown-Wood grew up in the South in a family of good cooks, so soul food she knew.

She couldn't find much in Lane County, especially since the passing of chef Ted "Papa Soul" Lee in November 2009. Her catering menu includes Spanish, Greek, Italian and Asian influences.

Brown-Wood, too, buys as much local food as she can. She connects with farmers on the FoodHub website.

Besides serving Muddear's sweet potato pie with bourbon pecan sauce, she makes wild salmon with huckleberry pinot noir sauce.

"There's a huge movement going on about staying local and getting close to the land when it comes to cooking," she said. "I'm anxious to be more of a part of it."

Brown-Wood rents the FOOD For Lane County kitchen. "It's a great commercial kitchen, and it keeps me from having to get my own certified," she said.

She does most of the cooking herself to keep her overhead low, but for events of 300 to 700 she hires one or two helpers from Labor Ready in Springfield.

Brown-Wood caters private parties, corporate events, board dinners and lunches and fundraisers. She emphatically doesn't do weddings.

"I used to do weddings when I catered back East and I know the stress involved when you're dealing with brides and mothers of brides. I just decided my sanity was more important than my bottom line," she said.

She averages four events a month; she declines to disclose her annual sales figures.

"It's actually going better than I expected," she said. "I'm as busy as I want to be."

Hard at play

Tennant, the sandwich maker, increased her business from five to 23 accounts, and a lot of those came after she closed her restaurant in March.

The biggest buyers are the Lane Community College cafeteria and the Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend cafeteria, Tennant said. She makes \$125,000 in annual sales.

But the caterer's big coup came in February when she won a spot on the shelves at the stores of the Junction City-based Dari Mart chain after a two-week campaign with multiple phone calls and a presentation to a 10-member Dari Mart panel that included sandwiches all around.

The food was a hit. "Their sandwiches are fantastic," said Kathy Gibson, Dari Mart stores vice president of operations and marketing. "The bread is Hideaway Bakery, and I love Hideaway Bakery."

“We wanted to bring in something healthier and more wholesome for our customers, and she was looking to expand her business,” Gibson said.

Now Tennant delivers sandwiches to seven of the 44 Dari Marts, and she may in the future be able to increase that number, Gibson said.

Tennant, whose motto is “Work Hard, Play Hard,” is trying to pace her growth, which means taking on a new account, mastering it and getting comfortable before she takes on the next one, she said.

She buys back any sandwiches that don’t sell and donates the leftovers to the Eugene Mission.

Tennant placed her sandwiches at Oakway Fitness, and she hopes to crack the market at other gyms. She hopes eventually to find her way into additional companies.

“I would rather stay small and grow steadily than get too big and not be able to handle it,” she said.

“I don’t want to disappoint anybody. I don’t want to put out a bad product. I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep.”

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