

Her Business Grows By Word of Mouth

by Nancy Rybczynski

Caterer, Marilyn Tunkey specializes in one type of cuisine: real food. Whether it's a Moroccan dinner for the University of Buffalo School of Business Management or an Alice in Wonderland Tea, every item is made from scratch and served on an appropriate table setting. It's what Marilyn Tunkey feels distinguishes her business from an ordinary catering business—superior quality and presentation. And, it's the same thing that keeps Marilyn Tunkey's clients coming back.

Real food for Tunkey means using only the freshest items and the best ingredients. It means cooking with real butter, it means using Charlap's whipping cream with a 40% butterfat content, and it means calling all over the eastern United States and Canada to find 43 fresh ducks to serve at an art gallery dinner.

But being meticulous doesn't mean having to be complicated. "I believe you can be the best caterer and still do simple food, and make it affordable for people," Tunkey says.

She enjoys new challenges. Clients sometimes ask for recipes they've eaten in restaurants in other cities. Tunkey's had great luck getting recipes from chefs across the United States. She says they've always been very helpful. One of her first experiences with a renowned chef was with the late Bert Greene. In her early catering days, Tunkey frantically called him, long distance, when one of his recipes wasn't working. He guided her, over the phone, through the whole recipe. The two remained friends until his recent death. She co-sponsored his visit to the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Museum this past April.

When Tunkey is trying new recipes she calls upon her experiences as a child, dining in some of the finest restaurants in Europe and the United States. She "grew familiar with the taste and presentation of many fine dishes."

CREATIVE APPROACH

Tunkey says that "serving fine food doesn't mean having to be pretentious." In fact, when clients first come to see her, she doesn't rattle off a list of menu items, trying to impress them. Instead, she shows them pictures. She has a collection of color photographs showing prepared dishes, table spreads, and even guests enjoying her food at events. She also likes to draw for clients. Whether she's explaining what a tortellini is or showing the layout of a table, Tunkey feels that pictures best describe her dishes. And she tries to make her clients comfortable by making menus easy to understand, from American dishes to French cuisine.

Tunkey says that clients in Buffalo request a lot of beef dishes. Her own favorites to prepare often use fish or mussels. She recently served an original recipe of grilled trout with apples, peppercorns, honey and Calvados at a local function.

Creativity has another function for Marilyn Tunkey, besides preparation. Food presentation plays an important role in her business. She usually serves on all white or all black dinnerware because food looks most appealing on these colors. Her tables are set to fit the function. Sometimes they're covered in antique linens, baskets and silver. She's wrapped fresh scallions on top of a basket full of cloth napkins for decoration. Other events have required a mark approach, like the use of black plates and bare, black branches at a local gallery show that concerned Hiroshima. Whatever the event, Tunkey and her staff give it appropriate thought. Many of the people working for her are involved in the art field. From film makers to floral arrangers, all seem to add their sense of aesthetics to the business.

Marilyn Tunkey caters for all types of clients, in all kinds of settings. From barbecues to school auctions to corporate functions, the variety is what keeps her business

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Arts in Buffalo

—Caterer (cont'd. from pg. 4)

interesting and fun. She never feels trapped in her profession or limited by clients' tastes. "If they aren't comfortable with my creative style, they go somewhere else," she said. And creative style means catering a Wizard of Oz party or the Alice in Wonderland Tea, complete with tea-cakes and mock turtle soup. Creative also means working in difficult situations like tiny spaces or cooking in a kitchen with no running water. Tunkey enjoys the problem solving.

THE RISE TO THE TOP

Entering the catering business itself, was a study in creative problem solving for Tunkey. She found herself having to suddenly support herself and three children, eight years ago, while feeling she had no real marketable skills. She went to the Displaced Homemakers Center, where they convinced her that her cooking skills were marketable enough to make her a caterer. She began by baking cakes from scratch and taking them to fine dressmaker shops, and leaving business cards. Clients began calling almost immediately. Tunkey recently received the Entrepreneur of the Year Award from the Displaced Homemaker Center and the Department of Labor.

Tunkey regularly attends upper level classes at the Callary Institute of America, in Hyde Park, New York. It's an atmosphere she finds exciting. She also attends Cornell University, part-time, on scholarship, to study Business Management.

After working out of her home kitchen for five years, Tunkey moved into her current location at 2508 Main Street, in Buffalo, three years ago. She now has 70 people on the payroll to keep up with a business that doubles every year. Tunkey has never needed to use conventional advertising, since all her clients come to her through referrals. In addition to catering, she also teaches cooking classes, one of her favorite aspects of the business.

Tunkey would like to see her business continue to grow in the future. She says she's addicted to it. And there are no plans to leave Western New York, although people hint at the success she could achieve elsewhere. "Buffalo has been good to me," she says. And Marilyn Tunkey takes pride in showing clients from various places that Buffalo's cuisine can compete with the best anywhere.



Marilyn Tunkey at work in her Main Street kitchen.

Marilyn Tunkey shared a summer recipe with *Arts in Buffalo*. The week of August 16-21 she'll be demonstrating Recipes for a Hot Summer at Arpark.

SALADE NICOISE I

- 2 teaspoons mustard, preferably Dijon or Dusseldorf
- 2 tablespoons wine vinegar/1-1/2 teaspoons salt
- 1 or 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 6 tablespoons peanut or vegetable oil
- 6 tablespoons olive oil
- Freshly ground pepper
- Lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme or 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 pounds green beans
- 2 green peppers
- 4 ribs celery, approximately
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes
- 5 medium, red-skinned potatoes, cooked, peeled and sliced
- 3 cans (7 oz. ea.) Tuna
- 1 2-ounce can flat anchovies
- 10 stuffed olives
- 10 black olives, preferably imported Greek or Italian
- 2 small or 1 large red onion, if available, or use Bermuda onions
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil or 1 teaspoon dried basil
- 1/3 cup finely chopped fresh parsley
- 1/4 cup finely chopped green onion
- 6 hard cooked eggs, quartered

1. In a mixing bowl, combine the mustard, vinegar, salt, garlic, peanut oil, olive oil, pepper and lemon juice to taste, and thyme. Beat with a fork until well blended and set aside.
2. Pick over the beans and break them into one and one-half inch lengths. Place in a saucepan and cook in salted water to cover until tender but crisp. Drain and run under cold water, then drain in a colander and set aside.
3. Remove the cores, seeds, and white membranes from the green peppers. Cut into thin rounds and set aside.
4. Trim the celery ribs and cut crosswise into thin slices. There should be about two cups of sliced celery. Set aside.
5. Bring a quart of water to a boil. Drop in the cherry tomatoes and let stand for exactly 15 seconds, no longer, or they will become mushy. Drain immediately. Using a paring knife, pull off the tomato skins. Set tomatoes aside.
6. In a large salad bowl, make a more or less symmetrical pattern of the green beans, peppers, celery, tomatoes and potatoes. Flake the tuna and add to the bowl. Arrange the anchovies on top and scatter the olives over all.
7. Peel the onions and cut into thin, almost transparent slices. Scatter the onion rings over all. Sprinkle with basil, parsley, and green onions. Garnish with hard cooked eggs.
8. Toss the salad with the dressing after the garnished bowl has been presented to the guests for their enjoyment. Serve with a crusty loaf of French or Italian bread.