



## Sunday Telegraph (Sydney)

Sunday 7/08/2011

Page: 10  
Section: Careers  
Region: Sydney, AU  
Circulation: 618123  
Type: Capital City Daily  
Size: 400.81 sq.cms.



press clip

# Cheeky twist makes a chef

## BRITTANY STACK

LEONA Watson loves food so much that she gave up a blossoming marketing career in her 30s to pursue her foodie passion.

After travelling and completing several cooking courses, the 45-year-old from Surry Hills now runs a lucrative cooking company called Cheeky Food Group and plans to expand it to four other states and Asia in the next five years.

“We run highly interactive cooking events for groups — from tailored corporate team building programs and conferences, to consumer cooking classes, private parties and even hens’ nights,” Ms Watson said. “As managing director I run the company, from hiring and training staff to overseeing operations, financial management, marketing and sales.

“I have 10 staff in total who directly manage these areas and I also lead some of our cooking events as the chef, MC and event manager.”

For Ms Watson, saying goodbye to her marketing job was a no-brainer as it always played second fiddle to her obsession with food.

“I hit burnout in my 30s and decided to run off to the Whitsundays to work as a cook on a yacht with a skipper I’d fallen madly in love

with,” she said. “During this time I realised that food was my passion and while I still worked as a marketing and business consultant, I pursued opportunities to build my understanding of the food industry and enhanced my cooking skills.”

This included a stint as a tour guide leading Italian Food Tours in Haberfield, writing for various food publications and technical training at Le Cordon Bleu, Australia’s leading

chatting and cooking together without the usual work barriers.

“I often have clients coming up to me years later telling me how much fun they had at a Cheeky event.”

While the steadily growing company is somewhat a niche business in the big bad culinary world, Ms Watson said competition is fierce.

“You have cooking schools marketing themselves as offering team-building events,” she said.

## The secret is to never be complacent and continually evolve

culinary school. Although she is busier than ever, Ms Watson said her job has never been more rewarding.

“We run over 400 cooking events a year and because most of our events are different and held at different locations — anywhere from Hamilton Island to the Yarra Valley — we have to plan to the minute details and work-hours can be very long,” she said. “But watching my staff and the chefs grow into confident presenters is great.

“The other great thing about the job is seeing our clients laughing,

“But we are staying ahead of the competition by offering more corporate events, as few have the know-how or experience to set up a cooking event in a ballroom or by a pool for hundreds of people.

“Over 40,000 people have cooked with us and nearly 80 per cent of our business is repeat and referral. If we keep doing great events and coming up with new corporate event ideas we’ll keep our number one position.”

Her advice for running a successful business: “The secret is to never be complacent and continually evolve”.

**Sunday Telegraph  
(Sydney)**

**Sunday 7/08/2011**

Page: 10  
Section: Careers  
Region: Sydney, AU  
Circulation: 618123  
Type: Capital City Daily  
Size: 400.81 sq.cms.



**slice**  
slicemedia.com

press clip



**Leona Watson quit marketing to become a chef and founded the Cheeky Food Group in Surry Hills** Picture: Sam Ruttyn