

# Feasting on success

Cheeky Food Group's 'do it yourself' cooking events have proved to be an attractive option for clients keen on team building. By **Nicola Card**

**FOR MANY YEARS** the Cheeky Food Group has successfully combined culinary fun with corporate celebrations. Catering for anywhere between seven to 700 people, participants gather to chop, slice, sizzle, fry or bake at food events designed to salute staff, to motivate or build a team, or simply as a very pleasant way of having a great time.

Staffed by about 20 skilled chefs, Cheeky stages around 300 events a year in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Adelaide, Hayman Island, Fiji and New Zealand. Some functions are held at the company's Surry Hills party venue but the majority are at hotels and resorts as part of company conferences. The Cheeky team simply moves in with ingredients and utensils – hundreds of knives and chopping boards – and the scene is set. Nothing is left to chance in presenting the right atmosphere,

according to co-founder and director Leona Watson.

"This is an event where atmosphere and music are as critical as the food, so in our selection we take age, gender and culture into account," she said. "We take the business of fun seriously and the business of business seriously too – if that makes sense!"

The concept of whipping up a feast involving a small or large team of corporate chefs is believed unique, but Watson attributes some of the more recent success of the business to the popularity of TV celebrity chefs and cooking programs.

"When we started out in 2001, cooking as a team building event did not exist in the market place either here or anywhere else in the world," said the ex-marketing consultant who has managed campaigns for ING, Microsoft, Virgin Mobile, Optus

and Volvo in Australia and the UK. "Jamie [Oliver] was barely around when we started out and there was no *My Restaurant Rules* on TV. We thought that the business would run its natural course in a few years and that we'd be diversifying greatly by now. But with all the cooking shows on TV, it just gets stronger."

Thoughts of a career change surfaced when she was balancing pots and pans over a small stove on a cramped, swaying yacht. "There were fourteen different nationalities on board with different food requirements and that was where the concept of team play came into effect, though it was not the intention," Watson said.

She went on to complete cordon blue cooking course, participated in food tours and wrote articles while her business plans took shape. Teaming up with a couple of chefs, her marketing expertise stood her in good stead in building a business around foodie delights. "I had to make everything up from the business model proposal, the sales process, how to price, invoice, cost and market it," she explained.

"I'm very passionate about cooking, entertaining and throwing great parties but if I didn't have the business skills to pull it all together it would all fall over. As a marketer, team building is always a part of what you do."

### Starting on a shoestring

"One of the smartest things we did initially was to keep overheads really low. We started with just \$2500 each which went towards a brochure, website and business cards and we were working from our homes. Then in 2003 we tripled our overheads. I was keen to protect our ▶



*The grins say it all – Cheeky's popularity and success derives from structured fun.*

extra expenditure so I spent more on a business coach to make the most of it."

Watson originally maintained her marketing contracts which "helped pay the bills" but quit that in the third year to take Cheeky to the next level, which involved hiring staff and targeting HR departments to drum up more customers. However they soon found middle management, which set their own budgets, and Exec PAs were the key to team building. The tricky bit was sourcing names but, as a novice industry, Cheeky was fast gaining a presence through articles in conference and events trade magazines and general media, so business steamed ahead, doubling in size every year for the first five years.

With the exception of 2009, the popularity of bonding over prawn flambes, lamb back-straps on barbecues, or chocolate brownies with kahlua and mascarpone has been consistently healthy. To date more than 35,000 have indulged in Cheeky Food Group events. Revenue is set to reach \$1.5 million this year and the short-term goal is to hit the \$2.5 million mark, aided by repeat business and favourable testimonials.

"Over the past five months we've doubled the number of events compared to last year," said Watson, who in 2007 won the Australian BusinessWomen's Award for Outstanding Business Growth and was nominated for Telstra Business Woman of the Year.

However it's not all been plain sailing, and Watson is now flying solo having bought out her remaining business partner in 2007. "The process of any business buyout is really tough, especially when both partners like and know each other well," she said. "Ours was made more difficult as we had no shareholder's agreement pre-set for us to work out a sale price etc. So it was a harder and longer process which was draining for both of us and on the business.

"Looking back, a key turning point for my commitment to Cheeky was when one of the original business owners left, two days after I sustained a horrendous knee injury which required two operations and three years of physio and pain killers. I had to rethink Cheeky as my future, as I really wasn't sure that I could do the job and I didn't want to be stuck at the office the entire time," she said.



Corporate team building cook-a-thons can be used to build team morale.

## Surviving the GFC

A consultation with a business life coach affirmed Watson's personal values and aspirations matched precisely what Cheeky does – fun, cooking, entertaining and business. Effectively she had created the perfect job for herself and that recognition served her well during the GFC which caused revenues to plummet by 20-40 per cent for several months.

"We were hit hard by GFC as we are part of the conference and events industry which is a discretionary spend, and many conferences were cancelled or budgets cut in half. I admit that I fell into a bit of a hole and was worried about the business failing. Luckily I manage money well and was cashed up enough to tide us through. We lowered overheads but the most stressful thing was the thought of losing any staff. In small to medium businesses you are like a family and any business owner takes responsibility for people's livelihoods.

"As the head of a business you are also the 'motivation' barometer of the company, and you have to check yourself every single time you walk in the door.

Even if you'd rather crawl under a rock, your role is to motivate and inspire. So fake it till you make it. You set the tone. I really learnt that during the GFC."

Momentum returned with a vengeance and now, with business more buoyant than ever, Cheeky is carving a future that includes extending the range of culinary merchandise, specialised cookbooks and a move into business to consumer (B2C) events such as food tours and cooking classes.

"We're just going through a massive growth phase; we have lots of great ideas and are working out the figures," Watson said.

Starting with reconnaissance trips to Hong Kong and Shanghai, Cheeky also has its eyes on Asia where Watson feels confident the gregarious nature of Australians and "the zing and theatre" of Cheeky's cooking events will be well received. ●

For further information visit:  
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