

Busy cooking but not the books

Damien Lynch

Big four accounting firm Ernst & Young earlier this year used cooking as a team-building activity when it brought its graduate intake for 2005 together in Sydney for the first time.

The main reason for bringing the 300-plus graduates from all over Australia together was for them to participate in a four-day induction program and conference. But Ernst & Young also wanted the graduates to get to know each other quickly so it enlisted The Cheeky Food Group to help organise some team bonding over food.

"It was the first time the graduates had a chance to work together as a whole group," a senior manager at Ernst & Young, Vicky Emery, said.

"One of the things we look to do at the graduate conference is to get graduates to start networking. They will be working together throughout their careers and it is always good to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone you know somewhere else in the country."

Basically, the idea behind The Cheeky Food Group is to spice up special events, like company get-togethers, and client entertaining events by getting between four and 400 people involved in team cooking. In the case of Ernst & Young,



Cheeky Food Group founders Leona Watson and Victor Pisapia. Photo: LOUIE DOUVIS

their event ran something like this.

The Cheeky Food Group provided most of the kitchen equipment and the expertise needed through its team of experienced chefs who, initially, spoke to the graduates about the wonders of cooking and food, went through some basic safety rules and ran through the recipes.

The graduates were then broken up into three teams and encouraged to chop, slice, peel, sizzle and cook

meals, with some help and tips from the experts. Graduates also helped set the tables, pour the drinks and, finally, presented the food in the form of a buffet.

"I achieved what I wanted to by getting people to work in collaboration and getting them to know each other very quickly," Ms Emery said.

The Cheeky Food Group was founded more than three years ago by business partners Leona Watson, who has a business and marketing

background, and Victor Pisapia, most recently the founder and executive chef of the Rattlesnake Grill in Sydney.

It employs four people full-time and another two part-time. In addition, it has between 15 and 20 chefs on call to help it with some of the bigger jobs. Revenues are expected to come in at around \$1 million this year.

While the company is Sydney-based, it does interstate events.

It will be doing an event in Brisbane for more than 200 people over the next few weeks and has already done events with Freehills lawyers and Macquarie Bank in Melbourne.

"The whole thing is we are definitely not about being a cooking class; that is a key differentiator. We come at it from the team-building angle and then we use the food and cooking as a way of delivering on that," Ms Watson said.

"We always put the focus on the people rather than it being about the chef and the food. It is a pretty ego-driven industry. For us, the people are the stars of the show."

In preparing for an event the team at The Cheeky Food Group will find out what their clients do and then create analogies between what the clients do to succeed and what a chef does in the kitchen.