

PROFILE

Cooking up a storm is good for business

The Cheeky Food Group whips up stronger team spirit in the kitchen, writes **Joanna Tovia**

STAFF who balk at the idea of donning a wetsuit in front of their co-workers to raft down rapids or shudder at the thought of throwing themselves off a cliff in a team-building abseiling adventure can leave their employers in a quandary.

The Cheeky Food Group has answered the call for a team-building exercise that's effective and fun and soon have staff cooking up a storm together and loving it.

Staff don't usually know any cooking is involved when they turn up at one of the Cheeky Food Group events — they simply expect a nice dinner out with their colleagues and hope that the boss is paying.

But, as they soon discover, not only do they have to cook their own food, they have to serve it up to their co-workers much like they would have to in a restaurant.

When the group arrives, they are served an entree, a glass of wine and given a brief presentation — then it's straight into the action.

Groups are formed and everyone gets chopping, whisking and laughing.

The chefs oversee the cooking to ensure everyone is on track with their parts of the menu and teach a few tricks of the trade along the way.

Throughout the event, glasses are kept full, music is pumping and conversation is buzzing.

They prepare a range of dishes — from flaming prawns to a gourmet barbecue — and then set about arranging the dishes so they look gorgeous.

"Presentation is everything," says Cheeky Food Group co-director Leona Watson.

"The recipe is just the starting point — you eat with your eyes before you even get close to tasting or smelling it."

With their finished creations served, the group then sits down together at a long table and devours them.

"It's a real party atmosphere," says Leona. "By the time everyone sits down to enjoy their meals as one big group, the energy in the room is remarkable."

Unlike competitive team outings such as go-karting, Leona says cooking together in a kitchen provides a relaxed atmosphere where it's easy for people to talk to each other.

No recipe is too complicated and there are no winners or losers.

"The great thing about food is that cultural, sex, and age barriers just go out the window," Leona says. "Cooking is the ultimate feel-good activity."

Leona says cooking is also something everyone can do regardless of their age, gender or fitness.

"They can all feel fantastic in a kitchen. Even self-proclaimed 'water burners' get excited about rolling slick and speedy wontons!"

Leona says she makes sure to find out about the group dynamics of a team before



Recipe for success: Two workmates bond at a Cheeky Food Group cooking class

staging an event and discusses with business owners or managers any issues that are affecting performance and morale.

She also gets familiar with their industry and job functions so she can create cooking analogies they can relate to throughout the event.

Some managers sincerely want to build a more cohesive team by organising the event, but others just want to give their staff a reward for working hard.

The outcome is usually the same, however — the team bonds and has a great night (or day) out.

"We always make people feel great about what they've done which gives people confidence," says Leona.

"If they have a positive memory of it and go away and start cooking the recipes, it's a great reflection on us and the company they work for."

The Cheeky team can set up a kitchen just about anywhere.

The Cheeky vans carry everything they

need to cater for groups as big as 400 and as small as four and regularly set up in conference rooms, at offices or even down at the beach.

Leona started the business three years ago with Victor Pisapia — an award-winning chef who founded the Rattlesnake Grill.

Leona had always loved cooking and had been leaning in the direction of a career change when Victor approached her with a novel idea.

She had trained and worked in marketing and business consulting in Sydney and the UK before "falling madly in love with a sailor" and heading to the Whitsundays to be with him.

There she worked as a cook/guide on seven-day yacht charters.

"Getting 12 passengers of varying ages, from different countries, speaking different languages, to work as a sailing team was no mean feat," she says, joking that she also learnt how to cook at a 45 degree angle.

On returning to Sydney, Leona decided to follow her passion and embarked on some

serious cooking training.

At first Leona says the Cheeky Food Group spread itself too thin and tried to be too many different things.

But since the company began concentrating just on team building, they knew they had found their niche.

Leona says her background in business consulting means she knows exactly what managers and business owners are trying to achieve with their staff and says their tailored approach is their point of difference.

A Cheeky event is popular with business owners who want to do something special for their staff at Christmas time and an added benefit is that they don't have to pay fringe benefits tax.

Leona describes her perfect Sunday as having people over and cooking up a storm and says she has ended up turning what she loves most into a thriving business.

"I'm actually making a living out of what I love — it's the best job."