

Anthony O'Brien



Booking the cooks

Bonding in the kitchen has been a winner for this innovative corporate team-building enterprise

LEONA WATSON AND HER BUSINESS partner, Victor Pisapia, have cooked up a storm that is now reaping \$1 million in annual revenue. The pair started Sydney-based Cheeky Food Group, a cooking and team-building business, in 2002. With a third partner (who left amicably in 2003) Leona and Victor invested \$2500 each. Cheeky now employs five full-time staff with 20 part-time chefs on call.

Leona, 40, is keen to point out that Cheeky isn't simply glorified cooking classes. "It's not just about fun but meeting team objectives, too," she explains. Cheeky hosts groups of between eight and 400 at conferences, seminars or team-building workshops. Among its clients are QBE Insurance, Count Financial, Vodafone and Optus. Classes run from a few hours to all-day sessions and, at the end, participants tuck into their own three-course, restaurant-quality meals.

Cheeky takes its special brand of team-building cooking sessions to venues across Australia. Base fees start at \$1200 for groups of eight and there are also venue hire fees, varying with the event and venue.

Using cooking for team building works because it's a great leveller, Leona says. "You don't have to have any great skill set." She says it is ideal for older participants who don't want to be wedged into rafts or thrown over cliffs.

Leona gravitated to food after a corporate marketing career that included stints with Microsoft, Optus and Commonwealth Bank. She cut her teeth in the industry by leading food tours to places such as chocolate and cheese factories. She also wrote restaurant and recipe reviews for SBS' *Food Lovers' Guide*.

"I've always just loved the whole thing with food and always had mad big dinner parties of 20 people, who all seemed to end up in the kitchen with me."

Leona jumped at the opportunity to get involved with Cheeky. "They needed someone with a business marketing background who had an appreciation of food," she explains. But before committing, she paid \$5000 for a cordon bleu course at Sydney's Ryde Catering College. "It improved my [cooking] techniques and confidence. I kept my day job as a marketing consultant while I completed the course."

At first, Leona and her partners spread themselves too thinly. "When small businesses start up, they're so enthusiastic they try to get any new business and kind of diversify too much," she says. So after a year or so, she and Victor decided to focus on team bonding over food. It's also worth not-



ing they recently returned to food presentation. "Our systems, training and marketing is now in place for the team building," Leona says. "We can now diversify without it distracting from our core business."

Leona attributes Cheeky's success partly to keeping overheads low until they were confident in their business model. "We'd seen so many businesses start and inject so much money in upfront," she said. "If they'd injected half of that into some research they would have been better off." Cheeky also relied heavily on targeted marketing. "We focus on people responsible for corporate team-building events or conferences," Leona says. "Anything else we ignored." Middle managers with budgets for team-building, rather than HR departments, proved their best source of new business.

Cheeky relied on email marketing. "I probably had a few hundred [contacts] to start with - we now have a few thousand," Leona says. "It was a cheap way of marketing." She drafted a brochure in-house, and a proposal is emailed to prospective clients.

Leona says her future hopefully includes owning and operating a "fantastic guest-house - like a mini hotel - where people can come along for the weekend and jump in and cook with me or kick back and take it easy". There are plans for Cheeky bases in Melbourne, Brisbane and London.

Three tips for success Leona Watson

- 1 Focus on your core business. Get it right before you diversify.
- 2 If something doesn't make you smile, stop doing it.
- 3 Keep your overheads low until you're confident about your business model.

Start-up costs Cheeky Food Group

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|--------------------------------|--------|
| Website | \$500 |
| (Watson owned IT equipment) | |
| Cooking equipment | \$1000 |
| Telephone | |
| (mainly mobile, a month) | \$150 |

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|--|--------|
| Brochure | \$3000 |
| Business cards and stationery | \$500 |
| Public liability | \$1000 |
| Training certification from NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training | \$1000 |
| Cordon Bleu course | \$5000 |
| (Watson paid for this course in 2001.) | |

