

## Teamwork Sacha Molitorisz

### Toque-over targets

Leave the boardroom for the kitchen – and a new take on corporate bonding with sharp knives and silly hats.

The prospect sounds less appetising than a barramundi daiquiri. A team-building exercise? In a kitchen? To me, kitchens are like airports or shopping centres – places best avoided. And aren't team-building exercises created purely to prise tax-deductible cash from corporate fat cats?

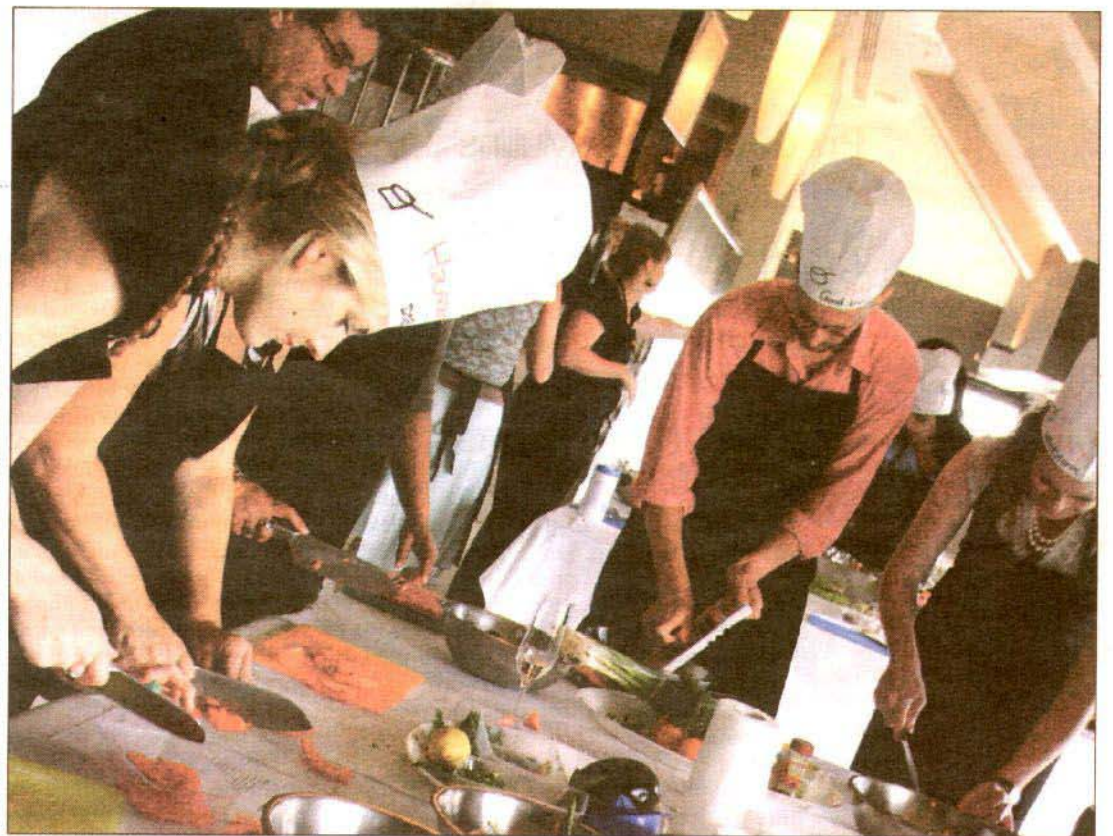
In other words, I have a completely open mind as I head along to a lunch hosted by the Cheeky Food Group, a local outfit that runs team-building exercises in kitchens.

I am, however, heartened by the company's logo: three chef's hats, one of them upside down. Alongside the name of the company, this inverted hat looks suspiciously like a derriere.

When the day comes, chef Victor Pisapia and marketer Leona Watson explain that Cheeky has been building teams and steam for four years. The theory is that companies assemble employees and/or clients for a bonding session; this exercise, at the Hotel InterContinental, is staged for a bunch of journos and PR types.

We start with a corporate video in which people with sharp knives and silly hats look as if they are having the times of their lives: sometimes cooking, sometimes dancing,

Many hands make light work ... hacks and flacks prepare lunch in the Hotel InterContinental's kitchen. Photos: Tanya Lake



sometimes nearly incinerated by enormous licks of fire and, strangely, always smiling.

The video climaxes when Pisapia pours ouzo onto a large pan of prawns. A huge flame leaps upwards, whereupon a huge grin breaks out on the face of a man in a silly hat holding the pan.

Born in the US, Pisapia has run several Sydney restaurants, including the Rattlesnake Grill in Neutral Bay. Today, he says, we will prepare the

likes of beef with Argentine chimichurra sauce, barbecued sweet potato with orange, Italian sponge mascarpone and prawns saganaki.

Given my culinary skills, each sounds like a recipe for disaster.

Working on the principle of divide and conquer, Watson and Pisapia split us into small teams. Working on the principle of having a good laugh, they then tell us we have to wear chef's

hats. My hat at least is the right way up, and so doesn't look like a bum.

I am paired with Elly, who works in PR and who says she isn't a great cook. Not being a great cook, I say, is something I can only aspire to, before volunteering us for the prawns. If anyone is going to set fire to the curtains, I want it to be me.

Pisapia explains the ground rules. Clean as you go. Hold your knife beside your thigh. If you're behind someone, say, "Behind". I spend the next few minutes watching Pisapia, trying to anticipate his call of "behind", so I can pre-empt him with "cute".

The result: Elly and I quickly fall, er, behind. Finally, as pop classics by Hot Chocolate and Aretha Franklin start blaring, we get to work. First, the tomatoes. Easy enough. Then we chop spring onions. Pisapia instructs us to keep the tip of the knife on the cutting board, and to cut with the part of the blade closest to the handle. He reckons chefs sometimes assess their staff by the thinness of their chopped spring onions. Making yet another thick cut, I tell him I've always believed size doesn't matter.

We crumble blocks of feta, chop garlic, pick off thyme leaves then begin peeling prawns. This, Pisapia says, can be useful in team-building. As it is time-consuming, whoever's doing it needs to enlist helpers – just as in the corporate world, where delegating is a crucial skill.

One of the best things about a Cheeky event, Pisapia continues, is that often CEOs and

secretaries are working side-by-side, which reinforces the need for teamwork.

Elly and I don't need to be told twice: we hastily enlist helpers. Then we attempt to follow Pisapia's advice on removing the digestive tract: rip off the head, grab the tract between thumb and forefinger, twist and pull. Occasionally, we succeed.

Then we are given one large, heavy saute pan each. Faced with a bottle of ouzo and an open flame, I am pretty sure I am about to violate several key conditions of my parole. I am momentarily tempted to ask how many people Pisapia and Watson have lost this way.

With Pisapia directing, I heat the olive oil and add the spring onion and thyme. Next I throw in the garlic and prawns, before searing the little critters lightly on both sides. Finally Pisapia pours in the ouzo and I tentatively tip the pan forward to the flame and ... whoosh.

I'm off, half-way to the exit.

Actually no, I stay glued to the spot as the flame rears up menacingly while, unprompted, my face breaks into a big silly grin – just like those in the video. When the flames subside, I add tomatoes and lower the heat, then add the feta.

After setting the table, our motley gang of hacks and flacks sits down to enjoy what we've cooked. Surprisingly, it all looks good and tastes great. Even more surprisingly, I still have my eyebrows.

To contact Cheeky: Leona Watson 0412 190 252 or [info@cheekyfoodgroup.com](mailto:info@cheekyfoodgroup.com).



Pisapia pours ouzo into the pan of seared prawns, I tip it forward to the flame and ... whoosh. Surprisingly, I still have my eyebrows.

In the thick of it ... chef Victor Pisapia explains grating and chopping to the author.