



BOB FEPPING/TIMES

A PERSONAL connection inspired Al Simon, left, to hire Sally van Slyke, owner of Walnut Creek's Wild Thyme Catering, for his 60th wedding anniversary.

Feeding them, with feeling

Party food pros cater to clients' appetites and emotions

By John Birdsall
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FOR WEEKS, Randy Milden regarded her daughter Emily's impending bat mitzvah with the trepidation she might feel answering a personals ad. The challenge of finding the right caterer became the search for something else: a search for connection that went beyond what the

passed hors d'oeuvres tasted like, a connection with a caterer Milden felt could express something essential about her own style, even reflect her personality. That, and serve up fajitas tasty enough to keep 60 picky adolescents happy.

Milden, 53, an educator and writer who lives in Albany, wanted a caterer capable of presenting food she considered

authentic. "In the perfect world I would have done everything myself," says Milden. But in the end, she found happiness with Emeryville caterer Janine Godfrey of Mediterraneo Catering.

"It was definitely like responding to a personals ad," says Milden. "In my case, it was like looking for a date who wasn't too date-y," she says, "somebody who was relaxed

about the whole thing."

Funny thing about Godfrey is that, pitted against another caterer, her food didn't even blow Milden away. Another caterer served up fantastic food at a preliminary tasting, says Milden, but the vibe was too corporate, too old-school caterer, all carefully arranged platters and fussy presentations. "I felt like I was supposed to be a Walnut Creek lady, and

to them I think I was just a Berkeley foodie," says Milden. "I felt like I was supposed to be my mother."

But Milden sensed Godfrey was the right one. "I felt much more like myself with her," she says.

Funny thing about catering: It starts out as business and ends up being personal.

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Cater

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Throwing a successful catered party is all about finding a sense of meaning, an intuitive connection, with your caterer. It's never just about the chicken satay skewers, though sometimes the chicken satay skewers become the means for connection.

Relates to foodies

That's true for Hugh Groman of Hugh Groman Catering in Berkeley. "I relate best with clients who are foodies," says Groman, "clients who like food that's unusual and creative, people who are passionate about food, as I am." For Groman, that's not an understanding that necessarily comes through with the first phone call. "Sometimes respect builds over time," he says, "but there's definitely a moment when they let their guard down, when they exhale."

Oakland caterer Monika Dunbar says if she doesn't relate to a client on a personal level, the business relationship usually falters. Last year Dunbar and her husband, Joseph, dissolved their boutique high-end catering company, Joseph Dunbar Catering, to spend more time raising her daughters. Go against your gut, she says, and all hell usually breaks loose.

Dunbar recalls a particularly nightmarish party. "The client thought we were trying to take advantage of her, and we thought she was low-balling the guest count. And then of course a ton of people showed up, they ate a lot and in the end both of us were just miserable."

Mistrust and poor communication resulted in the cardinal sin of catering: "We ran out of food before the rabbi got there," Dunbar admits. Say goodbye to building an ongoing relationship with a client — or for getting referrals. And in a business as competitive as catering, both are as crucial as making sure the buffet line doesn't back up.

'Relationship business'

Just ask Paula le Duc, arguably the Bay Area's premier society caterer, and one of only a handful of prominent caterers nationwide. "We are in the relationship business first, and we cater on the side," says le Duc, whose Emeryville-based company—Paula le Duc Fine Catering—is currently in its 25th year. "We consider the relationship the most important part of what we do." If you're a skeptic, that's like saying your hair stylist is in the therapy business and just happens to give fabulous balayage highlights and a killer razor cut on the side. But considering le Duc's client list (she was so disappointed last year, she says, when the wedding her team was working on for J.Lo and Ben in Los Angeles was abruptly, uh, terminated), it's simply an affirmation that the caterer-client relationship works best when clients feel the caterer is tending to their emotional needs.

For le Duc that's never truer than when she talks to clients about an innovation she's particularly passionate about: the long table.

Christened some 8 years ago when le Duc was designing a

THE RIGHT FIT

Caterers with businesses of all sizes agree: When looking for a caterer you can bond with, ask lots of questions and lean heavily on your intuition.

■ Former boutique caterer Monika Dunbar thinks clients should trust their instincts. "Find somebody who's excited about your event," says Dunbar, "a caterer who's willing to spend a lot of time on it. Make sure there's one person who's your contact, that you're not being handed around from person to person." Above all, she says, "Look for an indication that your event matters to whomever you'll be working with."

■ Sally van Slyke agrees. "Of course the food has to be good," says van Slyke, owner of Wild Thyme Catering in Walnut Creek. "Anyone who's been in business for any time is going to have pretty good food. The difference is you sit down and pick the caterer you respond to."

Napa Valley wedding with chef Paul Bertolli of Oakland, the long table is now a Paula le Duc signature—and a tangible expression of the way a caterer infuses an event with meaning.

Instead of dispersing guests around a room at round tables of eight or 10 that brands guests (the work colleagues, the groom's cousins from Fresno, our nice gay friends), the long table is one uninterrupted place where all guests are seated together. For big events it can end up curving like a tunnel in an ant farm—le Duc says she once seated 500 at a continuous table snaking around San Francisco's Exploratorium.

It can be a hard sell for brides imagining more conventional arrangements. "We talk about a community table and what that means," says le Duc, how we were inspired by Italian festivals where everyone in the town shares a long table running through the main square. "Then we begin to talk about the experience," she says, "how we're creating a lifelong memory—that's when we can talk about the emotional experience of the event."

A wedding speaks to the heart and the soul, and the long table is a way to see it, to touch it and feel it.

But a wedding is only the beginning for le Duc, who says about 80 percent of her business is from repeat clients and referrals. "To do one event, fine, we'll do a great event," she says. "But to really succeed is building a relationship, going on to do the client's next event,

and the one after that."

In fact it's not uncommon for a caterer (like the all but extinct family doctor) to build lifelong relationships with her clients — even, in some cases, beyond.

Sally van Slyke, owner of Walnut Creek's Wild Thyme Catering for nearly a decade, says building deep personal relationships with clients is what makes catering so rewarding.

"I have people who use us every single Christmas," says van Slyke, "one couple who does a musical evening year after year and calls us in every year to do it. The clients become very special."

"One woman was 86 when she slammed through the door here," she recalls. "She would walk downtown for lunch every day, and for four years, whenever she was throwing a party, she'd stop by here and we'd plan it. And then one day her kids called and said she had passed away," recalls van Slyke.

"We did her memorial," she adds, "which just broke my heart."

Abiding loyalty

Building an abiding loyalty is what successful catering is all about, a loyalty that at times goes beyond the usual business relationship. Like Randy Milden, the reluctant client who found the right caterer, whose daughter's bat mitzvah gave Milden something of a new identity.

"I so think of myself as not the kind of person who has a caterer, but here I am," says Milden.

Or like Al Simon of Walnut Creek. Last year Simon hired Wild Thyme to help with the 80th birthday celebration for him and his wife, Mim. Simon says he was so impressed with the event and felt such a strong connection with van Slyke, that in October he hired her to do the Simon's 60th wedding anniversary at Temple Isaiah in Lafayette.

And even though the temple tried to steer Simon toward one of the caterers on its preferred list, Simon wouldn't budge.

"I refused because of my relationship with Sally," says Simon. "We had to do quite a bit of arguing before we came to an arrangement. We finally settled," he says, chuckling — settled by making a donation to the temple.

"The next event that we'd like her to do is our 65th anniversary, if we live that long," says Simon. "I've already discussed it with Sally. She told me that's a long way off," he says. "And then she added: Don't worry—nothing could stop me from being there."