



# Recipe for Success



Joan Brennan, Elegant Catering



Shaw once wrote, 'He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches.' Some special few do both. J.R.R. Tolkien, Robertson Davies, and Jack Hodgins come to mind as dedicated professors as well as distinguished professionals. While many great minds have switched gears from a professional career to educating, few successfully blend one with the other.

Joan Brennan exemplifies the working educator, capable of assembling a feast in her kitchen at Elegant Catering one day, and preparing a class of students for kitchen work the next; the two constants for her have been students and food. For much of her life, Joan has balanced the two halves of her working life on a fulcrum of love. So suited to her career, she never imagined anyone could work at a job they didn't like.

Joan's career began in Toronto, just before the food scene picked up, when cuisine beyond steak and chops was unheard of in Downtown Toronto. At the time, she was more a passionate amateur than a professional chef, on-call at Fenton's, where her husband worked, often contributing more to meal planning than preparation. When the restaurant had surplus ingredients, they called Joan. "It's not that they weren't creative, but sometimes even creative people get blocked, so they would call me and I would give them ideas." She worked all around the front of the house as a waitress, bartender, bar back and so on before landing a position heading up a section in the kitchen. Two years later, Joan was a chef.

In 1987, she and her daughter made

the move to London and, in 1991, she opened her own restaurant, Strange Angels. "That was a lot of fun. I was at my absolute peak at that restaurant," says Joan. However, staffing issues forced its closure only three years later.

In 2001, Joan started the Ontario Chef School, an internet tutoring school offering courses to help students prepare for their Red Seal Certification Exam. Even before Ontario Chef School, Joan taught cooking Loblaw's, at other culinary schools, even at Covent Garden Market, but mostly privately.

As a response to some of the challenges of the restaurant industry, Joan established Elegant Catering, which has steadily grown over the years. Elegant Catering's customers can expect a wide array of menu options often centred around seasonal fare – of course, Joan is willing to accommodate favourites, allergies and special requests. "I'll sit down with the client and go over a menu, or sometimes they'll just give me a budget to work with and I'll give them the best I can within that budget. I have clients who will just tell me the date, the time, the budget and the number of people, and we'll show up and give them the time of their life."

Joan credits two major sources for her success: attention to detail and adherence to a guiding philosophy. Offerings of seasonal fare spring from Joan's philosophy: Slow Food. Slow Food focuses on fresh, local, unprocessed, unpackaged food, the polar opposite of fast food. Slow Food supports local farmers, contributes to the local economy, inspires chefs

## Recipe for Success (Continued)

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with the freshest ingredients, and encourages everyone involved to savour the experience.

Elegant Catering's success has seen it take over much of the floor space of its building. Housed with Bob's Fish and Chips, as Elegant Catering's kitchen has expanded, Bob's lost its dining room and has become strictly a take-out and delivery business.

Success has only brought Joan more ambition: "I would love for this building to one day become a school. If I could turn this into a school, the students would be getting real life experience every day. In fact, that's what I'm working toward." It's a goal that only seems to make sense for such a dedicated professor, and such a distinguished professional. ■

*Ryan Ford is She's editor and  
a contributing writer*