

WILBUR FOSHAY: THE TOM PETTERS OF MINNESOTA'S ROARING '20s

SEPTEMBER 2009

TCBMag.com

Twin Cities

BUSINESS



THE BEST OF BUSINESS 2009

**INCLUDING THE BEST
LOCAL COMPANIES:**

- Hanging Tough • Under the Radar
- In Local Web and Package Design
- Creating New Technology

**The Trix Rabbit:
Still the Best-Ever
Brand Character**

\$3.50



Spotlight

Catering to Simpler Tastes

These recession-era caterers offer low-cost meals, marketing savvy, and a green sensibility.

32 Michael Walsh puts the last piece in place at Delta Dental spinoff DeCare Dental.

Archives

Get to know more Twin Cities businesspeople and their businesses. Go to "People and Companies" at tcbmag.com.

The economy may be slow, but people still need to eat. Three newer Minneapolis caterers are responding to the recessionary market by offering casual options like boxed lunches and comfort foods. These days, they say, customers are eschewing ostentatious ice sculptures and exotic fare from distant locales. Instead, they're looking for quality and comfort—and, says Amy Brown, co-owner of Chowgirls, "that sense of not being showy."

Case in point: Molly Herrmann, who gives her business persona the saucy moniker **Tastebud Tart** and combines quality with sustainability. A former nutritionist at an exclusive retirement community in San Diego, she began her food business three years ago as a personal chef to friends who liked her nutritious yet hearty approach to vegetarian and vegan meals, as well as her "locavore" (i.e., eating locally grown food) philosophy.

Last year, Herrmann was able to make the leap financially to a commercial kitchen (and a catering license) with one simple trick: shared kitchen space. Using an open kitchen in East Lake Street's Midtown Global Market, Herrmann schedules time and works alongside nine other "micro" food businesses—and is just steps away from several of her favorite suppliers.

One of Herrmann's specialties is preparing boxed lunches that follow her organic-and-local philosophy. Each is packaged in a biodegradable, post-consumer-waste cardboard box. "I thought it would be unique to offer healthy, specialty meals that speak



Molly Herrmann uses shared kitchen space in Minneapolis's Midtown Global Market to keep costs low and quality high.

SAFA JORDE

to companies with similar philosophies," Herrmann says.

As the operator of a very small and nimble business, Herrmann can change menus every week according to what's available while keeping price points low: about \$10 for vegetarian meals, \$12 for those with meat. The day she was interviewed, Herrmann had just delivered boxed lunches to a board meeting of Crescendo, a Minnesota Orchestra program that seeks to attract a younger audience to Orchestra concerts. Boxed lunches make up 60 percent of

her business, full catering the other 40 percent. She's currently talking with the Three Rivers Park District to set up a quick-serve counter featuring locally grown food at the concessions area at Silverwood Park in St. Anthony.

A few miles north, in the Warehouse District, a staff of five, along with several subcontractors, run the **Lunch Cube**, which launched in November. This casual-catering business also makes use of an existing kitchen—in the Rosewood Room event space. Both businesses are owned by



CRAIG BARES

Nate Tietge, general manager of the Lunch Cube, shows off his firm's low-cost fare—and its high-style branding.

businessman Anas Abukhadra. Rosewood Room Executive Chef Jamis Scapple plans all menus.

"Food businesses have been sharing kitchen space in New York for years," says Lunch Cube General Manager Nate Tietge. "There's never been a space need for it here. Here, it's an advent of a green mindset, but it also makes plain economical sense. Why would you build new when you can use?"

That's where the Lunch Cube's simple concept comes in—gourmet sandwiches delivered in a simple cardboard cube. The recipes are chef driven, including the Black and Blue Panini (roast beef, blue cheese, and grilled onion with red wine aioli) and the Chairman (grilled pastrami, provolone, and smoked tomato aioli with jalapeño relish).

"Some people are like, '\$7.95—huh?'" Tietge says. "But then when they get it in their hands, they're like, 'Wow—this is a giant sandwich!'" Lunches are modular, too, with side options added to the box. Even the

cookies are cube shaped. When an order hits \$200, the Lunch Cube advises customers to switch to platters (which accounts for about half its business).

The Rosewood Room kitchen swarms with Lunch Cube prep and assembly staff in the morning. Employees make free deliveries on bikes using custom-made delivery bags. Keeping the delivery area within biking distance of the Warehouse District keeps costs down. (There are exceptions to this close-in rule, like big customer Wells Fargo Mortgage down towards Lake Street.)

"We have a lot of repeat clients, especially those who provide a lunch not just for meetings, but for morale and the tax break," Tietge says. "This is absolutely a recession-proof catering model."

In Northeast, **Chowgirls** has based its expansion plans on that model. Founded (in 2004), owned, and operated by Amy Brown and Heidi Andermack, Chowgirls features down-home cooking, which includes



Chowgirls owners Heidi Andermack (left) and Amy Brown specialize in green-minded comfort food. Weddings and small parties are their sweet spot.

items like beef stew, meat loaf, and Swedish meatballs priced at \$11 for boxed lunches and more for platters, with pies, cobblers, and crumbles for dessert. Vegetarian options are also available. “The word ‘comfort’ in our branding definitely draws people,” Brown says. Hot lunches are a specialty; Brown and Andermack also do brown-bag and cold plattered lunches.

After spending two years in a tiny rented kitchen in Dinkytown, Brown and Andermack moved last year to a larger, customized kitchen in North-east Minneapolis. They currently employ a mixed full- and part-time staff of 20, plus a roster of part-time servers. “We needed a bigger, more efficient workspace for what we had in mind: expanding our business and lunch services,” Andermack says. This part of the business has grown 70 percent since they moved.

That’s not to say they haven’t been hit by the downturn. Andermack noticed a slowdown “around the holiday season. We were doing more deliveries instead of full-staffed events . . .

We weren’t doing \$5,000 parties. We were doing \$2,000 parties.”

“And we were hearing a lot of things like, ‘I don’t want your staff to wear black ties,’” Brown says. “Some caterers present themselves as the optimal—you know, orchids placed perfectly on the plate. We are into abundance and value and good quality.”

Like the Tastebud Tart, Chowgirls seeks to source as much food locally as possible. Andermack and Brown also say they recycle 95 percent of their firm’s kitchen waste. Chowgirls catered for *The Daily Show* and *The Jim Lehrer News Hour* during the Republican National Convention, and provided the food at local LEED building workshops for the U.S. Green Building Council.

“We expanded our business lunches because people are still having meetings,” Brown says. “And people are conscious of healthful choices. That’s an anchor for our business.”

—Stephanie Wilbur Ash