



An appetite *for* gourmet takeout

DANA SHORTT BLENDS CULINARY AND ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS



Andrew Coppolino

By Andrew Coppolino

THE JOKE CIRCULATING AMONG THE STAFF

was that Dana Shortt was expanding. The reference was to owner Shortt herself, who was pregnant when this article was written, due to give birth in late April. But at the same time, Dana Shortt Gourmet Made Easy, the popular Waterloo fine-food store and catering business, was putting the finishing touches on its own expansion.

Early this year, having purchased its retail neighbour, a gift basket purveyor called Blessings, the young company took over Blessings' 1,500 square feet in the small plaza at 55 Erb St., incorporated Gourmet's 500-square-foot unit, and opened the larger space in March. Shortt says she'll continue to modify and refine it.

Dana Shortt Gourmet's next generation came about through a relatively simple recipe: one part vision, one part carefully drawn blueprint, one dash of serendipity.

The 30-year-old Shortt has masterfully blended the culinary with the entrepreneurial, a combination which garnered her the Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award from the Greater Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber of Commerce in 2006. After a short maternity leave, she'll return to oversee the day-to-day operations.

"We started small and that has helped give us room to grow," Shortt explains. "Marketing and promotion has been minimal. The business has relied on word-of-mouth.

"Winning the chamber entrepreneur ▶



Decorated cookies can be among the many little impulse-purchases at Dana Shortt Gourmet Made Easy in Waterloo.

Photography • Mathew McCarthy

► award brought us a lot of new business. I had to hire a few people full-time after the award, but I think taking time with our clients and servicing them well is key.”

Born and raised in Waterloo, Shortt moved to Toronto to take a culinary management diploma at George Brown College after graduating with a bachelor of commerce in hotel and food administration from the University of Guelph.

During that time, her vision never wavered. “I always knew I wanted to have my own local business, but I didn’t envision myself owning a restaurant,” she says.

“I had a realistic view of what that would mean in terms of lifestyle, and owning a restaurant is very risky.”

With her forward-looking business plan, Shortt anticipated a market niche for take-home foods. “I was doing what I called ‘10-entrée service’ — going to people’s homes and cooking meals. Customers would ask if I did dinner parties, or could I prepare a great soup and dessert?”

One thing led to another, and it dawned on Shortt that rather than taking the crudités to customers, she could bring her customers — lots of them — to the crudités. Logic dictated that a retail shop was a perfect way for shoppers to pick up a lovely soup or special dessert, and Dana Shortt Gourmet opened its doors in November 2004.

Demographics and changing lifestyles took care of the rest.

“People are now often working longer, getting home exhausted, and not feeling like cooking,” she says. “I hear a lot of women say that the worst part of their day is in the car coming home, not knowing what they are going to cook.”

Understanding that time and meal preparation can be mutually exclusive, Shortt specializes in unusual, freshly prepared take-away meals, catering and fine food products that are also healthy.

People are more educated about “how chemicals, preservatives and modified ingredients in food affect us. Customers

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Dana Shortt

appreciate that we don’t use chemicals or preservatives.”

The full-service, at-home catering portion of the business represents Shortt’s vision from early in her career. A group of a minimum of eight people can sit down to a palate-awakening amuse-bouche, first and second courses, dessert and coffee.

Buffet brunches and dinners can be booked for a minimum of 25 people, and hors d’oeuvre can be prepared for up to 500 people. Shortt’s “gourmet-to-go” foods are ready to take away, while pick-up catering goods must be pre-ordered.

Thanks to the purchase of Blessings, gourmet gift boxes in a variety of sizes are a relatively new addition to the business.

The boxes may include cheeses, “shortt breads,” spiced pecans and walnuts, and Shortt’s signature red wine and black pepper biscotti among other fare.

Shortt’s vision also capitalized on a burgeoning “foodie” culture that has become increasingly sophisticated regarding fresh, locally produced foods of high quality.

The phenomenon drives an important part of the business: a host of seasonally oriented “gourmet-to-go” fine foods prepared by Shortt and her team of chefs.

Bistro fare like coq au vin, or sausage, chicken and white-bean cassoulet sit alongside that Burgundian classic of French gastronomy, boeuf à la bourguignonne.

Contemporary cooking with an international accent has its place, too, with Asian glazed salmon and rice rolls, or cashew chicken curry.

Traditional comfort foods — soups, mac and cheese, meatloaf, casseroles and



chicken pot pie — are made with elevated flavour and flair. And with Latino and Mexican foods expected to be among the next foodie trends, the popularity of Shortt’s “gourmet quesadillas” will likely increase.

Shortt has hired a team of chefs for the bustling business. Although she is frequently behind the stoves developing and testing new recipes, and occasionally cooks, she says the front of the store is where she prefers to be: “Customers want to see my face.”

In the expanded and refurbished kitchen, staff prepare food for both catered events and the food shop, where they are sold fresh or frozen. Chefs don’t simply stock the coolers and freezers: they’re dedicated to building layers of flavour, nutritional balance, food costing, portion control and consistency.

For instance, during a recent visit, chef Scott Yates was smoothly working his way through crisp bacon, sautéed apples, cheddar cheese and caramelized onion as he prepared the popular quesadillas which would likely sell out by day’s end.

Using a digital kitchen scale, Yates measured each ingredient to get the right balance. It’s not slavishness to a recipe and it doesn’t mean a dish can’t be reinterpreted, tweaked here and there. However, rather than merely “eyeballing” quantities freestyle, precise measurements ensure uniformity, which Shortt knows is important to her customers.

Though she recognizes the cliché, she is adamant that a commitment to quality is paramount: her food is made by people, not machines.

“I’ve never lost sight of that. From the beginning, I knew who I was from my business background and training. It’s easy to get lost with buying pre-made products, but we haven’t done that.

“I know it would save us time and money, but our customers would be able to tell and I’m not comfortable with that. People want food that is whole and real and tastes good.” ©

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