

Trouble-Free Feast

Catering business delivers home-cooked meals for offices, parties, nonprofits

By Jeanie Senior

When Michele Sliwa and friend Jody Haas started their catering company in 2008, they wrote a closely focused business plan.

One chief goal: They wanted to be finished with their work day by 1 p.m.

“We both had young children, we both enjoyed cooking and baking, and we wanted to be home for our kids when they got home from school,” Michele says. “The goal was to do corporate breakfasts and lunches and that’s pretty much what I do, although I normally do lunches, and this week I had

breakfasts on three days.”

They anticipated their fledgling firm, D’lish Delivered, might get a couple of orders a week, just enough to keep them occupied. Instead, “We hit the ground running,” Michele says. “Insitu was our primary customer at first. We were pretty much catering there every day.”

As the Bingen-based drone-maker grew from a handful of employees to 800 workers, “there was always a department meeting somewhere,” Michele says.

Jody moved to Chicago last year, so Michele carried on alone. The company website notes the firm now is based in White Salmon and Chicago.

Besides breakfast and lunch, D’lish Delivered offers gift baskets, desserts and party catering. Michele also makes and packages homemade granola, one variety studded with almonds and local dried cherries, the other with chocolate chips.

She uses local foods in her recipes whenever possible, changes her menus by the season and uses the products of local bakers.

“I don’t do weddings,” Michele says. “I refer those to other people.”

D’lish’s home base is a building on East Jewett Boulevard that formerly housed a bakery. Michele shares the space with Julie Vance,

owner of Sweet Things by Julie, who also is the pie maker for Dickey Farms.

“The majority of the kitchen is mine, but she comes in and bakes pies,” Michele says. “It’s a great partnership. When I have to do breakfast quiches, I say, ‘Can you make the pie dough?’”

This summer, Michele and Julie plan to share a booth at the Gorge Grown Farmers Market, which operates at Hood River Middle School on Thursday afternoons.

The pair offer cooking classes and other events. Julie taught a class on biscotti and scones in March. Michele and Julie teamed up on Easter Brunch Ideas in April. In May, the Desperate Wives Dinner Club invited participants to “enjoy drinks and appetizers while we help you make three dinners to take home for the freezer.”

Michele and Julie plan to do the dinner club quarterly, but can replicate it for private parties, too.

“If you can get four or more friends together, we will be happy to set it up for you,” Michele says.

Catering represents a change from Michele’s original career in retailing. In 2001, she was a general manager for the May Department Stores Co., working in Norfolk, Virginia. That year, her husband, Dave, moved to the Columbia Gorge to work for Insitu Group Inc. She followed a year later, pregnant with their daughter, Andie.

“We spent two years of our marriage going back and forth,” she says of their long-distance commuter marriage.

Initially, she was a stay-at-home mom, but she also got involved in charity work and grant writing. Then she worked as



Granola made in small batches is a D’lish Delivered specialty.



Carrie Nelson, left, and Michele Sliwa cut peppers inside the kitchen of Michele's White Salmon-based catering business, D'lish Delivered.

development director at Next Door Inc., a community services program that helps children and families throughout the gorge. She organized fundraisers for Next Door, where she still is an active board member. She also co-produced the Bite of the Gorge this year.

Dave is Insitu's director of business development, and Andie "is a first-grade ball of fire who loves helping me in the kitchen," Michele says.

When it comes to promoting her business, Michele found that word of mouth works best. She also does a lot of donations, including catering for nonprofit events.

"That's how I got most of my business contacts, through donating free food," Michele says. "Word of mouth is my

"Word of mouth is my biggest marketing tool."

— Michele Sliwa

biggest marketing tool. Besides, I like to do charity work. It kind of fits in with my business model."

With degrees in fashion merchandising and fashion marketing, Michele learned catering has much in common with her earlier work in retailing.

"It is fast-paced," Michele says. "You're on your feet. It's a business and you've got your bottom line that you have to look at. You're dealing with customers and the public. There are a lot of similarities,

although this is definitely on a smaller scale."

Despite all of the hard work, Michele has figured out how to pace herself. One late afternoon in May, she mixed up a batch of blueberry coffee cake muffins for a breakfast for 70 people that D'lish Delivered would serve, then returned early in the morning to finish off the meal, which included breakfast casseroles, fruit salad and pastries.

"I don't want to get up at 4 a.m. and make these muffins," she says. ■

Michele recently finished writing a book profiling 20 chefs from The Dalles to Hood River and White Salmon called "Culinary Artists of the Gorge." It will be for sale at local bookstores soon. Proceeds will benefit Columbia Gorge Arts in Education. Learn more about D'lish Delivered at www.dlishdelivered.com.