



CATERER Tina Llewellyn

WORDS ALEXANDRA STILLWELL

THE SMELL OF ROMA TOMATOES ROASTED THE DAY before has barely left Tina Llewellyn's kitchen before she wakes at 5am to begin another day in her catering business, The Rolling Pin, which she runs from her home in Netherby. The early start is made a little more enjoyable by the fact that her lawyer husband Peter rises at the same time to make breakfast, which they share together. After half an hour indulging in her passion for reading, Tina starts work at 6am by checking her shopping and work lists for the day.

At 6.45am Tina heads off alone to do her shopping – also her exercise for the day. This task she has made an art form. After dropping off orders with the grocer, butcher and baker, Tina proceeds to the supermarket where, having written her list in the order she walks down the aisles, she completes her purchases in 40 minutes. By this time, the grocer, butcher and baker have prepared her orders. “I like to support the local suppliers because they will do special cuts of meat and get in good quality produce to the standard they know I like,” she says.

At 7.45am and after a quick kiss goodbye as Peter leaves for work, Tina checks her emails – often from panicked hosts who have discovered their numbers have risen or a guest has a food allergy – before she starts the early baking of Danishes and meringues.

Tina's staff arrive at 8.30am and are allocated tasks, deadlines and bench space in the kitchen. She has five regular kitchen staff as well as a pool of more than 100 people ranging from university students to part-time working mums who work on a roster system either in the kitchen or at the functions. Staff are organised according to a colour-coded list: bar staff have a blue dot beside their name, waiting staff are yellow and cooking staff green. She then works out the number of each she needs on a particular day and fills in the names of those capable of each task. This is cross-referenced to a telephone list which makes it easy to quickly find a replacement if a person is unable to work.

Tina has more than 80 regular clients and says she would have at least one function every day of the week; on her busiest days – Thursday to Saturday – the number is more like seven. Her limit? “We find it difficult to do more than 12 functions in one day.” Today she has six: a morning tea, three lunches, a cocktail party and a dinner. The morning tea – lemon curd tartlets, chocolate brownie squares, apple and cinnamon muffins and macadamia and white chocolate melting moments – is packed and dispensed at 9.15am, after which Tina orders any special goods to be picked up in the afternoon. A quick gulp of coffee around 10am is followed by preparation of tomorrow's lists for shopping, work and staff which Tina will keep checking and altering between today's jobs.

At 10.45am the kitchen is a scene of organised chaos as sandwiches are sliced, salads tossed and cheese platters arranged before being packed into trays with the rest of the food and loaded into either Tina's van or her hatchback car which, despite its size, can accommodate 16 trays. Last minute checks – “is the mustard hollandaise sauce packed?” – are made and by 11.30am all lunches and staff have left.

Tina's rule is that regardless of the number of functions she has in a day, all cooking in her own kitchen must conclude by 1pm. If Tina is not required at a lunch, she will use any time in the early afternoon to transport goods or pick up extra items. Today, however, she has a new lunch client and so she travels into the city to oversee the function.

Unforeseen challenges are always a possibility in catering but Tina says she is able to solve most problems because she knows where to pick up anything that might be needed in the city and has a staff member constantly on the road to deliver items.

At 3pm Tina collects ice for tonight's cocktail party before heading home to finish her paperwork. On less busy days, she might use this time to squeeze in a quick trip to the library to pick up a new book which, to save time, she has pre-ordered on the internet.

At 4.45pm the food for the cocktail party and the dinner is packed and sent to its respective venues, after which Tina cooks her own dinner while thawing 350 Danish pastries for the next day.

A former nurse, Tina has been in the catering business for 28 years and has cooked for everyone from the Duchess of Kent to Prime Minister John Howard. When asked what keeps her motivated to continue in a business which is so physically, emotionally and time demanding, Tina, who turns 60 next year, says it is both her interest in food and the fact that she likes to be independent. “It also keeps me fit,” she laughs. “In fact I feel even fitter than I did 10 years ago.” Tina says she deals with stress by “not having any” – achieved by allowing plenty of time for every task. “I don't like panic in my day; I like it to be calm and smooth.”

Often Tina's day will not finish until midnight as she attends – frequently as a guest as well as a caterer – anything from an intimate dinner for 10 to a wedding for 200. Tonight, however, she is not needed at any function so after sharing dinner with Peter, watching the news and reading for half an hour, she will have an early night. Probably a good idea given that she has a 4.30am start tomorrow.

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