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A woman with shoulder-length brown hair, wearing a white chef's coat and black pants, is smiling and leaning forward in a garden. She is surrounded by green plants and some orange flowers. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

Taking Cooking Personally

Chef Melissa Wieczorek
Aims to Make You a Guest
in Your Own Home

From Mundane
to Masterpiece

Upgrade
to Up Sell



Taking Cooking Personally with Melissa Wieczorek, Personal Chef

By Scott Cullen

Don't use the word "caterer" around personal chef Melissa Wieczorek, co-owner of A La Maison Personal Chef Service in Newtown, PA, or around any personal chef for that matter.

"We don't cater in the traditional sense," emphasizes Wieczorek. "Caterers generally focus on large events and cooking for the masses, a personal chef offers a much more intimate personal experience."

Eight years ago Wieczorek decided that 11 years of the corporate world was enough and the time had come to do her own thing. The challenge was finding that one thing that allowed her to spend more time with her family while also blending her business background with her culinary skills.

"I wanted to start my own business and do something culinary, but not a restaurant," says Wieczorek who spent her college years working in various restaurants throughout the Philadelphia area.

Her passion for cooking can be traced back to her childhood. By age six one of her favorite books was a cookbook. It wasn't unusual to find the young Wieczorek in the kitchen preparing weekend meals for her family, a skill she continued to hone over the years. "I was always a weekend gourmet; as I got older, people kept encouraging me to open a restaurant."

A Simple Twist of Fate

With no interest in opening a restaurant it seemed as if Wieczorek's options for a second career were limited if not for a simple twist of fate. While studying for her MBA at Temple University where she also worked, a professor friend encouraged her to do an independent study, which is

how she discovered the personal chef industry. After creating a business plan and presenting it at a venture capital fair, Wieczorek was cooking.

She left her job in December 2005 and by January A La Maison had a handful of clients. By summer she had a full book of business. "It was entrepreneurship 101," she laughs. "I was telling everybody what I wanted to do and my first customer was a client of another small business owner."

Initially, she prepared meals in client's homes, but as the business grew she rented a commercial kitchen from a caterer where meals are now prepared for either pick up or home delivery.

The "Copreneurs"

Launching a new business can be a frightening proposition ripe with second guessing and hours of stress, but the self-confident Wieczorek was comfortable with her plan and her decision to go solo from the start. "I had a solid business plan and my background was in business and marketing so I felt as if I had done everything I needed to get things in place and move forward."

And move forward she did. The business blossomed and expanded beyond her original business plan. She's no longer a sole proprietor. Several years ago she entered into a business partnership with her chef beau, Theo Petron, an advertising executive turned personal chef. "Copreneurs' as they call it," she says.

A typical day for the 'copreneurs' begins with coffee and a business meeting where they discuss the agenda for the day, where they each need to be that day, who needs to cover what, and who needs to call





MELISSA SAUTES UP SOME PEPPERS AT THE SOLEBURY CLUB CAFE

“While I enjoy cooking, I enjoy the business side of the business as well so it’s the best of both worlds.”

who. Then it’s either off to their Board of Health-certified commercial kitchen to cook or to the café they now operate in the Solebury Club in Buckingham. They’ve been doing that for the last four years.

If operating a café sounds as if Wieczorek is now in the restaurant business, that’s because she is. It wasn’t her original plan, but when the economic downturn hit it hit the personal chef business hard.

“We have a lot of clients in financial services and in an economic downturn, personal services are the first thing people cut,” notes Wieczorek. “That led to the strategic decision to branch out with the café.”

The café was a great opportunity and came at an opportune time. Plus it’s located in the heart of A La Maison’s target market. “It’s a lot of work but it’s free advertising,” acknowledges Wieczorek. “It gives people an opportunity to get to know us and taste our food and serves as a feeder to our personal chef business.”

Running the café is time consuming because either Wieczorek or Petron must be there all the time. “The same thing for our [personal chef] customers, clients are used to seeing us and talking directly to us,” observes Wieczorek. “That’s one of our biggest challenges going forward because we’re working on expansion plans and still need to be able to offer that [personal touch].”

Being one half of a couple and one half of a couple running two businesses has got to be difficult, and Wieczorek will be the first to admit that it is a challenge.

“You have to know when to shut off the business and we’re getting better at doing that,” says the self-proclaimed workaholic. “We have to make a conscious effort to go out on dates and for the next five hours not talk about work.”

They’ve also got work-free rooms in the house where they’re not allowed to discuss business.

Clients who rely on a personal chef tend to be busy professionals who are too busy to cook, but have made healthy eating a priority and are willing to commit financial resources to that.

Asked how much it costs, Wieczorek doesn’t serve up a price list although the A La Maison site states that in general, the cost is about what you would expect to pay in a moderately priced restaurant or if you frequently purchase prepared foods from the market or specialty stores.

“It’s a very personal experience.” So working with a personal chef such as Wieczorek usually begins with a consultation, either on the phone or in person to identify the person’s needs, tastes, and preferences. Lifestyle is also important. “That can relate back to the frequency of service, type of meals a person needs and even how they’re going to heat them,” explains Wieczorek.

Over the years she’s identified two different groups of consumers. The first are people who need customized meals because they have particular tastes and preferences or specific dietary needs and have consistent food needs from week to week. Meals are conveniently delivered to their home or office. No contracts are necessary. “It’s more of a customer agreement,” says Wieczorek.



The second group is those who have broad tastes and preferences, enjoy most foods, and whose needs for meals changes from week to week. “They don’t need customization but appreciate the convenience of healthy portion-controlled meals when they need them,” states Wieczorek. “Those people can order meals for the week from our fixed weekly menu and pick-up at our kitchen.”

A La Maison will also prepare food on site for parties of anywhere from 2 to 20 or so people. Again, that has nothing to do with catering; it’s another example of the aforementioned intimate experience provided by a personal chef. Prices for dinner parties vary on a range of factors. “It’s not a ‘choose from this menu with a flat rate per person’ experience,” explains Wieczorek. “We work with you on what you want to offer (food and experience), how many courses, what level of service, whether or not the experience is interactive. We offer a customized package and the price is based on the food and experience.”

A Guest in Your Own Home

It’s not always easy for those hiring A La Maison to sit back and watch them do all the work. “People aren’t used to having nothing to do,” says Wieczorek. “They’ll ask about helping, we say ‘go sit, have a glass of wine, relax,’ and once they have that first glass of wine and relax, they say ‘this is great.’ The comment we hear again and again is ‘This was so awesome it was like being a guest in my own home.’ They actually get to enjoy their party instead of running back and forth between the kitchen and doing the cleanup.”

The busiest time of the year for A La Maison is between October and early July. It often peaks in December, although October is hectic now that summer is over and the kids are back in school and people are

realizing they're eating terrible and need to get their lives in order. The business also follows the cycles of health clubs with a boost of activity in January as people look to start new eating habits and get healthy.

For Wieczorek, the best thing about being a personal chef is the opportunity to be creative while also using her business skills. "It's the perfect combination," she says. "While I enjoy cooking, I enjoy the business side of the business as well so it's the best of both worlds."

Asked about the challenges and frustrations of juggling the two businesses, she feels that rolling with the flow is inevitable. "You just do it, that's part of entrepreneurship; it's not unique to our business."

Wieczorek and Petron log at least 60 hours a week each between the two businesses. That doesn't count the time Wieczorek has been putting in the past 14 years as a hockey mom. Her 17-year-old son has been playing travel hockey since he was three. "That takes up a lot of time, but now that he's older and driving, I'm pursuing some of my own hobbies," reports Wieczorek.

She's a member of the New Hope Solebury Community Choir and the Bucks County Dragon Boat Association. She and Petron are also getting better at carving out time for vacations and recently returned from a trip to wine country in California.

"I feel guilty when I take vacation," admits Wieczorek. "I have to get over that because if I don't take a vacation I'm a miserable person and not as creative or productive."

Does she feel as if she can use a personal chef?

"Oh god, yeah, all the time," she says. "We're working a lot, and when we come home after cooking all day we don't always feel like cooking. We eat a lot of salads. And we're good at playing 'what's in the fridge?' and whipping up something quick and easy out of nothing."

What's next?

"The sky's the limit," says Wieczorek. "It's up to us to create what's next. That's the beauty of it." **MW**

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